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The Impact of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Discovery of the "Original" Version of the Ten Commandments upon Biblical Scholarship: The Myth of Jewish Particularism and German Universalism

In memoriam, Hans and Sophie Scholl, founders of the White Rose movement, executed February 22, 1943, for their opposition to National Socialism

Introduction

In 1773, the twenty-four year old Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, perhaps the greatest writer of the German literary tradition, anonymously published an essay entitled *Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen: Zum erstenmal gründlich beantwortet, von einem Landgeistlichen in Schwaben* [Two Important but as yet Unaddressed Biblical Questions: Fully Answered for the First Time by a Country Clergyman in Swabia].¹ In this text, the young Goethe experiments with many of the literary devices that will mark his mature work. The composition presents itself as a letter written by a rural pastor to a trusted old friend. Writing on a cold wintry night, the pastor describes the confusions in the mind of his son, triggered by the son's study of theology at the university. This essay is the first work of literature known to me in which the newly emergent discipline of academic biblical scholarship, just then being introduced into the curriculum of the European university, is directly thematized, let alone given literary treatment.

¹ J. W. von Goethe, *Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen: Zum erstenmal gründlich beantwortet, von einem Landgeistlichen in Schwaben, Lindau am Bodensee 1773* (Darmstadt: Merck, 1773). Goethe's original essay is published in several German editions; this article will use the *Münchener Ausgabe* [Munich edition], edited by G. Sauder: J. W. von Goethe, "Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen: Zum erstenmal gründlich beantwortet, von einem Landgeistlichen in Schwaben, Lindau am Bodensee 1773," in *Der junge Goethe: 1757–1775*, vol. 1.2 of *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens: Münchener Ausgabe*, ed. G. Sauder (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1987), 434–43; commentary 849–52. Another recent edition worth noting is that of H. Fischer-Lamberg: J. W. von Goethe, *Der junge Goethe: Neu bearbeitete Ausgabe in fünf Bänden*, ed. H. Fischer-Lamberg, 5 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), 3:117–24; commentary 3:447–49.

Goethe's essay marks an important moment in cultural and intellectual history. The essay is significant to the topic of ending antisemitism for a number of reasons: first, for its reflections on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity; second, for the way it creates a myth of Judaism as the particularistic "Other" in opposition to an allegedly normative, universal German identity; and third, for its intellectual afterlife.²

The distinctiveness of Goethe's essay for biblical scholarship is its claims regarding the composition of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. The essay deconstructs the conventional view of the Pentateuch as a unified literary composition, presented as spoken by Moses prior to Israel's entry into the land of Canaan. Specifically, it raises the question whether the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, commonly known to us today could really have been the original text of the covenant between God and Israel that is narrated in the biblical book of Exodus. Goethe's pastor argues that the biblical text has undergone a severe disruption and that in order to recover its pristine condition, extensive surgery is necessary to repair the textual trauma and to restore the Bible to its original sequence. In using the language of literary disruption and in reordering the sequence of the biblical text to make it conform to a claimed more correct historical sequence, Goethe's protagonist anticipates and reflects the developments then taking place as academic biblical scholarship was just beginning to take shape in Europe.

Nearly one hundred years after Goethe, perhaps the most brilliant of all German Bible scholars, Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), credits Goethe as having anticipated one of Wellhausen's own claims. Goethe was correct, Wellhausen argued, that the most ancient version of the Ten Commandments was not to be found in Exodus 20 (see Appendix 1), as conventionally understood. Rather, the earliest Decalogue was located in Exodus 34 (see Appendix 2), in the narrative of the renewal of the covenant and the replacement of the tablets of the law after Moses had destroyed the first set of tablets during the episode of the Golden Calf. In terms of content, the two texts differ in that Exodus 20 contains several broad ethical or moral prohibitions, such as "do not kill" (v. 13) and "do not steal" (v. 15), while Exodus 34 gives more of its attention to matters of cultic ritual and the ritual calendar. These perceived differences were central to the claim made first by Goethe, and then later by Wellhausen, that the familiar Decalogue of Exodus 20 represents a later composition than the sequence of laws in

² On the fluctuating status of Goethe as a symbol of German literature, see D. Borchmeyer, "Goethe," in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, ed. E. François and H. Schulze (Munich: Beck, 2001), 187–206.

Exodus 34: in other words, that Exodus 34 preserves the more original and primitive version of the two legal passages. Wellhausen's model stood for more than a century as a nearly classical position. Multiple generations of biblical scholars, with only a couple of exceptions, continued to draw upon it, viewing Exodus 34 as the original of the Decalogue.³

I will not go into the details of the debate about the relative dating of the two texts here. Rather, I will focus on the *Nachleben* [afterlife] of Goethe's essay as an important moment in cultural and intellectual history, one that has been insufficiently examined. While biblical scholars have certainly noted the essay's influence on Wellhausen, the cultural biases that govern the essay and the way it constructs a double myth (both about Judaism and about Christianity) have not been addressed.⁴ Conversely, within academic German studies (*Germanistik*), despite the iconic status of Goethe, his ideological use of formative biblical scholarship to construct a myth of German identity seems to have escaped attention.⁵ Despite

