Neither Ratzinger nor I ever claim that the “crisis in biblical scholarship reflects a conflict between the critical methods of theology and history.” The crisis, rather, reflects the lack of appreciation of the inescapable subjectivity of the modern exegete (of all exegetes of all times, Catholic or not, theological or not). This is one irony of some of the positivist approaches which still exist in modern biblical criticism.

It was quite an honor for me to discover that Thomas L. Thompson had not only read my article, “On Biblical Scholarship and Bias,” but had taken the time to respond to it so thoughtfully in his rejoinder, “On Myths and Their Contexts: An Issue of Contemporary Theology? A Response to Jeffrey Morrow.” What follows is my response to Thompson. In my attempt rightly to understand Thompson, and accurately to represent the positions he takes in his written response, I include ample quotations from his reply below, and my responses directly tackle what he wrote. Thus the format in general will be along the lines of, “Thompson writes…. To which I respond…,” cumbersome as that is. In general, the article below is structured by linking Thompson’s statements that go together thematically, rather than addressing them in the order in which they appear in his article.

Understanding and Misunderstanding Morrow’s Use of “Bias”

In reference to my earlier piece, Thompson writes, “The problem of inevitable ‘bias’ in presuppositions, which are at the same time both ‘unconscious’ and ‘philosophical,’ is I suggest awkwardly defined.” I concede the point; I could have
been clearer. By “bias” I intended the general category of presuppositions. Presuppositions often rely upon philosophical foundations. Such presuppositions, philosophical or otherwise, may be conscious or unconscious. In the terms of biblical scholarship, I think they are often unconscious. I know many biblical scholars who are tremendous linguists, archaeologists, historians, theologians, etc., but have been unaware of philosophical presuppositions as unexamined starting points. This lack of awareness may in part lie in their paucity of formal philosophical formation. Of course, this is not true in every case.

Thompson opines, “The weight of this critique of criticism is, unfortunately, somewhat lessened by Morrow’s suggestion that such ‘bias’ is due merely to an ordinary carelessness.” I would not use the word “carelessness,” so much as “unconscious,” or “unaware.” Such unconsciousness need not be “careless,” especially for exegetes who do not claim for any such presuppositions to exist. They may simply be unaware of these unexamined commitments, which need not imply carelessness, especially for those whose biblical scholarly formation omitted consideration of being aware of such commitments.

Thompson demurs: “The existence of either Morrow’s or Ratzinger’s crisis of criticism might well be doubted….” Certainly, but such doubt doesn’t carry much weight until it refutes the concrete examples (e.g., Bultmann and Dibelius—and their unacknowledged Heideggerian biases/presuppositions) that Ratzinger, Reiner Blank, Michael Waldstein, and others have demonstrated.[1] Moreover, such “unexamined commitments of criticism,” have been broadly recognized outside of Christian circles, as Jon Levenson’s essay with that very subtitle—“The Bible: Unexamined Commitments of Criticism”—demonstrates.[2]

Thompson balks at the idea that, “theoretically ‘unbiased’ scholarship is claimed to be impossible!” This idea is not all that novel, and certainly not unique to my work. Perhaps none have argued this as forcefully, while remaining realist and resisting the solipsism of so much of post-modern thought, as Alasdair MacIntyre.[3] Peter Novick has shown the history of the opposite assumption within the founding and early years of the development of the discipline of history within the United States, likening such quest for objectivity to “nailing jelly to the wall.”[4] One need only be aware of the necessary uncertainty within the hard sciences like physics and chemistry—à la the physicist Werner Heisenberg, to whose “Heisenberg principle,” the then Cardinal Ratzinger made reference in his, “Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit.”[5] Despite the many apparent protestations to the contrary that I have heard, I have yet to be persuaded that the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, and the related “observer effect,” obtain in such fields as
physics (quantum mechanics), and chemistry, and yet disciplines like history and literature are somehow exempt; that they might “theoretically” achieve a higher level of objectivity. I remain open to (and welcome) persuasive contradiction here.

