

Critical Approaches to the Bible: Introduction to Genesis 12-50

Lecture 5 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-5>

Overview

This lecture introduces the modern critical study

of the Bible, including source theories and Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis, as well as form criticism and tradition criticism. The main characteristics of each biblical source (J, E, P, and D) according to classic source theory are explained. This lecture also raises the question of the historical accuracy of the Bible and the relation of archaeology to the biblical record.

1. Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis and Characteristics of Biblical Sources

- [1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* We were talking last time about evidence of the use of different sources in the biblical text, and I mentioned Richard Simon, who was the first to argue that perhaps Moses wasn't the author of the entire Torah. In the mid-eighteenth century a fellow named Jean Astruc first noticed the use of the name Yahweh in certain stories and passages, and the name Elohim in others. And on this basis he came, and others came, to identify what have come to be known as the J and E sources. J being pronounced "y" in German, as a "Y," so Yahweh is spelt with a "J". So the J and the E sources. Now Astruc actually happened to maintain the idea of Mosaic authorship. He argued the Moses was drawing from two separate long documents, which he identified as J and E. They used different names for God, and he was drawing on those in his composition of the Torah. But in the next century his work would be expanded by Germans who identified other sources that made up the Pentateuch especially, the first five books of the Bible especially.
- [2] And in 1878 we have the classic statement of biblical source theory published by Julius Wellhausen. He wrote a work called *The History of Israel*, and he presented what is known as the Documentary Hypothesis. Now you've read a little bit about this in your source readings, but it's the hypothesis that the historical or narrative sections of the Bible — Genesis and stretching

on really through 2 Kings — is comprised of four identifiable source documents that have been woven together in some way. And he argued that these documents date to different periods and reflect very different interests and concerns. These four prior documents, he says, were woven together by somebody or some group of somebodies to form the narrative core of the Bible.

- [3] Wellhausen argued that these sources therefore do not tell us about the times or situations they purport to describe, so much as they tell us about the beliefs and practices of Israelites in the period in which they were composed. This is going to be an important claim; this is an important predicate of the documentary hypothesis. So although the sources claim to talk about events from creation, actually, forward, Wellhausen says, no, they really can only be used to tell us about the beliefs and religion of Israel from the tenth century, which is when he thinks the oldest was written, and forward.
- [4] Now his work created a sensation. It undermined of course traditional claims about the authorship of God and the work of Moses. It's still disputed by conservative groups and Roman Catholic authorities, although Roman Catholic scholars certainly teach it and adopt it.
- [5] The four sources that were identified by Wellhausen are, as I said, the J source and the E source, but also P, the priestly source, and D, which is primarily the book of Deuteronomy. Now as I said the first two sources are named

because of the names of God that they employ, but it goes a little deeper than that. According to J, the knowledge of the proper or personal name, if you will, of God, Yahweh, begins with the first human, with the *adam*. So already in Genesis 4, *adam* seems to know this name and refer to God by this name. If we look at other sources such as P and even E, Yahweh's name is not known to humankind until he chooses to reveal it to Moses, and this happens in the time of the Exodus. So in Exodus 6:2-3, which is assigned by source critics to the P source, the Priestly source, God appears to Moses and he tells Moses then that he is Yahweh. He says, "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," the patriarchs before you, "as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by name, Yahweh." So the P source has a different sort of theology, if you will, of God's name, or the revelation of God's name. And the same sort of thing happens in Exodus 3:13-16, and that's assigned to the E source.

[6] So once you've identified rough blocks of material according to not just the name of the deity but also their assumptions about when humankind knows the name of the deity, then you can analyze these blocks or chunks of text and begin to identify certain characteristic features: their style, the terminology they use. Source critics were able to come up with a list of what they believed were the main characteristics of the various sources. So the main characteristics of the J source, which begins with the second creation story, so the J source picks up in Genesis 2:4, second half of verse 4 are: (1) that it uses a personal name Yahweh for God from the time of creation, and that will be in your Bibles as "Lord"; (2) It describes God very anthropomorphically. It's the J source that has God shut the door of the ark after Noah. It's the J source that has God smelling the sacrifice after the Flood, the sacrifice that Noah offers. It's in the J source that God eats with Abraham and bargains with him. It's in the J source that God meets with Moses in this mysterious passage and tries to kill him one night; (3) J has a very vivid and concrete earthy style; and, (4) It uses the name Mount Sinai to refer to the place where the Israelites with Moses will conclude the covenant with God.

