SCIENTIFIC METHOD AND BIBLICAL STUDY

What little the general reader knows of Biblical criticism, he knows it as an opposition to religious beliefs. The name of Julius Wellhausen immediately comes to mind, and his hypothesis of different documentary sources for the origins of the Pentateuch. The word “criticism” for the religious student has therefore come to mean “to be critical of” in a pejorative sense.

Aside from the exercise of literary criticism based on the different names of God, repetitions and duplicate stories, diversities of style, and characteristic words and phrases, which led to conclusions religiously unacceptable, the Wellhausenian school used its reconstruction of the texts as the basis of a new historical criticism of the Jewish geschichte. On the assumption of a new chronology for the numerous documents comprising the text of the Bible, Jewish history and origins were re-arranged to begin at the Exodus. Monotheism was the gift of the Prophets, not the Patriarchs.

Nevertheless, it is today unanimously conceded that Wellhausen’s historical scheme was not solely the results of his literary criticism. Rather, it partook of the prevailing spirit of the age—Hegelian evolutionism of all things from their simplest forms to the complex. Thus, not only his history but even his dating of the Pentateuchal sources was colored by a priori assumptions that certain Biblical ideas must be of more recent origin than others due to their complexity.

The knowledge that Wellhausen was working from an evolutionary bias, whose validity as a generally operative scientific principle has never been proven, left his conclusions open to question. Indeed, current conceptions of Ancient Israelite history differ radically from the Wellhausenian notion, with most
of the rewriting in this area having been done by William Foxwell Albright.¹

Rejecting the old school’s historical findings, however, does not come to grips with their methodology of literary criticism and its findings. The question remains: Is literary source criticism valid as a methodology in Biblical study, once the exaggerations of the Hegelian Zeitgeist are removed? More generally, is literary criticism of any shade, be it form or new, a legitimate modus operandi in Biblical study, from which religious students may derive historical (factual) conclusions? Albright has stated categorically: “The ultimate historicity of a given datum is never conclusively established nor disproved by the literary framework in which it is embedded.”² Even if we accept this remark without argument, are we entitled to draw not only historical but theological or moral or halakhic conclusions from literary criticism as applied to the Bible?

Leaving the literary approach, one finds reluctance among traditional students to apply the methodology of any of the social sciences to Tanach. Here, too, the notion that the behavioral sciences are religiously “dangerous” has tainted all the non-physical sciences. Their conclusions are cited only where they support a previously-held traditional notion, as if such accord grants the science instant legitimacy. As with Biblical criticism itself, the rejection of many social science conclusions drags down their entire methodology, too, through “guilt by association.”

It is relevant to note the view of many Orthodox (physical) scientists, who are steeped in scientific method while oblivious to the general implications of scientific methodology as a philosophy, or at least as a guide to the exploration of areas outside the physical world.

This problem has two sides to it. Practically speaking, people studying Tanach do not avail themselves of all the methods of research that could be put to use. Theoretically, the relationship between scientific method and Biblical study has not been formulated. What considerations must govern the application of the former to the latter? Lack of clarification on the theoretical plane is, one suspects, the cause of neglect on the practical level.
Before relating scientific method and Bible study, it is essential that we define the term "science," categorize some of the different methodologies, such as literary and historical criticism, and test their applicability to the subject at hand.

Science might be described as a humanistic way of looking at experience. It is humanistic because it seeks to understand all things rationally, which is to say in human terms.³

The application of scientific method has no bearing on the Divine origin of Torah. Torah can, in any event, fit under the classification "experience" so far as we are concerned—that is to say, after we have received it. Utilizing the above definition, if the conclusions we wish to draw proceed rationally from the text, then some form of scientific method is in place. Of course, this does not rule out non-rational and hence non-scientific approaches to the truth of Torah, though some traditional commentators are insistent upon an exclusively rational approach.⁴

There has been a tendency . . . to think of science as one particular technique or as a single pattern of thought. No conception can be further from the facts. There are as many sciences as there are fields explored by the human mind.⁵

In line with the above, there are basic distinctions we can draw between literary criticism and the methods of psychology, sociology or anthropology, as they relate to the Bible. Whereas the former approach deals explicitly with literature in its form as such, the latter disciplines are applicable to the contents of the texts, irrespective of the text itself. If we were to decide that the Bible is completely myth, it would still be a genre of literature worthy of intensive study. However, the social scientists would have to look elsewhere for data.

