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Philosemitism and Antisemitism in Biblical Criticism

Tel Aviv University, 22.11.2017

My lecture focuses on the history of biblical criticism and the place of biblical studies and Jewish studies more generally in the academy.

I challenge the presuppositions of what is “scientific” about the study of Judaism, of Hebrew language and of the historical development of ancient Judaism as interpretive constructs that are burdened by a variety of forms of what I want to call parochialism. At times this is explicit and at other times less than discernable. The challenge for us today as biblicalists or more generally as philologists and humanists more generally is to build on the achievements of nineteenth century scholarship while engaging twentieth and twenty-first century developments in the humanities, all along without forgetting the continuing vitality of Judaism, long after its prematurely announced death.

At its most sophisticated point, historical criticism became part of a paradigm whose methodology owed much to Weber, but many practitioners were less sophisticated than Weber in their uncritical distinction between the religious and political ideologies that they ascribed to the producers of biblical texts, and the value-free pursuit of historical truth that they assumed for themselves. Across the past twenty years I have tried to articulate and implement approaches not taken that considered the vitality of biblical traditions after critique and historicism. The temporal extent and cultural diversity of biblical vitality establish Biblical Studies as a location where distinctive

insights are possible. Some of these insights will be specific to biblical traditions, while others will be generalizable to other traditions focused upon by the humanities. An opportunity exists at the present moment for the renewal of reciprocity between Biblical Studies and the humanities.