[7] As for the date? Well source critics felt that a clue to the dating of the J source could be found in the passage in which God promises a grant of national land to the Israelites. The boundaries of

the land are given there as the River of Egypt, the Nile, and the Euphrates. It was argued by some that those were basically the borders of the Kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon. Think of 1000 as your date for David, that's basically when the monarchy begins. So the beginning of the tenth century. The argument is that under David and Solomon the empire reached that boundary and so clearly this is a writer from the tenth century who's seeking to justify Israel's possession of its kingdom from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates; it's presenting that kingdom as a fulfillment of a promise of land that God made to Israel's ancient ancestors. For that reason source critics thought J must date to about the tenth century and to the time of perhaps King Solomon.

[8] It also seems to reflect the interests of the south. Remember, we talked about the fact briefly that at a certain point in Israel's history there is a division upon the death of Solomon in the late tenth century. The kingdom divides into a northern kingdom now called Israel and a southern smaller kingdom called Judah. And the southern interests seem to be reflected in the J document. So source critics decided this is a Judean document from the tenth century.

[9] The E source, which source critics say begins around Genesis 15 is really the most fragmentary. It seems to have been used to supplement the J source rather than being used in a larger form. So sometimes it seems very difficult to isolate, and there's a lot of debate over this, but the E source's characteristics are that (1) it uses Elohim, again it's a plural form of the word god or gods, but when it's used with a singular verb it refers to the God of Israel; (2) it has a much less anthropomorphic view of God; (3) God is more remote. There aren't the direct face-to-face revelations in the E source; most communications from the divine are indirect. They'll be through messengers or dreams and; (4) there's also an emphasis on prophets and prophecy in the E source. Miriam, Moses — they're both referred to as prophets in the E source; (5) The style is more abstract, a little less picturesque, and; (6) the E source uses a different name for the mountain where the covenant was concluded. It uses the name Horeb. So you will sometimes see as you are reading the text, they will sometimes refer to Horeb instead of Mount Sinai, or you'll see the two names used interchangeably. And it's been

the theory of scholars that that's because it comes from a different source.

[10]The E source seems to be concerned primarily with the northern tribes, therefore the northern kingdom. And so source theorists decided that it was most likely composed in the northern kingdoms about the ninth century.

[11]And then, according to this hypothesis, the J and E sources were combined, primarily J with E being used to supplement it, probably somewhere in the eighth century, late eighth century; and that was the backbone of the Pentateuchal narrative. It covers the early history of humankind, of Israel's early ancestors known as the patriarchs and matriarchs. Their stories are told in Genesis. It contained the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt in the book of Exodus, and the stories of the wandering in the wilderness that are found in the book of Numbers. The anonymous scribe or editor who combined these sources didn't care to remove any redundant material or contradictory material, as we've already seen.

[12]Now there are two other sources according to classical source theory, and these are D and P. D, which is the Deuteronomistic source, is essentially the book of Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy differs from the narrative sources. This is a book of speeches. The book purports to be three speeches delivered by Moses as the Israelites are poised on the east side of the Jordan River... I'm not good with directions; I had to stop and think... the east side of the Jordan River, about to enter the Promised Land. But according to the source theorists it clearly reflects the interests of settled agrarian life. It doesn't reflect the interests of people who have been wandering around nomadically. It has laws that deal with settled agrarian life. The main characteristic of D, however, which assisted source theorists in fixing its date, is the following: D is the one source in the Bible that clearly insists that one central sanctuary only is acceptable to Yahweh. God cannot be worshiped at makeshift altars. God cannot be worshipped through sacrifices at some local sanctuary; all sacrifices must be offered in the one central sanctuary where "he will cause his name to dwell." It doesn't actually ever say Jerusalem, which is why Samaritans think that it's at Mount Gerizim and that they have the correct temple and that they're authorized to offer sacrifices. They [the Israelites] got it wrong when they

thought it was Jerusalem; Samaritans think that that [Mt. Gerizim] is where God caused his name to dwell. So Jerusalem is not actually mentioned in Deuteronomy, that's a later reading, but the place where God will cause his name to dwell, and only at the temple there, can there be sacrifices. This is a very different perspective from other biblical books. So you're going to see in the stories of the patriarchs that they're wandering all around the land and they're offering sacrifices. There are other books too where it's clear that there are local shrines, local sanctuaries, local priests who are offering sacrifices for people throughout the land. But Deuteronomy insists: one central sanctuary. All of the outlying alters and sacred places must be destroyed.