To be more accurate, the last remark must be qualified. The anthropologist will have a field day with myth, and the psychologist will be able to gleam insight into some aspects of his research; the sociologist will extract much less, and the factual historian — nothing at all.
Our task is therefore to ascribe the proper identity to the Bible, so that we can determine which method of research is best suited to it. This “identity crisis” is not simple. Whereas logically it should be the first desideratum, we generally study the Bible even before the question of identity is solved. This is all for the good; real-life experiences do not have to follow the rigorous prerequisites of logical analysis. Besides, it is not all that easy to find an identity and then apply a methodology. Often, the identity emerges only after a certain approach of study is taken. The serious offense is our negligence in pondering the question of identity altogether. Of necessity our method of investigation must suffer, if we do not know what we are looking at, and if the methodology is haphazard, the resultant peshat is likely to be the same.

Some of us, especially the more theological-minded, are not really bothered by such considerations. If we do not know the nature of the material, we at any rate know just what we want from it. Like rabbits from a hat, relevancy after relevancy is extracted from the text and offered as pshuto shel mikra (literal meaning of the text).

Whereas the lack of identity of the material will seriously hamper critical investigation, the second approach is to be excluded from the realm of scientific methodology altogether. Scientific investigation will always be equated with exegesis; the eisegetical approach, which extracts only that which it puts in, has polemical, sermonic, and even religious value, but it does not come within the bounds of a critical methodology.

To highlight the problem of the identity of the Bible text, the two extreme possibilities will be considered. Is the Bible an historical text in a specific historic setting, or is it a moral-religious-legal guide, metahistorical in nature and hence not subject to scientific scrutiny?

The Rabbinic dictum “Let them each day be in your eyes as if they were now, as if you received them today from Mount Sinai” commands a sense of immediacy about Torah with no allowance for historical perspective. Yet the word Ke’illu (as if) are the acknowledgment of the duality involved; the whole statement is necessary because the Torah was given in one place, at
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has written one of the most penetrating essays in literary analysis of the Bible. In his book, *Mimesis*, Auerbach compares the epic forms of Homeric and Biblical literature. The Greek style has

externalized uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feelings completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense.¹⁴

The Biblical narratives, in contrast, externalize only those phenomena necessary for the purpose of the narrative; time and place are undefined, and the whole remains “fraught with background.” The multilayered problematic psychological situations which lie behind Biblical characters are impossible for Homeric heroes, “who wake each morning as if it were the first day of their lives.”¹⁵ Auerbach relates these observations on form and style to the purposes of the Biblical stories — they aim

not to bewitch the senses, and if nevertheless they produce lively sensory effects, if it is only because the moral, religious, and psychological phenomena which are their sole concern are made concrete in the sensible matter of life.¹⁶

Whereas the Homeric legends are idyllic, floating above time, the religious intent of the Biblical narratives is often an interpretation of history; the Bible lays “an absolute claim to historic truth.”¹⁷ Bearing this in mind, Auerbach finds a rationalistic view of the Bible absurd, for then we must assume that the Biblical narrator, in his attempt to explain history, was “a conscious liar — no harmless liar like Homer, who lied to give pleasure, but a political liar, with a definite end in view.”¹⁸

The Biblical narratives were not primarily oriented towards realism but towards truth. Their very nature calls for interpretation of the type we find in traditional commentators and midrashim, for they seek to overwhelm our own reality and force our life-situation into the biblical structure of universal history. Once the critical consciousness decided to sever the narratives from their implicit moral and doctrinal claims upon us, these traditional methods of interpretation were dropped and the stories became harmless legends.
And yet, because of the Bible's historicity, after we have extracted all the *Mussar Haskel* (moral lesson) from the Patriarchal narratives by means of form criticism, the question of whether Eliezer's camel was a dromedary or a Bactrian or an anachronism altogether can still be actively explored.\(^{19}\)

II

If the Bible has identity as literature, it has a more basic aspect as language, or as embodiment of language. As such, the science of linguistics is applicable.

This methodology is comparatively recent, but has had "ancestors" in the form of grammatical study and classical philology. Linguistics, however, is not to be identified with these earlier disciplines. Instead, linguistics finds a place for them within the framework of language study. As a science, linguistics has been especially active in introspection, constantly defining itself and its scope of study.

The concern of linguistics is the spoken language. Written records serve as evidence where no language remains. Most people attach a greater importance to texts as language than to the spoken word itself. Surely, the early philologists were more interested in clarifying texts than in researching the phenomenon of language. Nevertheless, we can now decipher, or at least understand, all sorts of problems in the Bible only on the basis of our scientific view of language; textual research is not sufficient.