Thompson continues: “Bias becomes almost a physical handicap.” Not quite. The bias I’m getting at tends to be unconscious, unnoticed. Not quite like a physical handicap. The bias might blind an exegete or it might illuminate. Thompson writes, “he continues the discussion now declared hopeless!” Not hopeless, hopeful. It’s a call to be aware of our presuppositions and commitments and how they may blind or illuminate our work.

Thompson proceeds to write:

“Unrecognized or ‘under-recognized’ biases of early historical critical scholarship become the focus, rather than any alleged biases of current biblical scholarship, which had been the problem and target of Ratzinger’s 1988 and 2010 papers! Morrow does not address the same crisis of biblical scholarship that Ratzinger had addressed as, certainly, Jesus von Nazareth, published by Ratzinger, in 2007—with its own, rather moderate form of historical criticism—must fall under this critique of alleged bias due to the methods and principles of these three founders of historical criticism!”

Not quite. Some of the exegetes Ratzinger mentioned, e.g., Bultmann, were the same I mentioned, and also from the past, albeit more recent past. It’s the same crisis, I’m simply tracing the history back earlier, which was one of the suggestions Ratzinger made, namely to examine the history and foundations of modern biblical criticism. One who follows historical criticism like Ratzinger, but is aware of some of these potentially infelicitous biases, may avoid some of the pitfalls. I have never, nor will I ever, call for an end to modern biblical criticism. My position is closer to Ratzinger’s which seeks an “exegesis C,” utilizing both traditional forms of exegesis (what he called “exegesis A”) as well as modern methods (what he called “exegesis B”).

Thompson understands me fairly well when he notes that I claim that “the methodological assumptions of historical criticism’s founding fathers, which have been inherited by contemporary scholarship as ‘fundamental guiding assumptions’ are inherent in the very methods and scholarly hypotheses of historical criticism.” My only caveat would be that this applies to some of the methods and hypotheses.

Thompson is critical of my claim that these assumptions may “neither [be] shared
by scholars today; nor is their influence realized. This is an extraordinary claim for
a tradition so rooted in the history of scholarship, evolution and methods as
historical criticism has been for some three centuries!” I think it is true
nonetheless. Examples abound. Just because scholars employ various
methodological frameworks, hypotheses, or conclusions that appear to be the
assured results of historical criticism, does not mean those same scholars agree
with the assumptions that formed and shaped those very same conclusions.

For example, there are many good arguments for Markan priority. Indeed, it is
possible that Mark was the first of the four canonical Gospels written. Studying the
history of the development of the synoptic problem, however, reveals how unlikely
it was that either the truth of the matter (if it is true), or the persuasive arguments
put forward were the reason for its widespread acceptance in the decade or so after
the First Vatican Council. The question is whether or not some of those
assumptions are carried forward in the method, for it is certain that many Markan
prioritists today do not share those assumptions, forged in part in the milieu of
Bismarck’s Kulturkampf.

Another case in point might be the conclusion of the late-dating of the Book of
Daniel to the second century B.C.E. This is a fairly widely held conclusion today,
and has been for some time. It may in fact be correct. When Porphyry made this
claim (which was revived in modern scholarship), it certainly was not with the
same sophistication of arguments modern scholars employed, but was loaded with
his anti-Christian bias. Was such bias illuminating for him? Perhaps, if Daniel is
from the second century B.C.E. Either way, however, when Pope Emeritus
Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) assumed such a dating in his Jesus von
Nazareth, he was not guilty of sharing Porphyry’s bias, nor that of the modern
revivers of his arguments. It is a legitimate question whether or not such biases are
carried forward in the methods and conclusions themselves. In this context, I think
of Matthew Bates’ depiction of the historian engaging in a “holistic approach,”
where, “The historian is keenly aware that perhaps the predetermined classification
systems and tools used for data collection might be skewing the results.” I think
this is the preferable approach.