[13]Now centralization of the cult was a key part of the religious reform of a king of Judah in 622. I've marked a couple of dates on the timeline up here: 722 is the fall of the Northern Kingdom, 622 a reform by King Josiah in Judah [correction: Professor Hayes meant Judea, not Judah here]. We read about this in one of the historical narratives where the temple's being refurbished. A book is found that says one central sanctuary. King Josiah says: What have we been doing? Get rid of the outlying altars, everything has to be centralized here. So that reform, Josiah's reform has caused many scholars to associate Deuteronomy, the centralizing book or source, with the late-seventh century, around this time in Judah.

[14]The trouble is D seems to reflect a lot of northern traditions, the interests of tribes who are in the north. Well the Northern Kingdom was destroyed in 722; so this is the theory: source critics conclude that D is an old source that was originally composed in the north in the eighth century. When the northern kingdom fell, when the Assyrians conquered and many Israelites would have fled to the southern kingdom, Deuteronomy or the D source was brought to Jerusalem, stored in the temple where a hundred years later it was discovered and its centralization was put into force by King Josiah.

[15]P is the Priestly source, and that is found mostly in the books of Leviticus and the non-narrative portions of Numbers. Now the major characteristics of P, the Priestly source, are (1) a great concern with religious institutions, with the sacrificial system, with the Sabbath, with holidays, with rituals like circumcision, the

Passover, dietary restrictions (the laws of *kashrut*) the system of ritual purity and impurity, and also holiness, ethical holiness and cultic or ritual holiness. P does have some narrative, and you've read some of it: Genesis 1, the first creation account, is attributed to P. It's orderly, it's systematized, the god is extraordinarily abstract. Because in the P source another characteristic is that; (2) God is transcendent, and even perhaps remote, much more so than in J, for example. Generally in the P source, God is concealed and revealed only in his *kavod*. This is a word that's often translated as "glory," but what it refers to actually is a light-filled cloud. God seems to be the burning fire inside this light-filled cloud. He travels before the Israelites in that form, leading them through the wilderness and so on. That seems to be in the P source. P is also; (3) interested in covenants, in censuses, in genealogies. All of those sections very often that link stories, are attributed to the P source. And because P elements often serve that kind of function as a bridge between stories, or very often P sources seem to introduce a story or conclude a story, the source critics felt that priestly writers were probably responsible for the final editing of the Bible, bringing together J and E and D and adding their materials and finally editing the work. Now, Wellhausen dated the priestly source to [or after] the exilic period, the period after the fall of the Southern Kingdom in 586 when the Babylonians have taken many of the Judeans into exile in Babylon.

2. *The Purpose of Literary, Source and Historical Criticism*

[16] So the narrative parts of P, J and E are continuous parallel accounts of the history of the world, if you will, from creation until the death of Moses. Source critics believe that they have a uniform style, uniform vocabulary, uniform set of themes, and chronological framework. So according to Wellhausen, and I sort of schematized it chronologically for you up here [on the board], the priestly school drew together all of this older material, added some of its own editorial material — bridges, introductions, conclusions — inserted the large priestly documents of Leviticus and Numbers, and so the Torah — and they did this [after] sitting in exile in Babylon — and so the Torah is really the result of five centuries of religious and literary activity. And this of course is a very, very different portrait from traditional claims about the authorship of the Pentateuch by one man, Moses, in approximately the fourteenth century BCE.

[17] There are different terms that we use to describe the modern, critical study of the Bible in the late nineteenth century as I've just described it. One term is literary criticism, because it proceeds by closely analyzing the literary features of the text: the terminology, the style, the motifs. But because the goal of this literary critical school was to identify specific sources, isolate sources, we also refer to it as source criticism. You'll see those terms used interchangeably in your literature. Today literary criticism has a slightly different connotation from what it was in the nineteenth century, so people prefer the term source criticism. But you should know both are used.

[18] However, the purpose of identifying and isolating these sources was not just to say, "Look at that, there are these different sources." The purpose was to ascertain as far as possible their relative dates to one another, and to therefore enable the work of historical reconstruction to proceed: primarily a reconstruction of the history of the religion of Israel, and the historical situation of the authors of the different sources. Therefore literary criticism is not only called source criticism. It's also called historical criticism, because its ultimate goal and purpose was not just to isolate the sources, but to arrange them according to relative dates as far as they might be ascertained, and then to chart changes in Israel's religion.

[19] You have a very readable introduction to some of this in Norman Habel's little work [*Literary Criticism of the Old Testament*]. Another excellent work which is not on your syllabus that is also critical of Wellhausen and some of the biases in his work, is found in a little work called *Who Wrote the Bible* by Richard Friedman, which has a great cover because it says "*Who Wrote the Bible?* Richard Friedman," [audience laughter].