3 Among the scholars who do not share Wellhausen's viewpoint regarding the priority of Exodus 34 are R. H. Pfeiffer, "The Oldest Decalogue," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 43 (1924): 294–310; A. Alt, "Die Ursprünge des israelitischen Rechts (1934)," in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* 1 (Munich: Beck, 1953), 278–333; and L. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), 216–32. More recently, a number of scholars have argued that the unit is late and post-Deuteronomic. See, for example, H. L. Ginsberg, *The Israelian Heritage of Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982), 64–66; M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 194–97; W. Johnstone, "Reactivating the Chronicles Analogy in Pentateuchal Studies, with Special Reference to the Sinai Pericope in Exodus," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (1987): 16–37; E. Aurelius, *Der Fürbitter Israels: Eine Studie zum Mosebild im Alten Testament* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988), 116–26; E. Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 67–70 and 369–77; E. Blum, "Das sog. 'Privilegrecht' in Exodus 34,11–26: Ein Fixpunkt der Komposition des Exodusbuches?," in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction-Reception-Interpretation*, ed. M. Vervenne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 347–66; S. Bar-On, "The Festival Calendars in Exodus XXIII 14–19 and XXXIV 18–26," *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998): 161–95; and, brilliantly, S. [Bar-On] Gesundheit, *Three Times a Year: Studies on Festival Legislation in the Pentateuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Note the astute early analysis by N. M. Nicolsky, "Pascha im Kulte des jerusalemischen Tempels," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 45 (1927): 174–75.

4 This applies to the most recent studies by T. Tillmann, "Vom Sprechen zum Lallen: Glossolalie und Prophetie in Goethes *Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen*," in *Goethe und die Bibel*, ed. J. Anderegg and E. A. Kunz (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 17–33; and T. Tillmann, *Hermeneutik und Bibelexegese beim jungen Goethe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 122–57.

5 A recent exception is K. Schutjer, *Goethe and Judaism: The Troubled Inheritance of Modern Literature* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015). Schutjer draws closely on my approach in my article, B. M. Levinson, "Goethe's Analysis of Exodus 34 and Its Influence on Wellhausen:

the rich literary and cultural issues it raises, the essay was not included in the recent Princeton series of Goethe's works in English translation.⁶ I am preparing the first comprehensive English translation and commentary of the essay, to place it in its cultural context and address these issues in an integrated way.

The Intellectual Structure of Goethe's Essay

As I noted above, in Goethe's essay, the fictional pastor in the letter writes to a colleague about his concern for his son. The young man has recently graduated from a theological faculty, but he lacks any historical understanding of religion. In a question and answer format that explicitly evokes Luther's catechism, Goethe's pastor argues that the familiar Decalogue of Exodus 20 could not possibly have been inscribed on the tablets of the covenant that God first made with Israel: "Nicht die zehen Gebote, das erste Stück unsers Katechismus!" ["Not the Ten Commandments, the first paragraph of our catechism!"].⁷ The proprietary genitive already begins to hint at the direction of the following textual arguments: Goethe argues that the "Ten Commandments" that are central to the Christian catechism cannot properly be ancient Judaism's Decalogue. Why does he make such a claim? Just beforehand, and before turning to any direct textual study, Goethe's village pastor begins to reflect on the theology of history. His prior assumptions there provide the foundation for the textual arguments that ensue. The extended metaphor of God as divine gardener who grafts (*pfpflanzen*) a slip (*Reis*) onto a root stock (*Stamm*) warrants particular attention:

Das jüdische Volk seh ich für einen wilden unfruchtbaren Stamm an, der in einem Kraus von wilden unfruchtbaren Bäumen stund, auf den pflanzte der ewige Gärtner das edle Reis Jesum Christum, daß es, darauf bekleibend, des Stammes Natur veredelte, und von dannen P[f]ropfreiser zur Befruchtung aller übrigen Bäume geholt würden.

Die Geschichte und Lehre dieses Volks, von seinem ersten Keime bis zur Pfpflanzung ist al-

The *Pfropfung* of the Documentary Hypothesis," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114 (2002): 212–23; as well as subsequent manuscript material that I shared with her; and personal discussions. Her work does directly begin to address the issues I have raised.

⁶ The most appropriate volume in the series would have been J. W. von Goethe, *Essays on Art and Literature*, vol. 3 of *Goethe: The Collected Works*, ed. J. Gearey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). See further D. Glass, *Goethe in English: A Bibliography of the Translations in the Twentieth Century* (Leeds: Maney Publishing for the English Goethe Society and the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2005), 316, which contains no entry for this essay. The one partial English translation that does exist is incomplete and apologetic. See M. Waldman, *Goethe and the Jews: A Challenge to Hitlerism* (New York: Putnam, 1934), 119–27.

⁷ Goethe, "Zwo . . . biblische Fragen," 437.

lerdings *partikular*, und das wenige universelle, das etwa in Rücksicht der zukünftigen großen Handlung mit ihm möchte vorgegangen seyn, ist schwer und vielleicht unnöthig aufzusuchen.