Despite Thompson’s protestations that historical criticism is “a tradition so rooted
in the history of scholarship, evolution and methods” and “has been for some three
centuries,” there remains a paucity of studies on just this sort of history of
scholarship. The overwhelming majority of such scholarship has been piecemeal,
and disconnected. There are a few welcome exceptions to this, e.g.: Henning
Graf Reventlow’s four volume Epochen der Bibelauslegung; John Van Seters’
The Edited Bible;[12] and Magne Sæbø’s five volume Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation.[13] I find that most Bible scholars are generally unaware of these histories. One of the great exceptions to this ignorance is Dominique Barthélemy’s fine (but little cited) survey of such scholarship.[14]

**Understanding and Misunderstanding Morrow’s Use of Troeltsch**

Thompson misunderstands (in three different places) how I am using Troeltsch when he writes:

“Morrow uses a quotation from Troeltsch to argue further that this development of historical-critical scholarship was a uniquely Protestant critique, in contrast to the earlier, authority-oriented, traditional and Catholic theology. For Morrow this betrayed an obvious Catholic bias. Why he sees it as a bias rather than Troeltsch’s insistence on the priority of scientific methods was not rather a conclusion of his research is somewhat unclear.”

I didn’t use Troeltsch’s quotation to show what Troeltsch was trying to argue. I was not arguing that historical criticism was “uniquely Protestant,” nor that more “traditional” non-historical critical forms were more “Catholic.” Rather I used it to show Troeltsch seemed to think so (although he didn’t, as my endnote made clear). The fact that Troeltsch could use it in such a dichotomous way was the anti-Catholic bias I referenced.

Again, Thompson continues later to misunderstand how I was using sources when he mistakenly attributes Troeltsch’s clearly false dichotomy to me: “direct bearing on the dichotomies Morrow, in his critique of biblical criticism, asserts to exist between critical and Protestant biblical scholarship on the one hand and theological and Catholic biblical scholarship on the other.” That was Troeltsch’s dichotomy, not mine, and I agree with Thompson in eschewing this dichotomy.

Finally, when Thompson writes, “Morrow’s identification of critical thinking with ‘Protestantism’ is deeply inattentive to the historical context of such biblical criticism,” he again mistakes Troeltsch’s view (which I quoted) for mine. To be fair to Troeltsch, he explained that he was not exclusively referring to “Catholics” by this designation, and that we should probably not refer to it as “Catholic,” as I mention in endnote 21 of my prior article.

**Loisy and the Roman Catholic Modernist Controversy**
Thompson writes, “In his qualification, Ratzinger stresses the change and relativity of scientific questions and observations over time, raising an issue, which is already, clearly central to the arguments of especially Troeltsch and Bultmann in regard to their understanding of modernism’s transformation of traditional Catholic theology with the help of historical criticism.” This point may raise a question, but it is not clear to me from what Thompson writes what that question is. Ratzinger’s use of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle applies quite well for the hard sciences (like physics and chemistry), and he is applying it to historical and literary studies, precisely because these disciplines have so often been likened to the hard and natural sciences. Ratzinger’s point was that even the hard sciences are not purely objective.

This issue of “modernism’s transformation of traditional Catholic theology with the help of historical criticism,” is something for which neither Troeltsch nor Bultmann had much concern. Perhaps Thompson was referring to the Catholic modernist controversy, centered around figures like Alfred Loisy, whom Thompson later brings up. Loisy certainly sought to transform Catholic theology, as he later conceded in his autobiographical memoirs: “Therefore I did not limit myself to criticizing M. Harnack, I implied discretely but really an essential reform of biblical exegesis, of the entirety of theology, and even of Catholicism in general.”[15]

Thompson writes later:

“Central to Loisy’s theology had been his objection that the biblical traditions, most notably, the Pentateuch, were not to be interpreted literally or as an account of events. As with Bultmann’s understanding of central myths of the New Testament, Loisy’s critique was not rooted in historicist ‘bias’. He rather argued on the basis of an astute and critical reading of the Pentateuch that its narratives were rooted in myth and legend.”