[20] So to sum up: the documentary hypothesis is an effort to explain the contradictions, the doublets, anachronisms and so on in the Bible by means of hypothetical source documents. So the theory posits hypothetical sources, traditions and documents to explain the current shape of the Torah the way we have it, to account for some

of these phenomena that we find. As a next step the sources are assigned relative dates, not absolute dates, relative dates, and then they're analyzed to reveal the different stages of Israel's religious history. And so source criticism is also known as historical criticism because it's a tool for getting at the history, not just at the text, but ultimately a history of Israelite religion. That is how it has been used.

[21] Now Wellhausen's work is subtle and it's quite brilliant, but it certainly reflects biases of nineteenth-century German scholarship, which believed strongly in the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. In his writings Wellhausen has some things to say about Judaism that are none too flattering. He describes Judaism at the end of the biblical period as a dead tree, twisted and perverted. He especially harbored a distaste for things cultic: priests, cult, ritual, in keeping with what was going on in Germany at the time, and the Protestant movement and so on. And these sorts of biases are very apparent in his work, and very apparent in his dating of the sources, and in his description of the evolutionary stages of Israel's religion.

[22] So for example, source critics before Wellhausen all thought that P, the priestly material, was some of the oldest material in the Bible, that it was an early source. But Wellhausen said no, it must be a late source, because priestly, cultic, ritual material — that's clearly a degenerate stage of religion that shows a sort of guilt-ridden behaviorism. It's not true of spiritual religion, so clearly that's the latest stage of Israelite religion when it had died and was waiting to be reborn in new form with the arrival of someone in the first century. Clearly his dating of P owes a great deal to his biases and religious ideology. He saw the priestly material as having to come from the [post]-exilic age, post 586 [or later] [see note 1], and this is one of Wellhausen's most controversial points that's still hotly debated today, and we're going to return to this debate when we actually take a look at Leviticus and Numbers. At that time we'll be able to see what's at stake in the whole question of the dating of the priestly material.

[23] The historical critical method, and the documentary hypothesis in particular, are not inherently biased, I want to make that point very strongly. They are simply analytical tools: look at the text and its features and draw some

conclusions based on what you're finding. They are simply analytical tools. They're not inherently biased. They can be applied fairly to the text, and they're extraordinarily useful. It's just that some of the earlier practitioners of these methods did have ideological axes to grind, and we need to be aware of that.

[24] The documentary hypothesis works fairly well when you have parallel accounts. It works a little bit less well when the accounts are interwoven because sometimes picking apart the sources can become dry and mechanical, sometimes to the point of absurdity. Some of the people who have carried this method to its extreme will go through and almost word for word — this is J, this is E, the next word is P... it's quite remarkable how certain they feel that they can break things down almost on a word-to-word basis as if an editor sat there with scissors and paste, cutting out word for word, and putting them together. It sometimes can reach heights of absurdity, and it can really destroy the power of a magnificent story, sometimes, when you carve it up into pieces that on their own don't really make all that much sense.

[25] It needs to be remembered that the documentary hypothesis is only a hypothesis. An important and a useful one, and I certainly have used it myself. But none of the sources posited by critical scholars has been found independently: we have no copy of J, we have no copy of E, we have no copy of P by itself or D by itself. So these reconstructions are based on guesses. Some of them are excellent, excellent guesses, very well supported by evidence, but some of them are not. Some of the criteria invoked for separating the sources are truly arbitrary, and extraordinarily subjective. They are sometimes based on all sorts of unfounded assumption about the way texts were composed in antiquity, and the more that we learn about how texts in antiquity were composed, we realize [for example] that it's perhaps not unusual for a text to use two different terms for the same thing within one story, since we find texts in the sixteenth, seventeenth century BCE on one tablet using two different terms to connote the same thing.

[26] So the criteria that are invoked for separating sources often ignore the literary conventions of antiquity, and the more that we learn about that the better able we are to understand the way the biblical text was composed. Repetition isn't

always a sign of dual sources; it often serves a rhetorical function. Variant terms aren't always a sign of dual sources; they may have a literary or aesthetic function.

[27] So most biblical scholars today do accept some version of Wellhausen's theory — yes, we feel the Bible is composed of different sources. We don't always have tremendous confidence, though, in some of the finer details and conclusions of his work and the work of other scholars who followed after him. Some doubt the existence of E altogether — it is so fragmentary and so isolated. Others defend the antiquity of P — we'll be coming back to that. Others argue that everything is post-exilic, everything's after the fifth century. It was written in the fourth, third century in the Persian period. None of it comes from an older period. Scandinavian scholars, they're not enthusiastic about source criticism at all. The whole Copenhagen School of Bible scholarship prefers — many of them prefer — to see the Bible as basically an oral narrative that just grew through accretion over time. So I did assign readings in the documentary hypothesis — it's extraordinarily important — but you do need to understand that it is one hypothesis, a major and controlling hypothesis out there, but it's not without criticism.

