

# HEBREW BIBLE OLD TESTAMENT

---

## The History of Its Interpretation

Edited by Magne Sæbø

I/1: Antiquity

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Hebrew Bible / Old Testament  
The History of Its Interpretation

Volume I/1

**V&R**

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Edited by  
Magne Sæbø

VOLUME I  
From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages  
(Until 1300)

Göttingen · Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht · 1996

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In Co-operation with  
Chris Brekelmans and Menahem Haran

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PART 1  
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*Johann Ernst Ludwig Diestel*

(1825–1879)

in memoriam



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## Preface

The project of *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: the History of Its Interpretation* stands in a tradition of similar works on the research history of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. Yet it has the intention of presenting something new and unprecedented. Since the planning of this HBOT Project started in the early eighties biblical research history seems to have come in vogue, and various new works on the subject have appeared. However, the need for a comprehensive research history in the field, written anew in the light of the current status in biblical as well as in historical disciplines, is still imperative. More will be said on this in the following Prolegomenon.

Linking back to two aged and renowned predecessors, namely LUDWIG DIESTEL's monumental *Geschichte des Alten Testaments in der christlichen Kirche* (1869) and FREDERIC W. FARRAR, *History of Interpretation* (1886), the present history will pursue the best of their universal character; and at the same time it will attempt to overcome their limitations and deficiencies as well. Both DIESTEL and FARRAR, as most authors in this field, were representatives of modern European Protestantism, and the History of FARRAR, presenting the Bampton Lectures of 1885, had even an apologetic bias. But in a new history of biblical interpretation confessional as well as national or regional borders will be crossed, in accordance with the present situation of a worldwide biblical scholarship.

As for the practical accomplishment, DIESTEL completed his great work alone and after few years, as did also FARRAR. Today it would be hard to compete with their immense and laborious achievement—for which one can but express admiration. Instead a scholarly team-work seems now to give the most appropriate possibility of procedure, and even more so as in our time the mass of new data, insights and informations on the subject has increased immensely.

DIESTEL had the intention of giving a comprehensive historical description, but, for practical reasons, he also felt compelled to confine himself to the Christian side of the field, leaving mainly out the broad and significant Jewish biblical interpretation through the centuries as well as elements of Jewish-Christian interactions in this field at various times. Excusing himself for this “substantial loss”, DIESTEL hoped for a “partition of work”, *Arbeitsteilung*, with Jewish scholars (*Geschichte*, p. v); regrettably, however, that did not take place, at least not directly. Today it would be inconceivable not to include the Jewish side of the history of biblical interpretation. Therefore, Jewish scholars were integrated into the HBOT Project from the beginning; and one of my first steps in organizing the Project was—during the IOSOT Congress in Salamanca 1983—to make contact with a Jewish Bible scholar,

namely Professor Menahem Haran, of Jerusalem; during the same Congress also Professor Henri Cazelles, of Paris, consented to act as a Co-editor, taking special responsibility for matters related to Roman Catholic exegesis. In 1987, when Professor Cazelles, for personal reasons, had withdrawn from the Project, Professor Chr. Brekelmans, of Leuven, kindly replaced him (see, further, my Presentation of the Project in *Biblica* 1992).

Coming to the pleasant duty of *acknowledgements* I, first of all, should like to express my sincere gratitude to the distinguished Co-editors of this volume, especially Professor Haran, without whose guidance and manifold help I would not have managed a proper inclusion of the Jewish interpretation, and then, to my Catholic colleagues, Professor Cazelles, for the years 1983-86 that were so important for the establishing of the Project, and thereafter Professor Brekelmans. For valuable help I also wish to thank Professor Dr. Rudolf Smend DD, of Göttingen, and Professor Dr. Dr. Norbert Lohfink SJ, of Frankfurt/M.

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Oslo, in May 1995

M. S.

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Every discipline of research that is of some age has its specific history, without which its identity would not be fully understood. It is, therefore, perceivable that the history of research, as a discipline of its own, in recent years has become an expanding scholarly matter of concern, both in science and in humanities, and not least in the field of biblical studies. It may be maintained that the writing of the history of studies increasingly seems to be regarded as a significant scholarly challenge.

1. In view of a broader context of the present new History of biblical studies two introductory remarks of a general character may be relevant.

First, historiography of research is, methodically, not different from any other kind of historiography, each kind having its distinct character according to its specific object and setting. A critical history of the study and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament through the centuries has definitely a most specific object of its own; at the same time, however,

it will be but a part of cultural and social history in general as well as of ecclesiastical history and Bible studies in particular (cf. MEINHOLD; EBELING).