I’m not sure where in Loisy’s massive literary corpus—he published 57 books in his lifetime (more posthumously)—Thompson is getting this. I’m not sure precisely what Thompson means by “literally.”[16] That’s not Loisy’s standard language. Loisy wrote on the senses of Scripture, as well as other forms of interpretation.[17] This has a long history within Christianity, gaining prominence with St. Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana, for which St. Augustine was indebted to the Donatist Tyconius’ Liber Regularum.[18] In his “Firmin” articles, Loisy defended patristic recourse to the spiritual sense of Scripture, but most of his comments, and his historical critical work, tended to focus on the literal sense.[19]
Certainly, Loisy’s language was often slippery, and this was especially the case in his writings intended beyond specialists. Loisy’s positions also changed and developed over time. I’m not sure if Thompson is referring to work Loisy published after his 1908 excommunication, or prior. Loisy was more cautious in his explanations prior. Early on, especially, he was wary of applying “myth” to the biblical accounts. He defined “myth” when he wrote, “Myths are the dogmas of pagan religions….“ He conceded that one cannot simply assume that flood traditions in the Bible are copied from older accounts, but admitted the possibility both accounts relied upon earlier traditions.

Thompson is correct when he writes: “There are not many Catholic scholars today who would see any reason to argue with Loisy.”

**Julius Wellhausen and “Bias”**

When Thompson writes, “Morrow does not actually offer an argument that Wellhausen’s conclusions regarding the dating of ‘P’ are biased,” I think I detect some confusion on his part. That was the very point of the quotation I included. I’m not exactly sure how Thompson is using the term “bias,” but I wonder if we are using it differently. At the outset of my article, I stated that I would use “bias” not “in any technical sense, but rather as a general term for the inevitable starting assumptions that we scholars bring with us when we interpret texts.” We don’t approach texts with no prior commitments, subjectivity, etc. Even to approach a text with the ostensible goal of formal objectivity, pure neutrality, itself represents a prior commitment, a bias (in the way I employ the term in my article) that might affect how we read the text.

The quotation from Wellhausen which I included would, I think, indicate a rather strong bias in favor of the Prophets and opposed to the Torah or Pentateuch. Wellhausen wrote, “my enjoyment of the latter [the historical and prophetical books] was marred by the Law [the Pentateuch]; it…intruded itself uneasily, like a ghost that makes a noise indeed, but is not visible and really effects nothing.” With these statements, Wellhausen is giving his impressions of the stories, with his obvious preference for the historical books and the prophets. This is not the conclusion he reached from disinterested scholarship, but was his first impression reading the Pentateuch. We catch a sense of Wellhausen’s relief when he remarks, “At last…” he learned that perhaps the Pentateuch came after the prophets, as well as his telling comment, “almost without knowing his reasons for the hypothesis, I was prepared to accept it.” His preference for the Prophets was precisely that, a preference. That preference, coupled with his obvious distaste for the Pentateuch,
was a bias that may have affected his scholarship, since it was a prior starting position he held prior to his scholarly attempt at reconstructing the history of Israel. This does not mean Wellhausen’s conclusions regarding “P” are incorrect, but it is difficult to argue they were free from any prior commitments or assumptions on his part.\[26]\n
Thompson is of course correct when he writes, “However, such arguments within today’s scholarship do not imply in the least that the failure of Wellhausen’s thesis on the dating of ‘P’ had been due to bias.” But that’s not how bias works. Bias does not always lead you to incorrect assumptions. It can also clarify. If your bias (in this case, anti-ritual, anti-priest, anti-cult, etc.), however, is one cause leading to your conclusion (e.g., regarding “P”), then although the failure of your thesis is not due to bias…it’s simply due to being incorrect, or insufficiently explaining more recent evidence…it may be biased nonetheless. The reason one may embrace a position, and be blinded to other options, may have been caused in part by such bias. Thus, when scholars fault Wellhausen for his general lack of engagement with other ancient Near Eastern materials, part of the failure might be due to Wellhausen’s assumptions about the significance (or in this case, the insignificance) of such material on the history of Israel. Wellhausen could read Akkadian, and was in fact familiar with the discipline of Assyriology, as Peter Machinist has shown.\[27]\n
Thompson is correct to note:

“Inadequate historical arguments, whether related to the documentary hypothesis, the two-source theory or the existence of ‘Q’ are inadequate as historical arguments. These theories can be falsified and they are largely based on evidence! It is hardly difficult, Morrow claims, let alone impossible, to question the documentary hypothesis today! However, many scholars have, especially over the last half-century.”