[28] Moreover, while it's a very important and worthwhile project to analyze the component sources and examine their specific concerns and contribution, and you'll see that I'm a very great fan of P, we must remember that whatever sources were woven together, they were woven together with great skill and care by a final redactor, or redactors, who wanted them to be read as a unity, and surely that must mean something. It must mean they *can* be read as a unity and that that's a challenge that's been issued to us. So the Bible can be read both analytically and synthetically. We need to combine an awareness of origins, not gloss over the problems and the contradictions and say, "Well, we can resolve it by coming up with some strange scenario that makes both things work." Be aware that there are problems, contradictions, these derive from different sources, but also be sensitive to the artistry of the final composition. What does it mean that both of these elements have been retained here side by side? What is the phrase? The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. So keep that awareness.

[29] And in the last 20 years or so, source criticism — actually 30 years or so — source criticism in the conventional sense of the analysis of documentary sources has been supplemented by other new and exciting methodologies in the study of the Bible, and we'll see some of those.

[30] I've also included as optional reading for you sometimes, a couple of articles that analyze biblical stories. They are written by someone who thinks that documentary hypothesis just doesn't really help us out much at all, and she gives some wonderful, coherent readings of stories that argue this scene here or this contradiction here isn't a sign of a different source; it serves this literary purpose, that literary purpose. And I put those in subversively for you to have a look at in your own time. They're brilliantly written and they give you insight into the various ways in which we can read the text [see note 2].

[31] But many of the alternative methodologies for studying the text do assume sources, in some broad sense even if not all the details of Wellhausen's theory, so it's clear that a great deal of biblical scholarship owes its accomplishments and its theories to the work that was done by the source critics of the nineteenth century.

[32] I want to flip back to text for a moment before I return to talk about a whole contradictory set of methodologies, or methodologies that pull in another direction. But first I want to get us up to the patriarchs and matriarchs where we're going to be starting off on Monday.

3. The Generations of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs

[33] We have just had a flood, and then we move into Genesis 10; and Genesis 10 contains a genealogical table of nations. In this table, peoples of various lands are portrayed as having descended from a common source, a common ancestor, Noah, through his three sons, Japheth, Ham and Shem. Shem: Shemites, Semites. Shemites are said to descend from Noah's son, Shem. The biblical text at this point is understanding humanity as basically sharing a common root united by a common language. The story that follows in Genesis 11 can be understood then as an etiological tale, a tale that

comes to explain something, and this tale is coming to explain the diversification of language: when we look around we see that in fact people don't seem to be that united and are in fact divided by their languages and so on. So how are we to account for the diversification of languages, the spread of different ethnic linguistic groups throughout the lands of the earth if we all come from one common creative moment, one common ancestor?

[34] Genesis 11 explains that. The story is therefore going to act as a bridge between the first section of Genesis which has a universal scale, a universal scope, and what happens in Genesis beginning in Chapter 12, where we're going to focus in on one ethnic, linguistic group and one land. This story serves as the bridge, first of all explaining how it is that a united humanity speaking a common language even becomes diversified linguistically and ethnically, to then focus in on one group and one land.

[35] Babel, pronounced "bavel" in Hebrew, is Babylon. The tower in the story of the Tower of Babel is identified by scholars as a very famous tower, a ziggurat, a ziggurat to Marduk in Babylon. The Bible's hostility to Babylon — after all it's going to be the Babylonians who are going to destroy them in 586 — but the Bible's hostility to Babylon and its imperialism is clear. This story has a satirical tone. The word Babel, *Bavel*, means Gate of the God, but it's the basis for a wonderful pun in Hebrew, which also actually happens to work in English. Babble [is] nonsensical speaking, confusion of language. And I think there's obviously some onomatopoeic quality to "Babel" that makes it have that kind of a meaning both in English and a similar word in Hebrew [*balbel*]. So this word can also with a little bit of punning mean confusion, or confused language. So this mighty tower that was obviously the pride of Babylon in the ancient world is represented by the biblical storywriter as the occasion for the confusion of human language.