Second, the basic and partly philosophical questions of what ‘history’ and ‘historiography’ really might be cannot, for obvious reasons, be discussed as such or at any length on this occasion, and far less so as the opinions concerning these issues among historians and other scholars occupied with historiography are considerably divergent. This may be demonstrated quickly by reading the selected general works listed above, which may be regarded as representative today, not to speak of many others not listed.<sup>1</sup> But, on the other hand, it would be neither wise nor advisable, on this occasion, to avoid any discussion of methodological problems regarding ‘history’ and ‘historiography’, and even more so as existing histories of Old Testament studies apparently presuppose and involve, in this way or another, different methodical approaches. A brief presentation and discussion of some historiographical problems, related to present works in the field, might therefore be considered appropriate as a Prolegomenon. Possibly, it may even bring about some clarification of the task and methodical procedure lying ahead.

2. The histories and surveys of the study of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament are of very diverse kind, differing from each other both in structure and content. Instead of going into a detailed discussion of the most outstanding histories—whereby a short history of research histories of the HB/OT might have been given—some main trends will be focused upon, primarily trends that may have an actual bearing on the question of what the character and function of a ‘historiography’ might be in this case.

When sorting the vast and variegated *literature* on the history of the study of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, including also the broader use of it through the ages, the literature may be categorized in most different ways. Here, some distinctions will be presented that have—*mirabile dictu*—been given little or no attention among scholars.

First, the literature may be divided into two groups related to two different aspects of the ‘history of the Bible’ that tend to go in opposite directions.

In *the one group*, the Bible may be said to be the influential *subject* or the ‘motor’ of the history. For, from the beginning, the Bible has been of great and varied influence and has had a complex *Wirkungsgeschichte*, in the proper sense of the word. The literature focusing upon this aspect may occasionally represent a kind of story-telling of how the Bible made its way under different conditions, from language to language, from people to people, through the centuries. In general, although varying in extent, one has here focused particularly upon the great impact of the Bible on Church life and theology, and beyond that, also on a people’s culture, art and literature, and even on its social life and political laws.

Though, in all this, some *interpretation* of biblical texts normally has been involved, biblical interpretation is, however, first of all characteristic of *the other group* of literature, where the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament mainly

<sup>1</sup> The anthology edited by Gardiner, *Theories of History* (1959), may serve as an introduction to the subject, demonstrating well its deep complexity.

has been regarded as the *object* of an individual's or a group's scrutiny. In biblical studies, then, above all in their scholarly part, it is the interpretation, in the sense of hermeneutical and theological understanding as well as of methodical exegesis of the biblical text, that has been predominant. It has constituted another approach and 'history' than the first one; in addition, it may implicate the acceptance or refusal of the Bible as a *received* text. In this respect, the history has not least the character of being a theologically – and historiographically – significant *reception history*, especially as the Bible as *canon* of Holy Scriptures is concerned.

The distinction between these two aspects and groups of literature is surely not a question of right or wrong approach, because both aspects have their rights and merits in the history writing. Although being somewhat abstract and ideal, the distinction may, however, contribute to some clarification of the character and purpose of historical works and studies, especially of those that are combining both aspects in one survey.

Thus, for DIESTEL the scope of his *History* was threefold, comprising the history of exegesis and of the variegated theological assessment of the Old Testament and also of the impact of the Old Testament on the Church life in general as well as on the culture and art and even on the social order of 'Christian societies'. Paying due attention to this extensive influence of the Old Testament it was scarcely at random that he named his book *History of the Old Testament in the Christian Church*.<sup>2</sup> In recent times, the volumes of *The Cambridge History of the Bible* and of *Bible de tous les temps*, like the *History* of DIESTEL, combine these two different aspects; but to a greater extent they focus on a very broad range of various influences of the Bible – both the Old and the New Testament – upon the areas of practical and theological Church life, including the rich history of Bible translations,<sup>3</sup> as well as on cultural life in broadest sense.<sup>4</sup> Differently, FARRAR concentrated his *History of Interpretation* explicitly on the history of scrutiny and varying exegesis of the Bible, mostly of the Old Testament. In this century, McQUEEN GRAY and KRAUS, for the time of the Reformation onward, and recently GRAF REVENTLOW, have proceeded along the same line.

In the perspective of these two different aspects of history writing, having really a deep shift in approach between them, the present project of *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: the History of Its Interpretation* definitely represents the latter approach that simply may be called 'History of the *study* of the Bible'; thereby 'history of study' is primarily seen as an interpretation and reception history.

Second, the literature on the study and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament may also be divided into two groups of another and more

<sup>2</sup> Geschichte, iii; at the same place he also says that his *History* is going to fill a gap in the scholarly literature by presenting "eine umfassende Darstellung der Art und Weise, wie das Alte Testament innerhalb der christlichen Kirche, von Beginn an bis auf die Gegenwart, wissenschaftlich behandelt, theologisch aufgefasst und praktisch verwertet worden ist".