But my comments were not meant to imply that scholars have not challenged these views (like the Documentary Hypothesis)—I too cited scholars who made such challenges. My point was that they are easily dismissed: I have seen this at many conferences. I concede my anecdotal evidence might be unique to me, but I have heard too many such anecdotes to think that very likely. Or, arguments that have been put forward, often multiple times, are summarily ignored.

**Theological Criticism and Historical Criticism**
To Thompson’s comment, “Morrow is quite on the mark in arguing against overly simplified dismissals of ‘traditional’ theological readings of the Bible. However, this does not give us reason to accept such readings as either valid or critical in comparison with modern scholarship,” I reply: Certainly its validity would have to stand on other points than mere assertion, like argument and evidence. Nor would I intend to claim such traditional forms of exegesis are “critical.” I question, rather, the preference for the distance “criticism” creates between the text and the reader. In my non-seminary classes that I teach, I often hear students facilely link mathematical “reason” with knowledge, and “faith” with ignorance. But cannot faith and trust give us knowledge, at least natural faith and natural trust (if not the theological virtue)? Commitment to the text, a commitment that prescinds from the more skeptical starting positions often assumed in “criticism” might arrive at a host of insights that a more critical eye might miss.

Thompson declares, “Traditional theological misreadings are often due far more to carelessness and lack of attention to the text in question.” Perhaps, but not always.

Thompson claims that, “Modern biblical scholarship is rooted in a discourse of evidence-based arguments.” That’s certainly how it styles itself. This notion seems to fit MacIntyre’s description of encyclopedic rationality, in his Gifford Lectures, and, frankly, I find his account of tradition (which, as MacIntyre describes it, also involves a form of evidence and argument), thickly narrated, more compelling than either encyclopedic or genealogic rationality.

Again, Thompson writes: “I also do not think he has demonstrated a bias against theology.” I concede that I may not have demonstrated a bias against theology, but my overall point was not focused just on theology, but on bias in general, and on the need to be aware of our biases.

Thompson demurs:

“Lemche rather argued his case in support of a thorough going theologically oriented interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, my own popular book of 1999, The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past, presented an argument both that the ancient history of Palestine must be based on sources apart from the Bible as well as that the function of biblical literature is not centered in a historical discourse, but is rather appropriately understand as theological. Morrow’s assertion that critical biblical scholarship, in its principles and methods, is rooted in an anti-theological bias is simply not true.”
I would concede that what Thompson claims is correct; that he and Lemche were claiming “that the function of biblical literature...is rather appropriately understood as theological.” My point was more in reference to the (theological) position that the Bible is Scripture, a living unified text that speaks to us about a real personal God who exists and who relates to us personally, and communally. That is not a “traditional” position within modern critical scholarship. Levenson points out the contrast quite well:

“historical criticism is the form of biblical studies that corresponds to the classical liberal political ideal. It is the realization of the Enlightenment project in the realm of biblical scholarship. Like citizens in the classical liberal state, scholars practicing historical criticism of the Bible are expected to eliminate or minimize their communal loyalties, to see them as legitimately operative only within associations that are private, nonscholarly, and altogether voluntary. Within the public space of the academy, scholars of every sort—Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, secular, or whatever—meet, again at least in theory, as equals.... the new arrangement.... tends subtly to restrict the questions studied and the methods employed to those that permit the minimization of religious difference with relative facility....”[29]

One need only compare approaches as James Kugel does so well in his How to Read the Bible.[30]

I remain rather confused by Thompson’s statement: “Neither do I see that the most significant differences in the conclusions of historical criticism and traditional theological or Catholic readings of the Bible are, in fact, to be explained as the result of bias, as Morrow claims.” I reread my article, but failed to find where I write that, “the most significant differences in the conclusions of historical criticism and traditional theological or Catholic readings of the Bible are, in fact, to be explained as the result of bias,” or anything resembling this statement. My writing has many flaws, but I do try to use words like “many,” “significant,” etc., with precision. And yet, I think many forms of exegesis, be they Thomistic, Bonaventurean, Karraite, Medieval Andalusian Muslim, etc., differ from one another in their starting positions, among other differences. Such starting points (biases) are not the only, nor necessarily most significant differences, but they remain differences.