Von der P[f]ropfung an wendet sich die ganze Sache. Lehre und Geschichte werden *universell*. Und obgleich jeder von daher veredelte Baum seine Spezialgeschichte, und nach Beschaffenheit der Umstände seine Speziallehre hat, so ist doch meine Meinung: hier sey so wenig partikulares als dort universelles zu vermuthen und zu deuten.

[The Jewish people I regard as a wild, infertile stock (or “tribe”) that stood in a circle of wild and barren trees, upon which the eternal Gardener grafted the noble scion Jesus Christ, so that, by adhering to it, it ennobled the nature of the stock and from there slips were fetched to make all the remaining trees fertile.

The history and teaching of this people, from its first shoots up to the grafting, is certainly *particularistic*, and the small amount of the universal (teaching) which may perhaps have been accorded it in anticipation of that future great deed is difficult and perhaps not even necessary to seek out.

From the grafting on, the entire matter took a turn. Teaching and history became *universal*. And although each tree that was ennobled from it had its own special history and its own special teaching according to its circumstances, my opinion is nonetheless: Here (in the case of Christianity) there is as little particularistic to be suspected and interpreted as there is universal there [in the case of Judaism]].⁸

Goethe's pastor makes a proprietary claim about ethical universality. Consistent with the elaborate allegory of propagation by means of grafting, the religion of ancient Israel and that of Judaism are conflated. They are then jointly conceptualized as sterile, particularistic, and lacking in world-historical significance. Christianity is alone conceived of as fruitful and universally significant.⁹ In the pastor's view, the ethical, which is to say, the universal, cannot logically be Jewish. The *Stamm*—Israel as a particular “tribe,” Israel as allegedly embodying particularity—cannot be the *Stamm*—the “root stock”—of ethics or the universal. Consequently, the ethical Decalogue of Exodus 20—“das erste Stück unsers Ka-

⁸ Goethe, “Zwo . . . biblische Fragen,” 436–37 (emphasis and emendation in original).

⁹ On these grounds, N. Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991–2000), 1:142, is incorrect in his analysis of Goethe's view of the Bible and its relation to Johann Herder (see below, page 127). His interpretation of “Zwo . . . biblische Fragen” asserts: “The notion that the Bible is the vehicle of a universal rational and moral religion (such as the Ten Commandments might be held to summarize) is therefore rejected in favor of Herder's cultural theory which gives value to particular and local traditions.” By reducing Goethe to Herder, Boyle overlooks the importance that Goethe attaches to Christianity: to the Incarnation viewed in philosophical terms as the indispensable means for local and particular cultures to achieve universal significance. Whereas for Herder, particular nations share in a larger human cause and thus implicitly participate in the universal, for Goethe, it is with the *Pfropfung* alone that the universal enters history. Prior to that point, there is only sterile particularity.

techismus!” [“the first paragraph of our catechism”]—could not have been, now by definition, the original covenant that God made with the Jews. The proprietary force of the *unsers* [“our”] is of course clear, both in its appropriation of the Decalogue and in the dispossession that accompanies it. By means of such exegesis, Goethe’s solitary pastor is relieved: “Wie gerne wirft man den beschwerlichen alten Irrtum weg: es habe der partikularste Bund auf Universalverbindlichkeiten [...] gegründet werden können” [How gladly one dispenses with that ancient burdensome error: as if that most particular covenant could ever have been grounded upon universal ethical laws [...]].¹⁰

This theology of history motivates the textual analysis that follows. Despite the text’s own claims, the covenant renewal of Exod 34:11–26—whose focus is the *Stamm*, with its so very *partikular* ritual law—must actually have constituted the original of the covenant and not merely its inconsistent repetition. On that basis, Goethe reconstructs the “Decalogue” of ten laws in Exod 34:11–26 which, he asserts, were originally inscribed on the tablets of the covenant. It is worth noting, however, that the material in Exodus 34 does not divide naturally into exactly ten laws. In fact, one particularly enterprising German scholar compiled a chart showing thirty-six mutually inconsistent attempts to identify the “ten commandments” within the material of this chapter.¹¹

The pastor in Goethe’s essay attributes the textual disruption that led to Exodus 34 being presented as the last Decalogue, rather than the first, to the chaos of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.E., when the Babylonian Empire force-marched the Israelites out of their homeland and resettled them in Mesopotamia. Only as the literary materials of the Pentateuch were being assembled and traditions forgotten did the fateful error occur that led to the ethical Decalogue of Exodus 20 being confused with the ritual text in Exodus 34 that was properly the Jewish covenant.¹² Goethe’s own dualistic and Romantic assumptions leave him, however, with no way to account altogether within Israel for the origins of the ethical Decalogue to which the original ritual Decalogue allegedly yielded its rightful, rite-filled, place. The issue is never discussed. Although it is impossible to detail within the confines of this short study, Goethe’s own reconstruction of the alleged Decalogue here requires multiple sleights of hand: strategic textual transposition and reordering, as well as selective additions, rewordings, and omissions. The project simply does not work.

¹⁰ Goethe, “Zwo . . . biblische Fragen,” 439.

¹¹ F.-E. Wilms, *Das jahwistische Bundesbuch in Exodus 34* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1973), 200–206.

¹² Goethe, “Zwo . . . biblische Fragen,” 440.