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also D.F. WRIGHT (ed.), *The Bible in Scottish Life and Literature* (Edinburgh 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Karpp, *Schrift* (1992) 1–7.

formal kind. For, on the one hand, there is a group of many and specialized studies and monographs, discussing primarily minor parts or special topics of this history; and this group is by far the greatest one. On the other hand, there is a relatively small group of books and works that cover the history at length, either the whole of it (like the Histories of DIESTEL, FARRAR and MCQUEEN GRAY, up to their time, and later GRANT, in a popular manner) or some greater part of it (like CHEYNE and KARPP, KRAELING and KRAUS and, more recently, CLEMENTS and GRAF REVENTLOW who, moreover, is planning to cover it all).<sup>5</sup>

As already indicated, the present History of the HBOT Project may be reckoned to the latter group of literature, covering the whole history of study and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, continuing in the traditional path of DIESTEL, FARRAR and MCQUEEN GRAY, but now in view of the current situation. Only in this way, one may contend, will it be possible to do justice to the longer perspectives, to proper main proportions and to the inner dynamics of the complex history of biblical study and interpretation.

3. It is, first of all, in the latter group of historical literature that the fundamental problems of 'historiography' become importunate. When, as example, DIESTEL in the Preface of his History discusses the problem of an exclusion of the Jewish biblical interpretation from his historical discourse,<sup>6</sup> he also reflects upon the possible objection that he may have had many valuable studies, that he calls *Vorstudien*, at hand; but he responds that these studies are not capable of giving an 'overall picture', *ein Gesamtbild*.<sup>7</sup>

There may, in other words, exist a considerable distance and difference between historiographical *parts*, like studies and monographs, and what might be called a *historiography 'at large'*; that is 'historiography' in its strict sense, representing a general idea or construct and giving a comprehensive and coherent picture, for a longer period of time, focusing especially on the description of the longer lines and inner dynamics of the historical process.<sup>8</sup> Individual studies and monographs, brilliant and outstanding as they may be, cannot replace or 'compete' with historiography and history in this sense; although variously related they may be regarded as 'irreplaceable'.

The historiographical problem at this point, then, is another version of the general problem of the so-called 'hermeneutical circle', or, the problem of the reciprocal *relation between part and totality*.<sup>9</sup> As a 'totality', broadly speaking, historiography resp. history should be more than only an addition of individual historiographical studies. But, at the same time, there will be a relationship of mutual and necessary dependence between partial or topical studies,

<sup>5</sup> The grand volume of *Mikra* (1988), on the period of Antiquity, may be placed in both groups. As for older Histories cf. Farrar, *History* (1886) viii–ix, where he starts by saying: "There does not exist in any language a complete History of Exegesis".

<sup>6</sup> *Geschichte*, v–vi. On L. Diestel cf. A. JEPSEN, "Ludwig Diestel als Greifswalder Theologe", an (18 pages) offprint from *Bild und Verkündigung* (FS Hanna Jursch; Berlin 1962), Berlin 1963.

<sup>7</sup> "Allein sie liefern noch lange nicht ein Gesamtbild von so plastischer Klarheit, dass ihre grössere Verwerthung unsrer besonderen Aufgabe zu Gute kommen könnte", *Geschichte*, vi.

<sup>8</sup> This includes also elements of generalization; cf. Gottschalk, *Generalization* (1963).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. i. a. Gadamer, *Wahrheit* (1986) 178 ff; 250 ff; 275 ff.



on the one hand, and a comprehensive historiography, on the other. The remaining challenge will be to find a proper historiographical balance between them.

4. In these perspectives, however, special aspects of the issue of 'totality' might be at stake when it comes to the specific kind of Research History that the HBOT Project now is presenting.

First, it may be recognized as a problem of *fragmentation* when the present History is written by many contributors, belonging to most different traditions; the more so, as in every work that is the result of an international team-work of scholars there is the risk of fragmentation. In this point, therefore, one has to consider seriously the problem of possible tension between fragmentation and 'totality', understood as the coherent whole of a history. But a risk of this kind may be limited, first of all, by detailed editorial plans and guidelines for the authors and also by some combining summaries in the History itself. Further, the fact that the contributing scholars, despite their differences, agree upon a critical historiography, in the framework of present scholarship, may have a restricting or at least reducing effect on a potential risk of fragmentation as well. That a history, on the other hand, is written by many and different authors—which is frequently the case today—should not merely be judged negatively, for it may imply an advantage for a history as a whole that authors of even opposite opinions are represented, mirroring, thus, the current situation of research.

Second, the problem of a potential fragmenting restriction of the 'totality' of a history may also be a question of content, or, by what might be called an 'intrinsic' fragmentation. For every writing of history has, of necessity, to make some selection of an often vast, or even boundless, source material and to set priorities. The 'totality' is, in other words, dependent on historiographical limiting, selection and preference of material.