Thompson writes:

“Historicist bias has little to do with the conflicts that have arisen over time
between critical and church related Catholic scholarship. In the conflicts he refers
to in my *memoire*, the issues were similarly rooted in my insistence as a Catholic
scholar on the theological and non-historical character of the narratives of Genesis
against a traditionalist insistence that the texts be read naively and within the
modern context of theological consensus: as accounts of past events. Bias played
little role in this conflict. The disagreement was real.”

By no means was I trying to imply that the disagreements were not real. In fact, I
was attempting to use Thompson’s autobiographical reflections, as I did in my
reference to the modernist controversy, with some sympathy for him and for them
(the “modernists”) on my part. I was certainly not attempting to denigrate
Thompson by asserting the problem in his early controversy he shared was
reducible to his bias. Rather I was attempting to express my sympathy for the way
in which he described how harshly he had been treated. Furthermore, even when
“bias” (as I have been using the term) is present, it need not indicate there are not
real disagreements involved.

**The Role of Figures (and Their “Biases”) from the Seventeenth through
Nineteenth Centuries in Historical Criticism’s Origins**

Thompson is clearly correct when he writes that, “I do not think that Morrow has
made a case that the methodology and principles of critical exegesis is biased in its
origins, methods and principles; nor that it prejudicially favors a historicizing of
the Bible or any other particular historical interpretation or ideology.” He is right, I
didn’t make that case. Rather I summarized my own work, and that of others, with
a few examples. The case has been made, but it takes more than a brief article to
trace the history of historical criticism’s origins, methods, and principles, showing
the way that political, cultural, philosophical, theological, and other biases shape
these. Important examples exist, e.g.,[31] Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker’s,
*Politizing the Bible*;[32] Pierre Gibert’s, *L’invention critique de la Bible*;[33]
Michael Legaspi’s, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*;[34]
Jonathan Sheehan’s, *The Enlightenment Bible*;[35] Thomas Howard’s, *Religion and
the Rise of Historicism*;[36] and Henning Graf Reventlow’s, *Bibelautorität und
Geist der Moderne, Die bedeutung des Bibelverständnisses für die
gestesgeschichtliche und politische Entwicklung in England von der Reformation
bis zur Aufklärung.*[37]

Thompson writes further:

“I doubt that we can any longer claim that what Ratzinger and Morrow have seen
as a crisis in biblical scholarship reflects a conflict between the critical methods of theology and history. The conflict is, I suspect, rather rooted in a failure to understand biblical literature, which is after all based in the context of a very ancient and distant past. Neither the Bible nor the historical origins of Samaritanism, Judaism and Christianity are historically transcendent. Nor is their theology to be understood apart from our fragile understanding of the ideologies from which they were originally formed.”

Neither Ratzinger nor I ever claim that the “crisis in biblical scholarship reflects a conflict between the critical methods of theology and history.” The crisis, rather, reflects the lack of appreciation of the inescapable subjectivity of the modern exegete (of all exegetes of all times, Catholic or not, theological or not). This is one irony of some of the positivist approaches which still exist in modern biblical criticism. Historical criticism was forged in a rationalist context (especially with Spinoza’s combination of a Baconian method applied to Scripture with a modified Cartesian methodic doubt). In the nineteenth century, especially as practiced by English-speaking scholars, historical criticism began to take on the same Scottish Common Sense Enlightenment philosophy that helped give rise and shape to the American Protestant Fundamentalist movement (and here I refer to those who self-identified as Fundamentalists at the dawn of the twentieth century). In many ways, the Fundamentalist common sense approach to Scripture comes from the same philosophical well springs as the more rationalist secular (in the contemporary sense of the word) approaches.