[36] The construction of Marduk's ziggurat is represented as displeasing to God. Why? There are very many possible interpretations and our commentaries are full of them. Some interpreters view the tower builders as seeking to elevate themselves to storm heaven by building a tower with its top in the sky. Others see the builders as defying God's direct order. Remember, God said, "Be fruitful and multiply

and fill the earth," spread out and fill the earth. But these people are said to come together, they congregate in one place, and instead of spreading out they're trying to rise high. There seems to be a real defiance of God's design for humanity, and so God frustrates their plan for self-monumentalizing, and he scatters them over the face of the earth. He makes it more difficult for them to do this again by confusing their tongues. Once again there's a very steep learning curve for this God. He has to keep adjusting things depending on what it is that humans are doing. So now he's got to confuse their languages.

[37] Some interpreters see this story as representing a rejection of civilization or certain aspects of civilization. Monumental architecture, empire building, these are always things that are looked upon with suspicion for most of the biblical sources and biblical writers. Those sorts of ambitions are viewed negatively. They lead to human self-aggrandizement. They are indicative of an arrogant sort of self-reliance — that the prophets will certainly rail against — and in some sense a forgetting of God. So this is a time in which humans spread out, lose their unity, and this is also a time really when they turn to the worship of other gods.

[38] The first 11 chapters of Genesis then have given us a cosmic, universal setting for the history of Israel. Those first chapters cover 2500 years if you go through and add up the chronologies. The rest of Genesis, Genesis 12 through 50, will cover just four generations: the generations of the patriarchs and the matriarchs. They will be Abraham and Sarah; their son Isaac, his wife Rebekah; their son Jacob, his two wives Rachel and Leah, I am leaving out other wives; but finally their children, 12 sons and one daughter.

[39] So God's focus has shifted dramatically, the text's focus has shifted dramatically. Why? When you get to the end of Genesis 11 you feel that God has been rather shut out. Things aren't going well. Although God created the earth as an intrinsically good paradise, he created humans in his image, he provided for them, humans to this point have put their moral freedom pretty much to poor use.

[40] Many scholars, Kaufman, Sarna and others, say that one of the differences then between these myths of Israel and the mythologies of their neighbors is that in Ancient Near Eastern

mythologies you have the struggle of good and evil cosmic powers. In the myths of the Bible this is replaced by a struggle between the will of God and rebellious humans. So these myths are telling also of a struggle, but it's on a different plane. Adam and Eve, Cain, the generation of the flood, the builders of the tower of Babel — God has been continually spurned or thwarted by these characters. So he's withdrawing his focus, and is going to choose to reveal himself to one small group, as if to say, "Okay, I can't reach everybody, let me see if I can just find one person, one party, and start from there and build out."

[41]And so in Genesis 12 which begins the second stage of the Bible's historical narrative, we read that God calls to Abram to leave the land of his fathers and travel to a land which God will show him, beginning a whole new stage of the biblical narrative, and we'll sense that there's a very different feeling when you get to Genesis 12. When you read that material, it will feel different to you. And because of that we need to talk a little bit more about ways to read the biblical text, methods of criticism and so on.

4. Critical Methodology Used in Biblical Scholarship

[42]In preparation for looking at the biblical narrative material that deals specifically with the Israelites, we need to think of some, or learn about some, of the other critical methodologies that are used in biblical scholarship, and for a moment we're going to adopt the role of historian. I'm going to ask you to think like historians — whatever that might mean — now and as we move into next week and look at Genesis 12 through 50.

[43]The source critical method that we talked about today focuses on the hypothetical period of the compilation of the text, the compilation of the four sources into the Torah. But later scholars began to ask, "Well, what about the pre-history of those sources? What were the sources' sources?" Why should that be important? Remember that the source critics claimed and concluded that J, E, P and D were written from the tenth to the sixth centuries, and the implication, well actually not just the implication, the strong assertion of many of them was that despite the fact that they purport

to tell of events prior to 1000, in fact they're just not at all reliable for those periods. They were written centuries after the fact, we really can't know anything about Israel, Israel's religion, Israel's history, religious history before the tenth century.

[44]That was a very dissatisfying conclusion to many people, because the writers of J, E, P and D probably didn't sit down at typewriters and just invent their documents out of whole cloth. It doesn't seem that that's the way these materials would have been composed. They didn't invent, probably, all of these cultic rules and ritual practices all of a sudden. It seems likely that they were drawing on older traditions themselves: older stories, older customs, older laws, ritual practices. Scholars in the next wave of biblical scholarship began to ask a different set of questions; they became interested in asking: what materials did the compiler or the compilers of J or E or P draw on in the composition of those sources? Did they use more ancient materials, and if so can we figure out what they were? Do they contain reliable traditions for an earlier stage? And if so, then maybe we do have access after all to information regarding Israelite history prior to the year 1000. Suddenly you see an analytical approach to the Bible that's going to pull in the exact opposite direction from the classical source theory.