Like the young academic son about whom the troubled Swabian pastor wrote on this dark winter's night of 1773, twenty-four year old Goethe was himself educated in the emerging field of the historical critical study of the Old and New Testaments.¹³ The fictional letter was written in Frankfurt just two years after Goethe's return from Strasbourg, where he lived from 1770 to 1771 and completed a legal training that had been interrupted by ill health. The time in Strasbourg represented a major turning point in Goethe's literary and intellectual life. He met Johann Gottfried Herder and became active in the *Sturm und Drang* movement, with its lasting impact upon German poetry and literature. During those years, Goethe studied law and political theology, while also working through Genesis and Exodus in Hebrew and reading widely, presumably also in emergent biblical scholarship.¹⁴ Indeed, the main lines of Goethe's hypothesis about the

13 Several times in his autobiography, Goethe discusses his familiarity with the assumptions and methodology of the historical-critical method and its divergence from the conventional view of the authorship of the Bible. He describes the Bible as a composite work that slowly grew together, as containing contradictions, and as having undergone internal revision. See J. W. von Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*, vol. 16 of *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens: Münchner Ausgabe*, ed. P. Sprengel (Munich: Hanser, 1985), 298–99 and 543–44; J. W. von Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth, Parts One to Three*, vol. 4 of *Goethe: The Collected Works*, ed. T. P. Saine and J. L. Sammons, trans. R. R. Heitner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 208–9 and 377. Note the background provided by G. Janzer, *Goethe und die Bibel* (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1929); and W. Schottroff, "Goethe als Bibelwissenschaftler," *Evangelische Theologie* 44 (1984): 463–85.

14 While Goethe in his autobiography several times refers to Spinoza as an important influence, that is always done in the context of his ethical development; the reference is always implicitly to Spinoza's *Ethics* (see Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 667–68, 712–15, and 870). Goethe emphasizes the feeling of calm that came over him in perusing the posthumous works of Spinoza (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 713). The reference can only apply to Spinoza's posthumously published *Ethics* (1677); his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was published anonymously (Amsterdam, 1670) during his lifetime. Nor does Goethe refer to the *Tractatus*, even where such an allusion might logically be expected, as in the discussion of historical criticism. Moreover, while Spinoza does distinguish between a divine and a ceremonial law and views the latter as contingent and particularistic, he never equates the one with the Decalogue and the other with the text of Exodus 34. Accordingly, the suggestion by the editor of the Munich edition that Goethe's position corresponds to Spinoza (*Tractatus*, books 1, 4, and 5) in distinguishing the contents of the tablets of the covenant from the Decalogue is inaccurate (editor's notes in Goethe, *Der junge Goethe* [ed. Gerhard Sauder], 851). Similarly, the analogies suggested by W. Schottroff take insufficient account of the dialectical structure of Spinoza's thought ("Goethe als Bibelwissenschaftler," 472). Both Sauder and Schottroff overlook the meticulous earlier work of H. Barner, demonstrating that Goethe had read Spinoza only after composing the pastor's letter and then, only the *Ethics*, never the *Tractatus*. See H. Barner, *Zwei "theologische Schriften" Goethes: Ein Beitrag zur Religiosität des jungen Goethe* (Gräfenhainichen: Heine, 1930), 141–43.

Decalogue were originally submitted as a dissertation to the Faculty of Law at the University of Strasbourg. The dissertation was rejected.¹⁵ This original version seems, however, to have proposed that the original terms of the covenant were to be found not in the legal proclamation of Exodus 34 but in the series of curses in Deuteronomy 27.¹⁶

Spinoza's text has been published in English as: B. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. J. Israel, trans. M. Silverthorne and J. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). The original Latin is available in: B. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, vol. 3 of *Spinozas Opera*, ed. C. Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1925). Until recently, this was the best critical edition of the original Latin. It has been recently superseded by a bilingual Latin-French edition: B. de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, vol. 3 of *Oeuvres*, ed. P.-F. Moreau, trans. F. Akkerman (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999).

15 In his autobiography, Goethe discusses his decision to undertake the licentiate in law at the University of Strasbourg, his father's urging him to submit a doctoral dissertation in addition, the ensuing dissertation on political theology that he submitted in Latin to the Faculty of Law, and his relief at its rejection. Although the publication of the dissertation was denied, Goethe was permitted to hold a pro forma oral defense and thereby, on August 6, 1771, obtained the licentiate permitting him to practice law. (See Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 504–8; trans., *Poetry and Truth*, 350–52). G. Sauder, in his annotation to the essay, assumes that the arguments of Goethe's "Zwo . . . biblische Fragen" derive from that rejected dissertation, "De legislatoribus." Sauder's observation is based on the report of Franz Christian Lersé (1749–1800), Goethe's nearly inseparable friend during the Strasbourg years. (See Goethe, *Der junge Goethe* [ed. G. Sauder], 851.) Sauder's assumption is incorrect and must be based on a misunderstanding (see the following footnote). The dissertation's rejection is also noted by M. Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946), 119.