Importantly, Thompson stresses the particularity of the diverse figures I bring up:

“The entrenched confusion of Morrow’s essay could perhaps be linked to the excessive ease with which he transcends the contexts of the critical scholarship he wishes to critique. Although the research, methods and principles of the philosophy of Hobbes, Peyrere, Spinoza, Troeltsch, Wellhausen, Schweitzer and Bultmann all might well be presented as central in understanding the methods and assumptions of the critical methods and principles of today’s biblical scholarship, our ability to understand differs considerably in regard to each of them. This is due, not least, to their very different contexts, both historical and theological, spread as they are over three centuries, from the early 17th to the mid-20th centuries! Whether the intellectual ideology, which had influenced the critical methods and principles of Isaac Peyrere and Baruch Spinoza’s biblical criticism, might be profitably understood as reflecting Thomas Hobbes’s philosophical reflections, which at times dominated 17th century intellectual life, is an historical question that needs to be addressed to our knowledge of Peyrere and Spinoza’s contemporary theology.
and intellectual life. Nevertheless, a study of the radically different theology, contemporary to the work of two, much later, German theologians, Julius Wellhausen and Rudolph Bultmann would produce entirely other expectations.”

This is true (with some caveats), but Thompson has missed the point I was trying to make. Thompson is completely correct that our knowledge of the past and of the historical contexts out of which the diverse texts that make up the Bible emerged, is far greater than for these prior figures. This does not have anything to do, however, with my claims of prior assumptions. My point about their “bias,” their prior starting points which affected their interpretations and methodological assumptions, has little to do with their lack of the knowledge we have. Moreover, our ability to transcend their limits because of our increasingly greater knowledge of the past, has not always changed the ways in which we relied upon the methods they helped forge…and our continued adherence to these methods is not, I would argue, the result of greater evidence, continued excellent explanatory power, etc., but is often rather due to our unquestioning use of them as starting points.

A few minor points of confusion in Thompson’s comment here: La Peyrère’s biblical work in *Prae-Adamitae* (written between 1635-1643) was prior to Hobbes’ in *Leviathan* (1651), and received published refutations prior to its and Hobbes’ published versions of their texts, even though the final text (which included his *Systema Theologicum*) was only published later (1655). It seems unlikely that Hobbes’ philosophy affected La Peyrère, but they moved in similar circles, so it is likely they shared common influences. Spinoza almost certainly relied upon both, at least in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670). The studies on these connections, which Thompson mentions should be done in order to discover their likelihood, have already been done.

Obviously, in articles such as these, I don’t have the space to trace all of these many connections (which is why I referred there, and here, in the endnotes, to the larger body of scholarship where such lengthier arguments can be found). Thompson is certainly correct about the later work of Bultmann and Wellhausen. I agree these are more complex figures, and their contexts were different, and the results would be (and have been) different in the various studies of their lives and works. I was focusing on the similarities: anti-cult, anti-Jewish elements, anti-Catholic elements, etc. These are commonalities, which should not surprise us, because they are some of the few similarities that La Peyrère’s context as a Huguenot (coerced into becoming Catholic, and then joining the Oratorians as a lay member where he had occasion to influence Fr. Richard Simon) in the seventeenth century Gallican Catholic France under Louis XIV, shared with
Hobbes in self-imposed exile in Paris (at Chateau Condé when and where La Peyrère hung out) during the English Civil War, and shared with Spinoza in the context of the various philosophical receptions of Descartes in the seventeenth century Dutch Republic and the political battle over the Calvinist take-overs in the wake of the defeat of Catholic Spain in the south, and shared with Wellhausen in post-Kulturkampf (and thus post Vatican I) Germany as a supporter of Prussian Bismarck, which was similar to Bultmann’s context as a Lutheran writing prior to and during the Third Reich relying upon Heidegger’s philosophy mediated to him first when he co-directed Hans Jonas’ dissertation on Gnosticism. These are vastly different contexts, and I am well aware of their distinctions…these are the sorts of histories and figures I spend my days and nights reading. I am focusing on the similarities I have detected in their work and political and cultural contexts, despite many differences. Their particular reasons, and starting assumptions, often differ, on a great many things. But I think they do share some things in common. To this list could easily be added other figures: Richard Simon; Johann Salomo Semler; Johann David Michaelis; Hermann Samuel Reimarus; Gotthold Lessing; Johann Gottfried Eichhorn; Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette; Ferdinand Christian Baur; Heinrich Julius Holtzmann; William Robertson Smith, et al.

Here Thompson appears confused: “Spinoza was indeed Jewish, and both he and Peyrere were rather more influenced by the agnostic Thomas Hobbes than by Protestant thought!” In what way was Spinoza Jewish? Does Thompson mean halachically, because his mother was? Does he mean that he never was baptized a Christian, therefore he remained Jewish? Or is it because later members of the Haskalah would recognize Spinoza as one of their own, and one of their guiding lights?[45] There’s no evidence his faith or practice was Jewish after his excommunication. He certainly wrote more favorably of Jesus, Jesus’ apostles, and the New Testament, than of Moses, the early Israelites, medieval Jewish sages like Maimonides, or the Old Testament, in his Tractatus theologico-politicus.[46] Spinoza was almost certainly influenced by Hobbes. I don’t think the evidence bears out that La Peyrère was influenced by Hobbes. If anything, I think it more likely the influence was the other way around, although this cannot be proven.[47] The “agnostic” Hobbes contrasted with “Protestant” thought? Well, Hobbes was an Anglican, so if we exclude Anglicans from “Protestantism,” as they have historically done, that might be the case. Was Hobbes an “agnostic”? I have some familiarity with Hobbes’ works (Leviathan, De Cive, his now published letters, etc.), but I find no evidence that he was an “agnostic.” Explicitly he seems to be a faithful member of the Church of England, which was consistent with his political philosophy—he went to church faithfully every Sunday. I think the real controversy is whether or not he had faith—he appears to from all explicit
comments he makes in this regard, as well as from his practice (unlike the case of Spinoza and Judaism). Or, whether he was really an Epicurean atheist. I don’t claim to know, although I lean, perhaps, in the latter direction.

**Concluding Remarks**

I did not respond in this article to every point Thompson brought up in his article, but only to those that I think most directly related to what I initially wrote. I am sincere in my appreciation for his taking the time to engage my work, despite our many disagreements. I hope I have clarified some of the points from my earlier article, although I do not expect to have won any converts. Such written disagreements on public forums such as this periodical are how we move scholarship forward in constructive ways.

**Notes**


Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).


[25] Ibid.


[27] Peter Machinist, “The Road Not Taken: Wellhausen and Assyriology,” in Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded, ed. Gershon Galil, Mark Geller, and Alan Millard, 469-531 (Leiden: Brill, 2009). This, of course, would not be a fault for Wellhausen with regard to his lack of engagement for other ancient Near Eastern elements that we now take for granted, like Ugaritic literature; Ugaritic had not yet been deciphered.


[29] Levenson, Hebrew Bible, 118. The particular essay is available online as, “The Bible: Unexamined Commitments of Criticism.”


[33] Pierre Gibert, L’invention critique de la Bible: XVᵉ – XVIIIᵉ siècle (Paris:
Jean-Christophe Chaussepied, Éditions Gallimard, 2010).


[38] See, e.g., Morrow, *Theology, Politics, and Exegesis*, ch. 2; Idem, *Three Skeptics*, ch. 4; and relevant sources cited therein.


[45] But see Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), who provides a devastating critique of the early Spinoza biography (*La vie de Monsieur Benoit de Spinoza*) used to mythologize Spinoza’s early life before his excommunication, in order to bolster his supporters within the Haskalah and in eighteenth century philosophical circles in general. Although scholars often fail to realize the important place Spinoza played in the later “Enlightenment” debates, see the important work of Jonathan