This question is dealt with, in characteristic and most different ways, by DIESTEL and KRAUS, among others. DIESTEL clearly intended to present a History that was as comprehensive as possible with regard to periods covered and topics discussed in the history of the use and study of the Old Testament. Limiting the source material, however, he confined himself—as already mentioned—to the 'Christian side' of the history, leaving out the important Jewish one.<sup>10</sup> In addition, he divided his treatment into two types of historical description in order to cope with the practically infinite material on 'Christian side': for every period first is given a brief presentation of the general characteristics and main lines of the period; then follows a longer and strongly

<sup>10</sup> See sect. 2 above, and cf. Sæbø, (1988) 4–6; (1992) 140. Differently, both Farrar, History (1886) 47–107. 111–116, and Duff, History (1910) 83–106, described parts of the Jewish exegetical tradition, primarily with regard to the times of Antiquity and Middle Ages, whereas McQueen Gray, OT Criticism (1923) 62–64, had remarkably little and, unexpectedly, Kraus, Geschichte (1956 / 1982), nearly nothing in this respect. Recently, however, more attention has been paid to the issue, cf. CHB (II, 252–279), and in particular BTT (I, 19–54.107–125; IV, 233–260; V, 401–425; VI, 33–48; VII, 93–102.511–521.599–621) and, regarding the Antiquity, Mikra (1988) pass., as well as, most recently, Graf Reventlow, Bibelauslegung (I, 1990, 24–37.104–116; II, 1994, 231–258).

concentrated part with compendious comments on individual scholars and works. It may be said that DIESTEL, on the whole, managed to present a comprehensive and yet condensed History that is of considerable merit.

KRAUS, however, has strongly criticized the broad scope and specific procedure of DIESTEL, claiming that he presents “an incalculable number of names and titles” and that he fails “to draw the relations of the intellectual and theological history clearly and deeply enough”.<sup>11</sup> For his own part, KRAUS reduced the ‘Christian side’ remarkably more than DIESTEL did, first, by starting with the Reformers and their theologically significant dictum of *sola scriptura*; second, by concentrating mainly on Protestant European, preferably German, scholars; third, by leaving out of his treatment the history of exegesis and of theological assessment; and fourth, by focusing primarily on some – certainly central – parts of the Old Testament, viz. the Pentateuch, the Prophecy and the Psalms. When, additionally, KRAUS brought the development of *modern* critical methods and specific theories and results strongly into focus, this preference together with the selected parts of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament apparently was meant to represent the whole, the ‘totality’, of the history.<sup>12</sup> But, generally speaking, in instances like these there may be the risk that a ‘history’ simply is constituted by a series of independent ‘case-histories’, or, that a ‘history’ merely turns into an aggregate of *problem-histories*, where the historiographical value, in a strict sense and within a broader context, might be problematic.

By comparing the distinguished and different Histories of DIESTEL and KRAUS, in this way, a methodological focal point is brought into relief, viz. the question – and need – of an adequate *criterion*, or criteria, of limitation and selection of material. Reflection on this question will always be crucial for the historiography, and it will remain imperative for the historian to avoid priorities of issues that may be found to be but arbitrary. Although no one, presumably, would object to this theoretically, in practical performance the problem is undeniable anyway. Harking back to the issue of material selection, another observation may be worth due consideration as well: in spite of various reductions – like those made by DIESTEL and KRAUS – there seems to be a general historiographical tendency of expanding in content, seeking – at least idealistically – a *maximum* of themes and studies, both weighty ones and others of more peripheral character. But, methodically, the opposite direction should be considered more seriously, asking instead for the central *minimum* and moving from the variegated *multa* to the basic *multum*. For, just this movement towards the basic minimum may prove to be more adequate and

<sup>11</sup> Kraus, *Geschichte* (1982) 1 (cf. 4): “[die Arbeit Diestels] zeichnet die geistesgeschichtlichen und theologie-geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge nicht klar und tief genug. ... Eine unübersehbare Zahl von Namen und Titeln wird vorgeführt. Doch das aufgehäufte Material ist auf weite Strecken hin stumm. Die Quellen sprechen nicht”.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the detailed criticism by G. FOHRER, *ThLZ* 82 (1957) 682–684, and, especially, by W. BAUMGARTNER, “Eine alttestamentliche Forschungsgeschichte”, *ThR* NF 25 (1959) 93–110. In response to the severe criticism from these and others, KRAUS expanded his book in its 2nd (1969) and 3rd (1982) edition. Regrettably, the last part of the title from 1956, “von der Reformation bis ...”, that indicated an exact delimitation of the work, was then left out.