16 Lersé reported that the first draft of Goethe's dissertation for the Doctor juris degree maintained that: "die zehn Gebote nicht eigentlich die Bundesgesetze der Israeliten waren, sondern daß nach Deuteronomium zehn Ceremonien eigentlich die zehn Gebote vertreten hätten" (as reported by K. A. Böttiger [1760–1835]: *Literarische Zustände und Zeitgenossen: In Schilderungen aus Karl Aug. Böttigers handschriftlichem Nachlasse*, ed. K. W. Böttiger [Leipzig: 1838], 1:60 [entry dated: "Lersé im Club den 30. Nov. 1798"]). If this account is correct, Goethe must have had in mind the ritual text of Deut 27:15–26 as the original terms of the covenant (where, however, there are not ten but twelve ritual curses). In writing without further qualification concerning "Zwo ... biblische Fragen" that "Dieselbe These" was previously presented as the rejected dissertation, the editor of the Munich edition of Goethe's work seems to have misunderstood Lersé's reference to Deuteronomy (Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* [ed. P. Sprengel], 1010). Lersé's report, if accurate, raises further issues. It is not easy to see how the series of bans in Deut 27:15–26 could be interpreted as purely "ceremonial" rather than ethical in concern. They prohibit idols; disobedience to mother and father; removal of boundary markers; abuse of the blind; exploitation of alien, orphan, and widow; incest; bestiality; assault; hired murder; and violation of the Torah.

Much later in his life, Goethe subsequently disavowed that pastor's letter when he reflected back on his Strasbourg years in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, the well-known autobiography he wrote in his sixties:

Ich arbeitete mich mit unsäglichlicher Mühe, mit unzulänglichen Hilfsmitteln und Kräften durch die fünf Bücher und geriet dabei auf die wunderlichsten Einfälle. Ich glaubte gefunden zu haben, daß nicht unsere Zehn-Gebote auf den Tafeln gestanden, daß die Israeliten keine vierzig Jahre, sondern nur kurze Zeit durch die Wüste gewandert, und eben so bildete ich mir ein, über den Charakter Mosis ganz neue Aufschlüsse geben zu können.

[With untold trouble and inadequate aids and ability I worked my way through the Pentateuch, meanwhile falling into the strangest notions. I believed I had discovered that it was not our Ten Commandments written on those tablets, that the Israelites had not wandered forty years in the desert but only a short time; and I also flattered myself that I could furnish some completely new insights about the character of Moses.]¹⁷

But it is that recycled dissertation, written with youthful exuberance and rejected first by the University of Strasbourg and then by Goethe himself, which, a century later, Wellhausen—curiously never citing Goethe's renunciation—claimed that his investigations had *bestätigt* [confirmed].¹⁸ Of course, Wellhausen was seeking to lend legitimacy to his own new controversial challenge to conventional piety, which makes the connection he claims to the greatest figure of the German literary canon a rather convenient way to write himself into an established cultural tradition, one that he was in fact sharply challenging.

Wellhausen argued that the doublets and repetitions in the patriarchal narratives could be source-critically resolved as originally independent and parallel versions that have been edited so that they appear to be a single narrative. He saw in the Decalogue a similar variety of versions, equally easily resolved and assigned to the specific textual sources he had identified in the Pentateuch. In Wellhausen's view, the three versions of the Decalogue are those of three different literary sources. The oldest text was that of the Jahwist (in Exodus 34), followed by those of the Elohist (in Exodus 20), and the Deuteronomist (in Deuteronomy 5). That Exodus 34 presents itself as a repetition and renewal of older law¹⁹—not as an independent, let alone the original, legal proclamation

¹⁷ Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 546; *Poetry and Truth*, 378. Goethe's disavowal is also noted in the polemic against source criticism by J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary* (London: Soncino, 1938), 368.

¹⁸ J. Wellhausen, "Nachträge," in *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), 330.

¹⁹ Exodus 34:1; note also the citation tag of 34:18b.

—was explained away as a product of redactional disorder. The ritual Decalogue thus narrates “nicht die dritte, sondern die erste und einzige Gottesoffenbarung am Sinai” [“not the third, but the first and only divine revelation on Sinai], misplaced from its original context by an exilic redactor.”]²⁰ Given this doubling of Decalogues within Exodus, the last must be made first for a proper reconstruction of the literary history of the Pentateuch. Wellhausen urges the sharpest possible distinction (*am schroffsten*) between Exodus 20 and Exodus 34 in language that recalls Goethe’s own dichotomy between “here” and “there” in the history of religions: “*dort sind die Gebote fast nur moralisch, hier ausschliesslich ritual*” [“there the commands are almost exclusively moral, here, exclusively ritual”].²¹

Wellhausen’s thesis of the antiquity, priority, coherence, and originality of the legal revelation of Exodus 34, as prompted by Goethe, has effectively defined the subsequent course of the history of scholarly interpretation. Direct challenges have been few.²² Even those analyses that did not accept Wellhausen’s attribution of Exodus 34 to the Jahwist source held fast to something more essential: the assertion that the chapter, far from being a repetition of earlier law—as the text itself asserts—represents an original and independent legal source: in fact, the most ancient Israelite law.²³

20 J. Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, vol. 2, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs* (Berlin: Reimer, 1885), 84. Reprinted in *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1899; repr. as 4th ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963).