[45]One of the leading scholars to take up this question was Hermann Gunkel, whose name is at the top over there [on the board]. Gunkel had a great knowledge of the oral literature of other cultures, other nations, and that led him to ask: Can we perhaps analyze these four literary source documents and figure out the pre-literary stages of their development? What went into their compilation and composition? He found support for this idea within the Bible itself because at times the Bible seems to name earlier sources quite explicitly. We don't have records of those sources anymore, but they seem to be named in the Bible. In Numbers 21:14 there's a little poetic excerpt that gives the boundaries between Moab and the Amorites, and it's quoted and it says it's from the Book of the Wars of the Lord. It's quoted as if this is a source that the person is drawing on and using in the composition of his text, and it's quoted in a way that makes it sound as if the source should be familiar to the reader.

- [46] We also have mention of something called the Book of Yashar in Joshua, that's also quoted, in Joshua 10:13. Or in 2 Samuel 1:18, we have David lamenting, a very beautiful lament over the death of Saul and his beloved Jonathan. It seems to actually be an epic song that recounts acts of Israel's heroes. He's reciting that now as he laments over the death of these two, and so it seems to be an earlier source that's been put into the story of David and his lament.
- [47] So it seems reasonable in light of the practices of other people, other ancient cultures and literatures as well as some contemporary literatures, and it seems reasonable in light of the explicit citation of sources in the biblical text to suppose that in fact the four primary documents are themselves compilations from other source materials, or drawing on written or oral materials from an even earlier period.
- [48] Gunkel began to focus on small little units. He was interested in small units within the four primary documents, and he identified genres or forms, what he called forms. The German word is a *Gattung*, *Gattungen*, forms. He would identify these small units, and that gave rise to the name of this approach, which is form criticism. He believed that what he was doing was identifying older, pre-literary forms that had been taken up and incorporated by the literary sources, by J, E, P and D.
- [49] Examples of the kind of form, or *Gattung*, that he would identify are things like a hymn, a proverb — we often have biblical texts quoting proverbs that seem to be folk sayings — laws, rituals, folk stories of a particular type, poems, legends, songs, fragments of mythology. So for example he says of Genesis 6:1-4, a passage that you've read:
- [50] When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them, the divine beings saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them. The Lord said, "My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years." It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim [these giants of some kind] appeared on earth — when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring [these giants, these Nephilim]. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.
- [51] That's just stuck in there, in Genesis 6:1-4. This is an older fragment of a mythology or a legend which is put into place here. It's explaining the origin of heroes and great men of renown in the old days.
- [52] He also says that there are etiological stories. We've talked about those — legends that give the origin of a name, or a ritual, or an institution. There are different types of etiological stories. He says there are ethnological legends that will give you the story accounting for the origin of a particular people: so the Moabites for example, and the Ammonites — not a flattering story at all following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Obviously the Israelites didn't care for those people very much and gave them a pretty nasty origin.
- [53] We also have etymological legends, because they're explaining the name of something. It's given this particular name because of an etymological connection with some event earlier.
- [54] So all of these things, he argues, are probably older existing traditions that have been taken up and adapted by the biblical writer, and they may preserve some historical reminiscence. More importantly, more important than the actual events that they might be reporting, is the fact that behind each of these is some sort of function. Each one of these did some sort of cultural work, it had some function or setting in life. That's what we can discover when we isolate these forms: this setting in life. That helps us learn something about ancient Israelite society or culture way before the tenth century. That's Gunkel's claim.
- [55] So form criticism wasn't content with just identifying these various types of material, these various genres; it asked what was their function? What was their *Sitz im Leben*? What was their situation in life, their cultural context? What does it tell us that we have a large number of liturgical texts? What does it tell us that we have a large number of texts that seem to point to some sort of judicial context? What does it tell us that we have a great deal of proverbs, or wisdom material in certain parts of the Bible that we might date to a certain time? What does this tell us about society and what people were doing?

[56] Growing out of form criticism is tradition criticism. This is a type of criticism that focuses on the transmission of traditional material through various stages, oral stages and literary stages, until it reaches its present form in the text. Now you can imagine as a story is told and then it's retold, it is obviously changed and adapted. Tradition criticism looks at that. Looking at Ancient Near Eastern parallels is very helpful. You can see how some of those motifs and themes were changed in the process of being transmitted within Israelite culture and society, and again, to serve some sort of cultural function, or purpose. So the present text of the Pentateuch obviously rests on a very, very long period of transmission, both oral recitation and transmission, very much like the Greek classics, Homer's classics, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*: they also had a long history of oral recitation and transmission, and were transformed along the way. Tradition criticism likes to look at the way people receive traditional material, rework it in creative ways and then adapt it to their own purposes and contexts and transmit it.