The first rule of linguistic methodology is the division between synchronic and diachronic linguistics. Synchronic linguistics studies language at a given point in time. This study may be comparative — between two languages at any particular period. In contrast, diachronic linguistics deals with the historical changes within a language. This is comparable to what is known as horizontal and vertical studies in sociology. Again, though many linguists specialize in one area or the other, both a structural and historical outlook are essential for a balanced picture.

The comparative picture is constantly being filled out by discoveries of new texts in related languages of the Semitic fam-
iliy. Texts and inscriptions in related languages interest linguists for the forms they reveal, or the new words they add to the Semitic lexicon, or the linguistic rules they demonstrate. However, linguistic study should not be confused with comparative literary studies, even if the comparison is between Biblical poetry and Ugaritic epics. In fact, questions of style may not come under the frame of linguistics altogether.

One area of linguistics which interests many people is semantics — the science of meaning. Semantics has implications far beyond the literal meaning of Scriptures; anyone interested in Jewish theology must know precisely what is meant in the Bible by kodesh, chesed, emet, mishpat, before he can proceed. Here, too, methodology has been laid down which invalidates many philological associations previously made. James Barr has already admonished Christian theologians for drawing weighty conclusions from very poor semantics;20 it is to be hoped that Jewish attempts at writing theology do not pursue the same fallacious methods.

III

Observations and interpretations made by the Talmudic Rabbis and preserved in the Midrashic and Talmudic literature contain insights in all areas, from the literary aspect to the linguistic. It is true that nobody takes Medrashet Aggadah seriously. It is precisely because their aims and methodology have not been made clear, that contemporary students treat them as homiletical excesses. If midrash were approached scientifically and some systematization of the different approaches within it were worked out, the value and authenticity of what is, after all, Torah sheb'al per (Oral Torah), would receive more than “lip-service” from religious Jews.

Thus, even if we were to add nothing substantial by our studies, the introduction of system and terminology would give the Rabbinic literature new life. However, we are not just capable of arranging old material. Like the dwarf on the giant’s shoulders, we are now capable of moving forward in many areas, particularly fields of study which utilize the evidence
which is constantly being uncovered. We can appreciate the comparative grammatical studies of Saadia Gaon and Ibn Ezra, even while adducing further evidence from languages not known to them, or by applications of methods not used by them.

The general neglect of Torah shebiktav (Scripture) amongst religious Jews is clear to this writer, and even shenayim mikra (the requirement to read twice weekly the Portion of the Week) has been relegated to the elderly. This sorry trend is not new; already in the Renaissance period most of the inquiries into Hebrew grammar and Massorah problems in general were carried out by Christians and apostates. Must one have polemical interests to be a student of the Bible, or isn’t the mitzvah reason enough?

Personal experience shows that uncommitted Jewish students are more likely to be interested in the Bible than other Jewish studies and they can be introduced to Halakhah and the Oral Law in this way. However, if we are prepared to teach them on the level that we last learned Chumash, there is little doubt that we will attract very many. Even where we are prepared to offer them substance, the problem of communication is crucial. College students are involved in scientific, scholarly and critical studies in all their classes and presenting ideas to them is their notion of relevance.

IV

This “survey” has touched only on one or two methods of study and even these treatments will appear superficial to anyone acquainted with the areas they cover. Nevertheless, the aim was to offer examples of what can be done constructively. So far as the correct identity of the Bible, the applicability of several methods and the different identities implicit in each give new meaning to the statement: Shivim Panim Latorah (“Torah contains seventy different aspects”). Torah will constantly reveal itself in new identities and one methodology will correct the view of another, but the essence of Torah is over and above all these individual revelations. Each time we learn something
new, and see in it a new face of Torah, the infinite personality of Torah becomes more apparent.

NOTES

1. See his Archaeology and the Religion of Israel (Baltimore: 1942) or The Biblical Period (Pittsburgh: 1955).
5. Youtz, op. cit.
6. Thus, De Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, writes: "Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that the viewpoint creates the object; besides, nothing tells us in advance that one way of considering the fact in question takes precedence over the others or is in any way superior to them." Ferdinand De Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. W. Baskin (New York: 1959), p. 8.
13. All these observations were taken from Gerald Blidstein's essay on Parshat Vayetzeh in Yavneh Studies In Parshat Hashavua.
15. Ibid., p. 10.
16. Ibid., p. 11.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.