21 Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, 96; translation by the author of the article.

22 Astutely, A. Alt explicitly rejects Goethe’s position, describing the unit as “ein sekundäres Mischgebilde” (“Die Ursprünge des israelitischen Rechts,” 317n1). See further n. 3 above.

23 J. Halbe’s influential traditio-historical study pushed the date of Exod 34:11–26 back to the early settlement period, regarding it as a chiastically structured ancient tradition of Yahweh’s “Law of Privilege” (*Privilegrecht*, a model derived from medieval European feudalism). In this radical claim for priority and originality, Exodus 34 functioned as a legal source for the Covenant Code (J. Halbe, *Das Privilegrecht Jahwes Ex 34,10–26: Gestalt und Wesen, Herkunft und Wirken in vordeuteronomischer Zeit* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975], 449–50 and 502–5). Similarly, C. Dohmen’s redaction-historical study proposes that the Law of Privilege in Exodus 34 comprised part of the original Sinaitic theophany, even if one not yet understood as a covenant and not originally identified with the tablets of the covenant. On his opening page, he credits Goethe for first raising the question (C. Dohmen, “Was stand auf den Tafeln vom Sinai und was auf denen vom Horeb? Zur Geschichte und Theologie eines Offenbarungsrequisits,” in *Vom Sinai zum Horeb: Stationen alttestamentlicher Glaubensgeschichte*, ed. F.-L. Hossfeld [Würzburg: Echter, 1989], 9–50). Even F. Crüsemann’s recent major study, although questioning the notion of a Decalogue structure and disputing Halbe’s pre-monarchic dating, affirms that the unit belongs to the eighth century as Israel’s earliest law and argues that it represents a pre-Deuteronomistic source for the Covenant Code (F. Crüsemann, *Die Tora: Theologie und Sozialgeschichte des alttestamentlichen Gesetzes* [Munich: Kaiser, 1992], 135–70).

Goethe's proposal, which was eagerly grafted onto the documentary hypothesis by Wellhausen and which has since vigorously propagated itself, raises some interesting issues. The horticultural allegory clearly draws on one employed by Paul in reflecting on his mission to the gentiles in Rom 11:17–24. While Goethe's argument is inspired by the Pauline text, it completely inverts the terms of the original.²⁴ In Paul's epistle, it is the gentile addressee who is figuratively described as "a wild olive shoot" that is grafted onto Judaism, "the rich root of the olive tree" (v. 17). Paul frames the unit with an *inclusio* which contrasts the "wild olive tree" with its root stock, the "cultivated olive tree." Paul cautions his gentile addressees against pride: "Do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you" (v. 18). In his reuse of Paul's allegory, Goethe has transformed the original's brilliantly dialectical thought into an approach that is dualistic and self-contradictory in its assumptions about history, faith, and Spirit. How does Goethe's theology of history understand the universal to emerge historically, when it quite literally has no roots or antecedents? Goethe's youthful Romanticism is essentially Marcionite in its dualistic theology.²⁵ It finds no vital connection between ritual and ethical, between particular and universal, between Old and New Testament, between Judaism and Christianity.²⁶ Given the logic of the

24 The relation is noted, although the complete inversion of the terms is not, by Schottroff ("Goethe als Bibelwissenschaftler," 472n40); and by the editor of the Munich edition of "Zwo . . . biblische Fragen" (Goethe, *Der junge Goethe* [ed. G. Sauder], 851).

25 What motivates Wellhausen's appropriation of this model strikes me as primarily a Romantic yearning for originality and antiquity. In this model, creativity is equated with orality, such that textuality is deemed a secondary fossilization. The paradoxical goal of the literary method is to reach the preliterate stage assumed by the text. Following his change of chairs from Greifswald to Halle and then Marburg, the same spirit motivated Wellhausen's attempt to recover the oral poetry of the Arabic *Jāhiliyyah* [pre-Islamic, "pagan" period] and thus to penetrate beneath the alleged overlay of Islamic literate culture. As K. Rudolph observed: "there was no difference in the method which Wellhausen employed in the two fields of research [...]" (K. Rudolph, "Wellhausen as an Arabist," *Semeia* 25 [1982]: 111–55 [at 112]). In this way, I do not regard Wellhausen's brilliant scholarship as driven by simple antisemitism but as adhering primarily to Romantic assumptions about literature and culture.

26 In sharp contrast, Wellhausen used the same metaphor of grafting very differently. In accounting for his shift from Old Testament to Arabic studies, he stresses that the reconstruction of the *Stamm* is essential for understanding the growth of the *Reis*. Pre-Islamic Arabic culture provides the best way of gaining access to the original Semitic stock out of which Israelite religion developed:

Den Uebergang vom Alten Testament zu den Arabern habe ich gemacht in der Absicht, den Wildling kennen zu lernen, auf den von Priestern und Propheten das Reis der Thora Jahve's gepflanzt ist. Denn ich zweifle nicht daran, dass von der ursprünglichen Ausstattung, mit der die

excluded middle, it is no wonder that the horticultural allegory of grafting should require something completely external to history as a way of accounting for the universal's coming into existence from a sterile *Stamm*. The allegory provides an all but supernatural, if hardly biblical, *edle Reis* [noble scion] *ex machina*.

The history of reception of Goethe's proposal raises further issues. In the pastor's letter, it is the cluster of theological assumptions that drives the textual analysis: the exegesis does not begin with the text.²⁷ But that textual proposal, now severed from its theological motivation, is what alone has entered the history of biblical scholarship, from Wellhausen to the most recent writers who cite young Goethe's essay, whether in agreement or in disagreement, while either overlooking or remaining silent about its non-textual rationale.

Conclusions

Goethe's "*Zwo wichtige . . . biblische Fragen*" provides a useful case study to demonstrate the need to examine the work of earlier scholars to understand the biases of the past and to ensure that such issues are not blindly carried forward into present and future scholarship. Goethe's use of the Old Testament and his portrayal of Jews and Judaism works in the service of his construction of a myth about German cultural identity. Beginning from a prior ideological conviction that drives his reading of the Bible, Goethe does not so much exegete as eisegete the biblical text to further his own portrayal of Christianity as a "universal" religion that supersedes and is completely independent of the "particularistic" re-

Hebräer in die Geschichte getreten sind, sich durch die Vergleichung des arabischen Altertums am ehesten eine Vorstellung gewinnen lässt.

See J. Wellhausen, ed. and trans., *Muhammed in Medina: Das ist Vakidi's Kitab alMaghazi in verkürzter deutscher Wiedergabe herausgegeben* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1882), 5. Note the valuable study by R. Smend, "Julius Wellhausen and his Prolegomena to the History of Israel," *Semeia* 25 (1982): 1–20, adducing this citation (p. 8). See further P. Machinist, "The Road Not Taken: Wellhausen and Assyriology," in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Buxenay Oded*, ed. G. Galil, M. Geller, and A. Millard (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 469–531 (510).

²⁷ In this regard, it is important to indicate that the concern of this investigation is only to address the intellectual history of the claim for the antiquity of Exodus 34. Clearly, this analysis does not necessarily mean that such claims are incorrect. Still less should this analysis be viewed, conversely, as defending the antiquity or originality either of the Decalogue of Exodus 20 or of the Sinai Pericope, whether in composition or in redaction.

ligion of Judaism. This portrayal entails his cultural construction of the Jew as “Other.” It equally advances an unreflected cultural construction of the German self as a universal that contradictorily can only be universal to the extent that it constructs and excludes that which is other.

The essay's afterlife also demonstrates the need to become conscious of how our unconscious prior assumptions can shape and control how we read texts, even against the grain. Even scholars, from whom we would normally expect greater methodological reflection and theoretical awareness, have significantly faltered here, both in the case of academic biblical scholarship and in the case of Germanistik. The romantic myth of the antiquity of Exodus 34 has had a very long influence upon biblical scholarship, through to the present. In the process, however, there has been a compartmentalization of Goethe's argument, whereby this essay has been recognized by biblicists for its influence on Julius Wellhausen, while ignoring its problematic assumptions about the history of Israelite religion. Conversely, Germanists interested in tracing Goethe's biography have ignored its problematic cultural assumptions about the nature of German identity and the construction of a false universal (that expels Judaism as alien “Other”). The essay falls between the cracks, and the intellectual omission perpetuates antisemitic stereotypes that pass unchallenged and unreflected. This history of scholarly silence mandates a new look at Goethe's essay and a reevaluation of Exodus 34's place within the compositional history of the Pentateuch.²⁸

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²⁸ This study is part of the author's project to provide the first complete English translation of and commentary upon Goethe's essay: “Goethe's Construction of the Self as German and the Jew as Other: A Translation of and Commentary upon his *Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen* . . . [1773] and Its Setting in Intellectual History” (in progress). The present essay draws upon B. M. Levinson, “La scoperta goethiana della versione ‘originale’ dei Dieci Comandamenti e la sua influenza sulla critica biblica: Il mito del particolarismo ebraico e dell'universalismo tedesco,” in *Il rovelo ardente: Scritti sull'ebraismo Tedesco in memoria di Francesca Y. Albertini*, ed. Irene Kajon (Rome: Lithos Editrice, 2013), 71–90.

Appendix 1

The “Ethical” Decalogue of Exodus 20:2 – 17

BHS	Vs.	RSV
אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:	2	I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פָּנַי:	3	You shall have no other gods before me.
לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם בְּתֹהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם תַּחַת הָאָרֶץ:	4	You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;
לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם כִּי אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֶקֶד עֵינָי אֶבֶת עַל־בָּנָיִם עַל־שָׁלִשִׁים וְעַל־רְבָעִים לְשָׁנָאִי:	5	you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,
וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלָפִים לֹא־הֵבִי וּלְשִׁמְרִי מִצֻּוֹתַי:	6	but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.
לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁוָא כִּי לֹא יִנָּקֶה יְהוָה אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׂא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ לְשָׁוָא:	7	You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.
זָכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ:	8	Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלָאכָתְּךָ:	9	Six days you shall labor, and do all your work;
וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלָאכָה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ־וּבִתְּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וּבְהֶמְתְּךָ וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ:	10	but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates;
כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיָּנַח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בֵּרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֵׁהוּ:	11	for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.
כְּבֹד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכֶנּוּ יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ:	12	Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.
לֹא תִרְצָח:	13	You shall not kill.
לֹא תִנָּאֵף:	14	You shall not commit adultery.
לֹא תִגְנוֹב:	15	You shall not steal.
לֹא־תַעֲנֶה בְרַעַד עַד שִׁקְרָה:	16	You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

- לֹא תַחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא־תַחְמַד אִשְׁתּוֹ רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדּוֹ
וְאִמָּתוֹ וְשׂוֹרֹוֹ וְחִמְרוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ:
- 17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbors.

Appendix 2

The "Ritual" ("Jewish") Decalogue of Exodus 34:11–26

- | BHS | Vs. | RSV |
|--|-----|---|
| שְׁמֹר־לְךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מֵצִוְךָ הַיּוֹם הַנֶּגִי גֵרֶשׁ מִפְּנֵיךָ
אֶת־הָאֻמִּי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַיִּבּוֹסִי: | 11 | Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. |
| הִשָּׁמֶר לְךָ פְּרִי־תִכְרַת בְּרִית לְיֹושֵׁב הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָּא
עֲלֶיהָ פְּרִי־הָיָה לְמוֹקֵשׁ בְּקִרְבְּךָ: | 12 | Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither you go, lest it become a snare in the midst of you. |
| כִּי אֶת־מִזְבְּחֵיהֶם תִּהְיוּ וְאֶת־מִצְבֹּתֵיהֶם תִּשְׁבֹּרֵן
וְאֶת־אֲשֵׁרֵיהֶם תִּכְרֹתֵן: | 13 | You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their Asherim |
| כִּי לֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָאֵל אֲחֵר כִּי יְהוָה קַנָּא שְׁמוֹ אֵל קַנָּא
הוּא: | 14 | (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), |
| פְּרִי־תִכְרַת בְּרִית לְיֹושֵׁב הָאָרֶץ וְנָנוּ אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְנָבְחוּ
לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְקָרָא לָהֶם וְאָכַלְתָּ מִזְבְּחֵיהֶם: | 15 | lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they play the harlot after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and one invites you, you eat of his sacrifice, |
| וְלָקַחְתָּ מִבְּנֹתֵיהֶם לְבָנֶיךָ וְנָנוּ בְּנֹתֵיהֶם אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְהָיוּ
אֶת־בְּנֵיךָ אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם: | 16 | and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters play the harlot after their gods and make your sons play the harlot after their gods. |
| אֱלֹהֵי מִסְכָּה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה־לָּךְ: | 17 | You shall make for yourself no molten gods. |
| אֶת־חֵג הַמִּצּוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל מִצּוֹת אֲשֶׁר
צִוִּיתִיךָ לַמּוֹעֵד חֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב כִּי בַחֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב יֵצְאָתָּ
מִמִּצְרָיִם: | 18 | The feast of unleavened bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Abib; for in the month Abib you came out from Egypt. |
| כָּל־פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם לִי וְכָל־מִקְנֶךָ תִּזְכֹּר פֶּטֶר שׂוֹר וְשֵׂה: | 19 | All that opens the womb is mine, all your male cattle, the firstlings of cow and sheep. |
| וּפֶטֶר חֲמֹר תִּפְדֶּה בִּשְׂה וְאִם־לֹא תִפְדֶּה וְעֵרְפָתוֹ כָּל
בְּכוֹר בְּנֵיךָ תִּפְדֶּה וְלֹא־יֵרָאוּ פָנַי יָרֶקֶם: | 20 | The firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty. |

- שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי תִּשְׁבֹּת בְּחֹרֶשׁ
וּבְקָצִיר תִּשְׁבֹּת:
- וְחַג שְׁבַעַת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ בְּכוֹרֵי קָצִיר חֲטִים וְחַג הָאָסִיף
תִּקְוֹפֶת הַשָּׁנָה:
- שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה יֵרָאֶה כָּל־זָכוֹרְךָ אֶת־פְּנֵי הָאֵל
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
- כִּי־אֶזְרֹשׁ גּוֹיִם מִפְּנֶיךָ וְהִרְחַבְתִּי אֶת־גְּבוּלְךָ וְלֹא־יִחְמַד
אִישׁ אֶת־אֶרְצְךָ בְּעֶלְתָּךְ לִרְאוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה:
- לֹא־תִשְׁחַט עַל־חַמֶּץ דֶּם־זֶבְחִי וְלֹא־יִלֵּן לְבָקָר וְזֶבֶח חַג
הַפֶּסַח:
- רִאשִׁית בְּכוֹרֵי אֲדָמָתְךָ תָּבִיא בֵּית יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
לֹא־תִבְשֹׁל גְּדִי בְחֶלֶב אִמּוֹ:
- 21 Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.
- 22 And you shall observe the feast of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end.
- 23 Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel.
- 24 For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders; neither shall any man desire your land, when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.
- 25 You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven; neither shall the sacrifice of the feast of the passover be left until the morning.
- 26 The first of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

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