[57] Sometimes that process is reflected in the Bible itself. Traditions in one part of the Bible will be picked up in a later part of the Bible, and written rather differently with a different point of view. So Deuteronomy, for example, recounts events that we've also read about in Exodus, and sometimes the differences are startling. Sometimes there are completely new emphases and the story can come out to be a very, very different story. 1 and 2 Chronicles are a retelling and a reworking of much of the material from Genesis through 2 Kings, and it cleans up a lot of the embarrassing moments. It presses its own themes in retelling those stories. Early laws are subject to reinterpretation. Ezekiel comes along and does some interesting things with some of the legal material that we find in Leviticus. This is all the kind of thing that tradition criticism looks at. Tradition criticism wants to uncover the changes that occur in the transmission of traditional material. It's already happening — we can see it — within the Bible, and the assumption therefore is that it happens before the material even gets into the Bible. Perhaps we can figure some of that out, and it's a process that also aids in historical reconstruction.

[58] So you can see after classic source criticism, which came along and leveled people's interest in anything before the tenth century, and said: all we have are these written accounts that reflect

the biases of the people at the time who wrote them, you then have the rise of types of scholarship that say: we're not satisfied with that. That's not really how literature works. People don't sit down and invent things out of whole cloth, particularly material of this type. It clearly has a history, they're clearly drawing on sources and maybe we can use analytical tools to figure out something about the period that you might think would be lost to history. So these types of criticism are emphasizing the real life historical setting of the materials that are in the biblical sources, their relationship to the wider culture, and that's something that earlier source criticism didn't care too much about.

[59] All of these analytical modes of studying the Bible — by analytical I mean sitting down and analyzing the features, the literary features of the text, and drawing conclusions from them — all of these modes of examining the Bible — most of them developed by German scholars — can be contrasted with the North American tradition of scholarship which emphasized the correlation of biblical and archaeological data. I've written the name Albright; William F. Albright, was a leading scholar at the American school of biblical studies, and he was an expert in the fields of Palestinian archaeology and Assyriology. He focused on illustrating the Bible with the Ancient Near Eastern sources that at that time were newly coming to light — archaeological findings; and his argument was — and it's an argument that's to a large degree not accepted anymore but — his argument at the time was that archaeology supported the basic historicity of biblical tradition.

[60] There are some definite problems, however, with viewing the Bible as history. There are certainly problems with chronology: it's hard to pin down dates for a lot of things. Many of the events are given more than one date. A lot of the numbers...the Bible tends to use ideal numbers; it tends to use fives and multiples of five, or multiples of five plus seven. You have ten generations from Adam to Noah. You have ten generations from Noah to Abram. These things begin to raise suspicions. We have suspicious repetitions of events, things that happened to two or more of the patriarchs: twice Abraham goes into foreign territory and tries to pass his wife off as his sister. Isaac does the same thing. Are these three versions of one basic tradition that got assigned to different patriarchs? Are we supposed to think of these as representing three

separate historical incidents? What's the likelihood of these things happening? Is that historically reasonable? So there are lots of reasons to feel that biblical chronologies of the patriarchal period are not accurate historical records: I use that phrase [accurate historical record] with some timidity. But in the twentieth century scholars of Albright's school argued that many of the traditions in the book of Genesis contained authentic reflections of the historical period they claimed to deal with. And they cited a number of considerations.

[61] We'll take those up on Monday, but I would like you — as you read Genesis 12 and forward and think about that material — I'd like you to ask yourself: Is this historical writing? By what criteria do I judge historical writing? What do I think historical writing is? What makes some writing historical? What makes other writing fictional? Where do we get these genres from? Why is so important to us to figure out what this is? Think about some of those issues, and we'll talk a little bit more about that as we turn to the texts in Genesis 12.

[62][end of transcript]

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[63] **Notes** 1. In general the terms exilic and post-exilic are not used with great precision in these lectures. Technically speaking the term exilic is used to refer to the period between the destruction (586 BCE) and the Restoration in the 530s BCE, while post-exilic refers to the period initiated by the restoration. However, in these lectures the term exilic is occasionally used to refer to any time from the exile on. Strictly speaking, Wellhausen placed the P source in the post-exilic period.

[64] 2. See on the syllabus, under "Optional," the articles by Pamela Tamarkin Reis.

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[65] **References** Friedman, Richard E. 1997. *Who Wrote the Bible?* San Francisco: Harpers. Habel, Norman C. 1971. *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers.