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On nail scissors and toothbrushes: responding to the philosophers' critiques of Historical Biblical Criticism

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Abstract: **The rise in interdisciplinary scholarship between philosophy and theology has produced a number of critiques of historical biblical criticism (HBC) by philosophers of religion. Some dialogue has resulted, but these critiques have gone largely unnoticed by historical critical scholars. This article argues that two such critiques of HBC, offered by Plantinga and Stump, are undermined by faulty presuppositions on the philosophers' part regarding the nature and value of HBC and misunderstandings of the nature of the ancient texts on which the discipline of HBC focuses.**

A recent revival of interest in cooperation between philosophers of religion and theologians has led to a number of joint enterprises that aim to be mutually enlightening.[1] While systematic and philosophical theology may have the most in common with philosophy of religion, biblical scholars have not been entirely absent from the dialogue either (Stump & Flint (1993); Bergmann et al. (2011)). A particular kind of biblical scholarship, commonly referred to as 'Historical Biblical Criticism' (Plantinga (2000), 375), has lately been the recipient of sharp critique at the hands of several prominent philosophers, particularly Christian philosophers.[2] These critiques, which predominantly concern method rather than any specific conclusions reached by scholars who practise Historical Biblical Criticism (HBC), have perhaps been more often (and more favourably) noticed among philosophers than among biblical scholars.[3] Nevertheless, they should be of interest to biblical scholars who are also people of faith – Jewish and Christian – who practise one of the many variations of HBC.[4] One of the strengths of HBC is its ability to bring together scholars of diverse (or no) religious beliefs, who, setting aside preoccupation with their individual religious beliefs

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and traditions, can engage in fruitful historical biblical scholarship that communicates across these dividing lines.[5] And yet engaging in this type of scholarship has been described by one of the foremost Christian philosophers of our time as 'trying to mow your lawn with a nail scissors or paint your house with a toothbrush' (Plantinga (2000), 417), an interesting pursuit if one has leisure for such frivolity but rather a waste of time. Jewish and Christian historical biblical scholars may understandably be taken aback in the face of this derogatory assessment of their scholarly pursuits and question the basis on which it is made. The goal of this article is to engage the critiques of HBC given by two prominent Christian philosophers, Alvin Plantinga (2000) and Eleonore Stump (2009; 1994; 2010), and assess their conclusions. I will argue that their critiques, though at times offering insightful correctives to all HBC scholars, are largely misguided and do not merit the discouraging effect they may have on people of faith who engage with HBC as scholars or students. The critiques show evidence of presuppositions that Jewish and Christian HBC scholars have no good reason to accept, they illegitimately discount the value of the theories of HBC scholars about textual composition and authorial intentions, and in some cases they demonstrate misperceptions regarding the way texts were composed and treated in antiquity. They therefore needlessly discourage Jews and Christians from pursuing or even paying attention to the results of an entire discipline devoted to the careful and methodical study of the texts they hold most dear. Whereas these critiques have argued that contemporary people of faith need not pay attention to the results of HBC, I will argue that we should not pay attention to the problematic aspects of the critiques of that enterprise that have been offered by Plantinga and Stump.

Before proceeding with a description and evaluation of the critiques, it is helpful to know what is meant by Historical Biblical Criticism. For this definition, we can turn to Joseph Fitzmyer's (1989) description and defence of the historical-critical method. According to Fitzmyer, HBC understands the Bible to be an ancient text, composed by multiple authors over time, and so analyses the Bible with all the usual tools applied to ancient texts. Taking into account backgrounds, contexts, and original languages, 'it refuses a priori to exclude any critical analysis in its quest for the meaning of the text' (Fitzmyer (1989), 249). HBC considers such questions as the authenticity and integrity of the text, date and provenance, style, purpose, and background, and deals with the transmission of the texts in their ancient languages and versions. The method has been refined in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes, by techniques taken from literary, source, form, and redaction criticism (*ibid.*, 249–251). According to Fitzmyer, the goal of HBC is to determine the meaning of the text as the human author(s) intended it. The method itself can be and has been put to use by scholars with various presuppositions about the nature of the text, and some of the more well-known uses and presuppositions have not been compatible with traditional theistic belief

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(*ibid.*, 252). Fitzmyer expounds on what users of HBC in his own (Roman Catholic) tradition are presupposing in the following way:

> that the book being critically interpreted contains God's Word set forth in human words of long ago; that it has been composed under the guidance of the Spirit and has authority for the people of the Jewish-Christian heritage; that it is part of a restricted collection of sacred, authoritative writings (part of a canon); that it has been given by God to His people for their edification and salvation; and that it is properly expounded only in relation to the Tradition that has grown out of it within the communal faith-life of that people. (*ibid.*, 254–255)

Although certainly not all those who employ HBC would agree, for Fitzmyer HBC serves to assist the Church by helping it to understand the word of God that comes to it in the form of these ancient texts (*ibid.*, 258).

In the third volume of his Warrant trilogy, *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), Plantinga addresses the concept of HBC and whether or not the conclusions of HBC that may appear to contradict the beliefs of traditional Christianity do in fact serve as defeaters for those beliefs. Without addressing any of the specific conclusions of HBC, Plantinga determines on epistemological grounds that they do not. He defines HBC as a kind of scripture scholarship that brackets out what is known by faith (including that the Bible is divinely inspired) and does its work on the basis of reason alone (*ibid.*, 375). He divides HBC methodology into two overarching categories, Troeltschian HBC and non-Troeltschian HBC (*ibid.*, 399). The former is (roughly) an approach that treats the biblical text and the events narrated therein as part of a closed universe in which events are causally connected according to natural laws; thus, miracles are precluded. The latter is (roughly) an approach that brackets out any knowledge obtained by faith, for the purposes of historical research on the biblical text (*ibid.*, 416). Against the former, Plantinga argues that no good reasons for the Troeltschian assumptions that conflict with traditional Christian belief – for example, belief in a closed universe – have been forthcoming, and so there is no reason for traditional Christians to pay attention to its conclusions that (inevitably) conflict with traditional Christianity. Against the latter, Plantinga argues that, since Christians have knowledge by faith, knowledge that is not taken into account by non-Troeltschian HBC, they need not be affected by the results of scholarship that handicaps itself by refusing to consider that knowledge. Still, Plantinga concedes, traditional Christians may play the 'game' of HBC if they so choose by 'conditionalizing' the results ('*if* the deliverances of faith are true, then . . .') (*ibid.*). Plantinga also admits that there is a possibility that, by some accident, HBC might stumble upon an incontrovertible fact that does contradict the beliefs of traditional Christianity, but this has not yet happened, and, in Plantinga's view, is unlikely to happen. Therefore, he concludes, traditional Christians need not be discomfited by the results of HBC.

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Stump's critique differs from Plantinga's in that she looks at some examples of specific conclusions reached by HBC scholars, as well as the presuppositions that led to those conclusions. Contrasting Raymond Brown's interpretation of the empty tomb narrative in his Anchor Bible Commentary on the gospel of John (1966–1970) with the interpretation of all the gospels' empty tomb narratives in the twelfth-century play *Visitatio Sepulchri*, Stump notes that both interpretations serve to harmonize the details of the story. The former does so by distinguishing among strands of different traditions that an editor has woven together into one story; the latter does so by incorporating details from all the individual stories into one coherent narrative (Stump (2009), 255). Stump prefers the medieval play's methodology of harmonizing the texts, in part because she finds the 'subtle, complicated dramatic story' of the play more true to life than Brown's simple strands of individual traditions (*ibid.*, 259). Further, Stump calls into question the implicit assumptions behind Brown's analysis of the text. The assumptions, as she understands them, are as follows (*ibid.*, 255):

1. Earlier stories are assumed to be consistent and free of tension.
2. Editors felt free to change significant details in these stories and add their own material.
3. Editors were slavishly deferential to received traditions such that they would not remove clear 'inconsistencies'.
4. Earlier accounts of a story are more likely to be accurate than later ones.

None of these presuppositions can be demonstrated by historical evidence, and so Stump considers them philosophically. She finds them wanting, particularly the combination of the second and third presuppositions. She reasons thus: for the hypothetical editor of the narrative to leave such glaring inconsistencies in the final form of the text as Brown sees, that editor would either have to be uncommonly stupid, or have a good reason for leaving the inconsistencies. The principle of charity requires that we choose the latter option, in which case the best explanation is respectful deference to a source text that precludes changing even very small details to produce a consistent story (*ibid.*, 247–248). It is incoherent and 'jarring' to try to maintain this kind of slavish deference on the part of the editor along with the belief that the same editor could change significant details and even include his own fabricated material (*ibid.*, 256). Stump sees this problem as less serious, however, than what is in her opinion the unrealistic simplicity of Brown's supposed narrative strands (ibid, 258–259).

A second critique of historical biblical studies comes in the context of Stump's (1994) evaluation, largely negative, of particular aspects of Richard Swinburne's *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (1992). In Stump's view, Swinburne's account of revelation, which involves God having given a culturally bound revelation that over time became distorted and filled with error such that

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that revelation requires ongoing interpretation, has deistic overtones (Stump (1994), 166). She compares this to the view of revelation espoused by many HBC scholars, and connects it to the tendency to see earlier texts as more authoritative and the resultant attempt to get behind the text to the different sources that would contain that more original divine message (*ibid.*, 166–167). The result of this view is that divine revelation is inaccessible to most of the people throughout time and space for whom it was intended, creating the need for experts in HBC to make divine revelation comprehensible (*ibid.*, 169). Stump contrasts this with medieval approaches to biblical interpretation. Aquinas, for example, considered that divine revelation functioned as an external standard that brings to light our own distorted concepts of good and evil, which is quite the opposite of biblical interpreters standing in judgement regarding the authenticity of texts (*ibid.*, 172). Furthermore, corrupt texts seemed to cause no problem; all manner of variant readings preserved by tradition were considered part of divine revelation and thus worthy of interpretation and commentary (*ibid.*, 176). Behind this attitude towards the biblical text is what Stump calls a 'dynamic conception of revelation' (*ibid.*, 177), as opposed to a deistic one. A dynamic theory of revelation, like dynamic theories of creation, assumes that God continues to be active in God's creation, in this case within the Christian believer, to communicate divine revelation, which is not static but can change form from believer to believer (*ibid.*, 178–179). On this view, much of what HBC scholarship is concerned with is, at best, unnecessary, since knowledge of original contexts, cultures, and languages is only of value for discovering the layer of revelation intended for those contexts, cultures, and languages (*ibid.*, 180). Not surprisingly, Stump prefers the medieval approach to biblical interpretation and revelation, not least because of its anti-elitism, which to her mind is consistent with the just and loving character of God (*ibid.*, 196).

A third critique of HBC conclusions can be found in Stump's recent book, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (2010), in which she uses her analyses of various biblical narratives to formulate a theodicy. One of the narratives under consideration is the story of Job, her interpretation of which she contrasts with aspects of Marvin Pope's interpretation in his Anchor Bible Commentary (1965). In his commentary, which Stump judges to be 'typical' and a 'common reading' of Job (Stump (2010), 184),[6] Pope notes the lack of a clear response to the problem of theodicy. Despite the fact that in the dialogues this is Job's main concern, which he vocalizes often with great emotion and bitterness, the divine speeches avoid addressing the problem directly. In the end, Job humbly repents in the face of God's declarations of divine power (*ibid.*, 184–186). Stump finds this interpretation puzzling in that a humble response on the part of Job seems incongruent in light of all that precedes it (*ibid.*, 186). She attributes Pope's baffling interpretation to his lack of attention to clever and subtle aspects of the narrative that form the context of the divine speeches. On Stump's reading, the

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book of Job shows God in loving relationship with the creation, like a parent with a child (*ibid.*, 190). The divine speeches show Job this aspect of God's nature, and this second-person experience[7] is what leads Job to the natural response of humble repentance (*ibid.*, 195–196). Although readers are not able to experience exactly what Job experiences, they nevertheless can see the way God acts in a loving way towards, for example, both Satan and Job at the same time, and infer that God is able to act in a loving way towards all God's creatures simultaneously, even when those creatures are at odds with one another. If HBC scholars find this reading naïve – there is no mention of the book's apparently (and perhaps intentionally) contradictory messages about retribution theology, 'the satan' is assumed to be the highly developed figure of Christian theology, and the ambiguities and alternatives for translation of Job's 'repentance' in 42:2–6 are completely without mention – they have no recourse for saying so. Stump saw to that in the first chapter of her book. About her project she writes, 'Insofar as the point of my examination of the biblical texts is not to elucidate a period in history or a historical culture, but rather to shed light on a philosophical position through reflection informed by narratives, the historical approach is manifestly not so much as germane to my project' (*ibid.*, 30). She follows this statement with the expected protestations against the dominance of HBC, and quotes scholars such as Robert Alter (1981) and Jon Levenson (1988) to support her points (Stump (2010), 30–32).[8] She goes on to call into question the assumption that 'every biblical text is such a mélange as many historical scholars have supposed those texts to be' (*ibid.*, 33) and to note that the simple, uncomplicated strands of tradition that HBC scholars might discern are not as true to reality as the more complicated, final form narratives.

Before proceeding with an evaluation of these philosophers' critiques, it is worth observing that they both express appreciation for some of the insights that have come out of HBC scholarship (Plantinga (2000), 401; Stump (2009), 260). It is now time to turn the question around, however, and ask what value their critiques of HBC, in terms of both methodology and results, have for Jewish and Christian practitioners and users of HBC. Should those practitioners consider a career change, perhaps go about biblical interpretation the way the mediaevals did, as Stump seems to prefer? Are their presuppositions and methodologies really as problematic as these critiques suggest? As one of these practitioners, I would be the first to admit that our work could benefit from reflecting more thoughtfully on and better articulating our presuppositions and methodologies. Indeed, these philosophers' critiques are an important impetus for our reflection;[9] however, they also give evidence of some misunderstandings of HBC and of the Bible and ancient texts in general that should be brought to light, lest people of faith who practise or study HBC be deterred unnecessarily.

I must note at the outset that I recognize and appreciate the apparent motivation behind Plantinga's critique in particular. He seems to have a pastoral

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concern, namely, that traditional Christians may learn of HBC scholarship that gives evidence of pointedly anti-theistic presuppositions, scholarship which challenges some of their beliefs or leads them to think that it is not rational to hold certain beliefs. This is a legitimate concern, and his desire to offer Christians a defence against the disquieting conclusions of some HBC scholarship is laudable. Further, I have no quarrel with Plantinga's conclusions regarding the lack of obligation on the part of average traditional Christians to worry themselves over the results of HBC. I would extend this same lack of obligation to the average traditional Christian and indeed the average person with regard to any specialized field. The results of, say, marine biology, or analytic philosophy, or almost any other discipline[10] may be safely ignored by most people and left to the experts – though generally scholars do not do their counterparts in other fields the discourtesy of saying so in print. The impression Plantinga's argument leaves with some HBC scholars, however, is that even those people of faith who care a great deal about studying the Bible and interpreting it in a well-informed and responsible way need not consider HBC worth their time. As such, it seems to me that his critique has the very real potential of doing more harm than good, and therefore requires a response. I find two things in particular worrisome. First is the lack of regard for the worth of HBC as a discipline, and the consequent, if unintentional, discouragement for those Jews and Christians called to pursue it. Second is the sweeping judgement that no traditional Christian need bother with the results of HBC, and the consequent, if unintentional, barricade against the very useful, faith-deepening, spiritually enriching insights it has to offer.

Plantinga's critique has received a response from Christian theologians (Bartholomew (2003); Gordon (2003)), to which Plantinga (2003) himself replied. The responses and replies have not satisfied HBC scholars or closed the discussion, however (Sparks (2008), 142–143). Robert Gordon in particular has made a good case for people of faith to engage HBC, and called into question some of the problematic implications of Plantinga's view of God as the author of the one book of scripture (Plantinga (2003), 81–84). In his reply, Plantinga acknowledged that there might be warrant for Christians practising HBC, and clarified that he is offering criticism only of the version of HBC that brackets out what can be known by faith (*ibid.*, 94–95). Since, presumably, Troeltschian HBC scholars who affirm a closed universe and thereby reject the activity of a deity in the world do not have the kind of faith that Plantinga is talking about, they are not really bracketing anything out. Upon closer review, then, it seems that Plantinga's critique is directed primarily towards people who have faith to bracket out and who choose to do so in a particular way and for a particular purpose. In what follows, I will focus on some of the implicit and, in my view, unjustified judgements about the relative value of various aspects of the biblical text that appear to be informing Plantinga's thought, particularly those involved in his positive appraisal of traditional biblical commentary over against HBC.

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The consequences of these value judgements are emphases on Plantinga's part that result in an unnecessarily dim view of HBC, and which Plantinga gives Jewish and Christian HBC scholars no good reason to accept.

The first of Plantinga's emphases that devalues HBC regards what God intends to communicate in the Bible versus what the human authors intended to communicate. Although there is overlap between these two communications, they are not identical, and when the intentions differ, the 'divine' intention is more worthwhile for Christians to pursue while the 'human' intentions may be safely set aside. Whatever the human author(s) had in mind when composing the suffering servant poems in the book of Isaiah, for example, God intended to communicate something about Jesus (Plantinga (2000), 385). Christians should pay attention to the latter but need not regard the former – unlike 'scientific' study of the Bible, which focuses on human authorial intention without considering the divine (*ibid.*, 388). As such, the usual ways of discovering insights into the things of humans – for example, historical research and applying one's powers of reason (irrespective of one's knowledge by faith) to the interpretation of a text – are marginalized in favour of the ways of discovering insights into the things of God. This implicit value judgment is problematic on two counts. First, it disregards the very valuable insights and knowledge *about God* that come from study of the Bible as a *human* text – and the Bible, whatever else it is, is also or at least a human text. The Belgic Confession, which Plantinga explicitly cites as informing his own thought (*ibid.*, 379), articulates a relatively common way of distinguishing two means by which we know God: the 'book' of the universe and the book of holy Scripture which is divinely inspired (Articles 2 and 3). That universe, says the Confession, 'is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God's eternal power and divinity' (Article 2). Such words are an invitation for Christians to study that 'book' with the best tools available to them and to the best of their finite ability, and to see the hand of God at work. However, this distinction between the universe (general revelation) and the Bible (special revelation) has sometimes become, in effect, a dichotomy, such that the Bible is exempt from the same kind of study applied to every other part of the universe – and this dichotomy seems to be one accepted by Plantinga. Now, while it is true that Christians who study various aspects of the universe will have in the background knowledge that comes from faith, that knowledge does not in all cases necessarily inform that study in such a way as to lead them to conclusions different from those of people who do not share those presuppositions. (The Christian oncologist will generally proceed in treating the cancer patient in the same way as the atheist oncologist, for example. That the patient is created in the image of God, that miracles are possible, and that eternity awaits him or her after death is knowledge certainly in the background, but in most cases would not lead the Christian oncologist to a treatment plan that works with the patient's needs and desires that is radically

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different from the atheist's.) As a collection of human texts that makes up part of the 'book' of our universe, there is great motivation to study the Bible using the same kind of analyses, methods of interpretation, and judgements[11] that we use with other texts that we find in the 'book' of our universe. Indeed, on my understanding of the Belgic Confession and the nature of the biblical text, this kind of study is one of the irreplaceable means available to us by which we can 'ponder the invisible things of God'. Trying to discover the nuts and bolts of how the cosmos came into existence (without a priori excluding any particular theory) seems to me not to be an affront to the Creator on the part of Christian scientists, but a wholly appropriate response to the invitation God sent out upon creating the cosmos and placing naturally curious sentient beings in it. Similarly, trying to discover the nuts and bolts of how the biblical text came into existence and what relationship that text has to historical events (without a priori excluding any critical analysis) also seems an entirely appropriate response to the invitation God sent out upon authorizing a text that all but begs for careful study and putting it into the hands of naturally curious sentient beings. Rejecting (or asking others to reject) – not accepting – this invitation is what is problematic. Thus, trying to find out what the author(s) of the suffering servant poems (for example) meant to teach is not less worthwhile for Christians to do than trying to discover God's meaning in the same passage, but, along with stargazing and studying fossils, is one of those means by which we may ponder the invisible things of God. Plantinga's implicit value judgement that for Christians the divine teaching is more important to study than the human teaching discourages Christians from pondering to its full potential this particular aspect of our universe, and has the effect of pointing all Christians away from one of the means by which we are invited to learn about God's 'eternal power and divinity'.

A second problem with Plantinga's emphasis on the divine over the human intention in the biblical text, and the greater worth of studying the one over the other for Christians, is its subtle rejection of the means by which God has chosen to reveal the divine self. In a passage regarding the ministry of the church in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin asks and briefly answers his own question about why God uses human beings to govern the church (4.3.1). After all, he reasons, God could lead the church by speaking from heaven, or employ angels to do it, without having to deal with unreliable humans to get the job done. However, God chooses humans rather than these other means for several reasons, according to Calvin. First, God communicates regard for humanity in choosing from among them leaders for the church. Second, it teaches us humility and obedience to God to make ourselves teachable to the things of God by people like ourselves – sometimes even by those less able or gifted than ourselves. Finally, it binds the church together to be taught one human to another; none of us can claim independence from fellow believers when we depend on each other for learning the things of God. Although this passage is about the teaching and

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preaching ministry of the church, it is not a far stretch to see how it might also apply to the biblical text. Presumably, God did not reveal the divine self through a collection of human texts because of an inability to do so in any other way, but because God chose to do it this way rather than, say, by speaking from heaven or sending an angel. I do not presume Calvin's confidence in giving God's reasons, but similar ones could apply in this case. By giving revelation through humans, God demonstrates regard for humans. We show humility and obedience to God by learning our theology from other humans with much more limited knowledge of cosmology than we ourselves have today, for example. And it binds us together as the people of God throughout time and space to be dependent one on the other; Jews and Christians cannot claim independence from the people of God of three millennia ago but in our study of the biblical text recognize to what extent our knowledge of the things of God comes from our fellow believers. To pit 'divine intention' against 'human intention' in alleged cases of non-overlap and to regard the one as worth the Christian's time and the other as dispensable is to ignore the obvious but overlooked fact that God willingly chose to reveal the divine self through those humans. In light of God's sovereign choice, it seems wrongheaded to see the divine meaning as over against the human meaning – it is simply not the right way to understand what is going on in scripture. If we value the revelation of God, we do not do well to devalue or disregard the means by which God chose to give us that revelation.

An additional implicit emphasis on Plantinga's part that devalues HBC, related to the first, is a predilection for viewing the Bible as a 'unified communication of God' (Plantinga (2000), 399) over viewing it as a set of separate texts. In a section entitled 'Tensions with Traditional Christianity', Plantinga notes with apparent approval William Pringle's complaint that HBC treats the Bible as the latter rather than the former, resulting in a rejection of the idea that Old Testament passages might be making reference to Jesus – effectively excluding 'clairvoyance' and other brands of miracle. Plantinga goes on to ridicule various interpretations of biblical texts that follow these HBC methods (*ibid.*, 399–400), but he does not give reasons why Pringle (or he) thinks these two ways of viewing the text are necessarily opposed to one another, much less why one might be a stumbling block or obstacle to accepting the other. Plantinga seems to take for granted Pringle's assumption that they are mutually exclusive, or at least two quite different things, without examining the legitimacy of that assumption. It seems that if we have proper respect for God's choice to reveal the divine self through humans and the texts they write, we will, as a result, recognize and respect the differences in historical context, perspective, and levels of knowledge among the human authors that are evident in the various texts that make up the Bible. Indeed, the possibility that God may have authorized divine discourse intentionally as a set of separate texts – and designed them to be understood as such – does not seem to be one that Plantinga has considered. A unified communication from God certainly does not a

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priori preclude diversity and variety among these texts any more than a unified body of Christ precludes diversity and variety among Christians (1 Cor. 12:4–30). In fact, it is in the very variety of contributions of individual Christians that the body of Christ is manifest in the world, and it is not unreasonable to hold to the view that it is in the very variety of separate biblical texts that God's unified communication is made manifest. Given the limitations of human capacity for understanding and of human language for describing the divine, it may be that the revelation of an infinite being even requires variety and diversity – at least considered from a human perspective. If it were so, Old Testament texts could be given equal honour, whether interpreted as miraculous predictions of the distant future or as incisive commentary on the present reality – and might even be honourable enough to bear both interpretations at once. It may be that certain types of variety and diversity among the texts that make up the Bible would be unacceptable to Plantinga and those who share his views, but that does not make it necessary to treat the Bible as a unified communication as opposed to a set of separate texts. In any case, HBC scholars who are also people of faith need not feel obligated to choose between these two ways of conceiving of the biblical text, but may hold to both at once – and interpret individual texts accordingly.[12]

At the heart of my evaluation of Stump's critique of HBC is what I see as a fundamental misunderstanding on her part about the way ancient texts worked – how they were produced, preserved, and treated – which, understandably but unnecessarily, leads to her rather negative view of HBC. In this regard, I will deal first with her methodological critique of Brown's approach to the empty tomb narratives, and then with her judgement that complicated, final form narratives are more true to life than simple, tensionless stories. It is all but inconceivable to Stump that reasonably intelligent editors could change significant details in their sources, even inventing their own material, and at the same time be so slavishly deferential to their sources that they would not change even glaringly inconsistent details. For example, she critiques Brown for his view that the hypothetical Johannine editor added significant details that were not found in his sources, such as the identity of the beloved disciple, while also refusing to change the personal pronoun 'we' to 'I' to smooth the discrepancy between Mary coming to the tomb alone in one source and apparently with companions in another (Stump (2009), 247). Such contradictory assumptions must, she thinks, undermine Brown's project. It is understandable that her fellow philosophers might find this reasoning persuasive, but scholars who spend their time immersed in texts from the sixth century BCE through the first century CE cannot help but resist it. Consider, for example, one kind of ancient text: the midrashim produced by Jewish rabbis through the first few centuries CE. This type of Jewish scripture interpretation tends not to be widely read or familiar among Christians; it is made up in large part of quotations of scriptural texts – but strategic quotation, juxtaposition, and

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reordering of those texts, in order to produce new meaning. The way scripture functioned for the rabbis has been likened to the function of language in general (Boyarin (1990), 28). On the one hand, I am limited in my communication abilities by the words I know and the grammatical rules and sentence structures that govern the English language. On the other hand, I have a tremendous amount of latitude within the rules and structures to choose and arrange the words I know to say what I need to say. So, too, for the rabbis: they were bound to quote scripture – that is how midrash was done – but they had a tremendous amount of latitude to choose and reorder their texts, while still abiding by the conventions of their community,[13] in order to say what they needed to say. There is a midrash on Psalm 145 that illustrates the point nicely. In the course of speculation on why one letter of the alphabet is missing in this acrostic psalm, a text from the prophet Amos is brought in to explain the lacuna. Amos 5:2 reads: 'She has fallen and will no more rise, the virgin of Israel' – one of the most ominous prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. Taking advantage of the absence of punctuation in the Hebrew text, however, some rabbis, according to the midrash, read the verse this way: 'She has fallen and will no more; rise, O virgin of Israel' (Kugel (1986), 77–79). In other words, they quote the verse verbatim, but make it say the opposite of what its author was trying to communicate. Now, a modern reader might well wonder whether these rabbis have misunderstood the meaning of the text, or whether perhaps they have so little respect for it that they can twist its meaning so blatantly. Neither is the case; rather, they are exercising their freedom within bounds. On the one hand, they are bound to be faithful to their traditions and to quote them accurately;[14] on the other hand, they have a great deal of freedom to work with those traditions to say new things. The result is that the ancient traditions are preserved by giving them a new context and meaning (Boyarin (1990), 24–25), and this is all done in the service of bringing the word of God to bear on their present context. I suppose if one were so inclined, one might describe them as 'slavishly deferential' to their textual traditions such that they could not change wording – even 'a "we" to an "I"' (Stump (2009), 248) – but at the same time have the freedom to recontextualize and reinterpret those words, including repositioning an understood comma, resulting in a complete change to the meaning of their source. If Stump thinks such an 'inconsistent' approach to their respected traditions indicates that they are uncommonly stupid or that their interpretations are suspect, the rabbis of 2,000 years ago – not to mention their modern readers, who cannot help but be impressed by the creativity and ingenuity with which they treat their source texts – may be excused for not taking seriously such criticism or allowing it to deter them in their work. This is simply one type of ancient text that undermines Stump's contention that the methodological presuppositions of HBC scholars are inconsistent and best abandoned, but it is not insignificant that it comes from a time much closer to the composition of the gospel of John than either Aquinas or Stump. Indeed, one could give a list of examples that

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demonstrate that the midrashists' attitudes towards texts and traditions were not by any means unique,[15] and thus that HBC scholars' allegedly 'inconsistent' premises are entirely appropriate to the texts they study. Without passing judgement on any of Brown's specific conclusions, I think it is safe to say that, with regard to his presuppositions and general approach to the text, Brown is not out of the ordinary or off base to assume both deference and freedom, in accordance with norms of context and community, on the part of his hypothetical ancient editor. Whether or not the rabbis' methods pass muster with twenty-first-century philosophers, the fact remains: they and others did approach their texts this way. Stump's inability to see the sense in their approach to texts says more about her cultural and intellectual biases than about the viability of HBC assumptions. Intelligent, creative people of another era might reasonably approach texts differently than we ourselves are inclined to do today, and HBC scholars try our best to match our presuppositions to the approach evidenced in our texts. Certainly these presuppositions are and should be open to critique and revision, but the critique and revision should be shaped by the ancient texts and their contexts and not by modern philosophical conventions.

With regard to Stump's impressions about what kind of stories are true to life, I might posit the competing impression that real life often does not make for a good, satisfying, coherent story – at least, not without a lot of tweaking, selective memory, and interpretation. However, my critique of this point will follow a different path – specifically, it will deal with the kinds of stories that are true to the life of ancient texts. Contrary to what Stump seems to think, at times HBC analysis demonstrates convincingly that a passage is not, in fact, a mélange.[16] Other times, however, critical analysis shows beyond a reasonable doubt (for many people, at any rate) that the most plausible understanding of the compositional history of a passage does entail a mix of sources or traditions. Indeed, the work of literary theorists over the last half century or so has opened our eyes to just how complicated texts really are and how pervasive is the phenomenon of intertextuality. One text might quote, allude to, or echo another text in ways that are unmarked and subtle, sometimes just beyond the awareness of even the author.[17] Thus the composition of any text – let alone its relationship to what it narrates – is not quite so simple and straightforward as Stump would have us believe. If analytic philosophers have not been impressed by the likes of Kristeva and Barthes, they can consider the work of biblical scholars who have demonstrated convincingly (and often independently of literary theorists) that the biblical text, at least, is often laden with echoes of other texts. Michael Fishbane, for example, has argued that as the biblical text was copied and recopied, scribes would incorporate explanations, corrections, or interpretations that came to be part of the text itself. New texts were written that quoted, recalled, or reinterpreted the content of a previously written tradition. The result is that the Hebrew Bible is a complex web of connections, of references to itself, the layers of which can

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in some cases be uncovered through careful reading (Fishbane (1989), 44–77). Other Hebrew Bible scholars have shown specific ways in which individual texts take up and transform the traditions found in other biblical texts (Newsom (1992); Tull Willey (1997); Sommer (1998); Nurmela (2006)). Additionally, Richard B. Hays (1989) has illuminated the complexity and sophistication of Pauline texts in regard to their references and allusions to the Old Testament. Thus, while it can be a very complicated business to discern the layers of traditions, citations, and echoes, and prudence as well as paucity of data often require that we not voice our judgements with too much confidence, this approach to the biblical text is much truer to the reality of ancient texts in particular than Stump's rather uncomplicated conception of cut-out-of-whole-cloth narratives produced by the literary artistry of one author.[18]

Regarding Stump's contention that HBC presupposes a deistic model of revelation, this seems to be the case only if one holds to the presupposition that God cannot or at least does not involve the divine self in a providential way in HBC scholarship, or use it in any way in ongoing communication of revelation to believers. Nowhere is this presupposition defended in Stump's critique, and it is certainly not a universal assumption; Fitzmyer, for one, explicitly states his belief that God does use HBC in this very way (Fitzmyer (1989), 258), and so does Sparks (2008, 230). Given that she does not see God at work in the aspect of creation that is HBC, it is small wonder that Stump regards it as inferior to other ways of understanding divine revelation. HBC scholars are under no compulsion to accept Stump's presupposition over against Fitzmyer's and Sparks's, and have good reason to see the providential hand of God in such things as the discovery of the Rosetta stone, the deciphering of the Akkadian language, and the unearthing of the tablets on which *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was inscribed. Indeed, privileging modes of interpreting the biblical text as if these things had not happened would seem seriously and unnecessarily to handicap the study of that text. Against Stump's protestations that experts are then required to mediate revelation, I would point to Fitzmyer's (1989, 258–259) astute response: the scriptures themselves recognize that they contain 'some things that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction' (2 Pet. 3:16) and sometimes cannot be understood 'unless someone guides' (Acts 8:31). It seems consistent with the just and loving character of God that God provides such guides on those occasions when there is a lack of understanding. I would also point out that there are gradations of understanding. A small child might understand that, for her parents, 'making a baby is a little like putting pieces of a puzzle together' (Murkoff (2000)); her parents might understand that babies are made from sperm and egg through sexual intercourse; and their obstetrician might understand in minute detail the processes of ovulation, fertilization, cell multiplication, and embryo implantation. For the time being, each knows what it is necessary and helpful to know, and each may graduate into greater depths of understanding as it is

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appropriate and desirable, but that does not change the fundamental truth and value of each one's current understanding. The 'great things of the gospel' (Plantinga (2000), 375) are simple enough for a child to understand, but it does not follow that studying them in new ways (even historically) or learning from others who have reached greater depths of understanding are not worthwhile. Anti-elitism is only a short distance across the straits from anti-intellectualism, and I imagine that Stump would want to avoid the latter Scylla as much as the former Charybdis.

I have now already dealt with most of Stump's critiques of HBC that are reiterated in *Wandering in Darkness*. I should like to point out two things in regard to her interpretation of Job, however. The first is that, as far as her citations indicate, her critique of HBC is based primarily on Brown's Anchor Bible Commentary on John and Pope's Anchor Bible Commentary on Job. Since some readers may be unfamiliar with this commentary series, a few words of description from its general editor, John Collins, are in order:

> The Anchor Yale Bible is a project of international and interfaith scope in which Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish scholars from many countries contribute individual volumes. The project is not sponsored by any ecclesiastical organization and is not intended to reflect any particular theological doctrine . . . Its approach is grounded in exact translation of the ancient languages and an appreciation of the historical and cultural context in which the biblical books were written supplemented by insights from modern methods, such as sociological and literary criticism.[19]

Recall Stump's description of her project: 'Insofar as the point of my examination of the biblical texts is not to elucidate a period in history or a historical culture . . . the historical approach is manifestly not so much as germane to my project' (Stump (2010), 30). It is difficult to imagine a commentary series more at odds with Stump's avowed purpose for her book than the Anchor Bible Commentary series. Pope can hardly be faulted for not giving a sophisticated literary reading when it was not his task to do so. (If one wants to know about the ancient Near Eastern background of Job or Akkadian cognates of difficult vocabulary in Job, however, Pope's commentary is second to none.) It is puzzling that Stump would choose as the target of her criticism an author whose work is 'manifestly not so much as germane' to her project – by her account and by his. In addition, it seems rather uncharitable for Stump explicitly to assert her project's right to immunity from any criticism on historical grounds while feeling free herself to take aim at an historical scholar for failing to provide a literary or theological interpretation he never intended to provide. Inasmuch as Stump is criticizing Pope for not engaging in a project similar to hers, which Pope never set out nor claimed to do, it is tempting to conclude that Stump is setting up something of a 'straw man' that is easy to tear down, instead of interacting with

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more recent sophisticated literary interpretations of the book of Job on the part of HBC scholars – and these are not lacking.[20]

The assertion of immunity against historical criticism notwithstanding, I will move to my second comment and venture to point out a potential weakness of Stump's project. There are aspects of her interpretation of Job that show a distinct lack of regard for what the author(s) apparently intended to communicate, and others in which her translation of Hebrew texts shows a similar lack of regard for the ambiguities in the Hebrew text. Among other things, I refer, respectively, to her interpretation of 'the satan' and to her translations of Job's two responses to the divine speeches, for which there is extensive commentary on the various possibilities (Job 40:4–5 and especially 42:2–6).[21] In the prologue of Job, the figure that incites God to afflict Job is not designated by a proper noun – 'Satan' – but rather by a common noun preceded by the definite article – 'the satan'. It can also be translated 'the accuser' or 'the adversary'. In the historical context in which the prologue was probably composed, such a figure would have been hired by a king as a sort of spy, whose job was to ferret out disloyalty to the throne within the king's realm (Tur-Sinai (1967), 41–45). Stump's treatment of this figure as the 'Satan' of later Christian theology would be all but unrecognizable to the author whose work she is interpreting, and obviously transforms the story in important ways from how its earliest audiences would have read it. This reality would not, I think, give Stump pause, given her goals, and I certainly would not propose to assert that a text only and always means just what its author had in mind. Good literature is much more complicated than that. However, untying a story from its historical context to the extent that Stump has done in this case and in others is not without its repercussions. It is, in a sense, to rewrite the narrative. Stump's interpretation of Job makes for a good story, but it is not the story of Job.

This point is further elucidated by Stump's translation of Job 42:6. As Stump tells the story, Job repents in dust and ashes – a fitting response to her take on God's speeches from the whirlwind. Her translation is a popular one, and typically remains as the default translation of this verse, but there is widespread agreement among commentators that it is an untenable one. Whatever the verse means, it is not a straightforward statement of repentance for wrongdoing. Several alternatives have been suggested, without a clear winner.[22] The meaning of the book of Job to some extent hinges on the meaning of this verse, and so the translation one chooses shapes the interpretation of the whole book. Indeed, one scholar noted about the enigmatic 42:6 that it is 'perhaps the most vexed issue in the entire book', and the lack of consensus for its translation means that 'interpreters make, rather than find, the text which they interpret' (Tilley (1989), 260). The ambiguity of this verse contributes to the profundity of the book's message, and would, I think, speak powerfully to many people of faith who have experienced terrible suffering and debilitating doubt much better than Stump's cut-and-dried translation of Job's final words. In disregarding that ambiguity, Stump has further

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rewritten the narrative of Job. The impression left by all this is that Stump's interpretation of the book of Job appears less an interpretation of the book of Job than an interpretation of her own creative and idiosyncratic rewriting of the book of Job. The result of the project as a whole is that Stump has constructed a theodicy based in part on an analysis of a story she has for all practical purposes composed herself. To put it another way, she has composed a story, analysed her story, and used her analysis of her story as a basis on which to reach her conclusions – hardly a reliable or persuasive way of proceeding.

Although I appreciate the pastoral spirit behind Plantinga's critique, as well as his and Stump's admonitions to be more self-conscious about HBC methodology, my appraisal of their critiques is that they have the potential to do more harm than good. Their devaluation of HBC unnecessarily discourages people of faith who wish to join the field, and runs the very real risk of preventing people of faith in general from reaping important benefits from it. Some of their presuppositions about the nature of the biblical and other ancient texts are unfounded and need not be accepted. The apparent disregard of the possibility that God might be active even in HBC scholarship need not be shared. Jewish and Christian HBC scholars would do well to think more carefully about our presuppositions and articulate them more consistently, and in their critiques Plantinga and Stump have extended an invitation for us to do so. I hope it is an invitation we accept, without, however, being unnecessarily deterred in our discipline by the misguided aspects of their critiques.[23]

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Notes

1. Rea (2009); Bergmann et al. (2011); Third annual Logos workshop in Philosophical Theology (University of Notre Dame; 2–4 June 2011).
2. Plantinga (2000); van Inwagen (1993); Stump (1994, 2009, 2010).
3. In a response to Plantinga (2000), Evan Fales suggests that the problems in articulating a methodology that beset HBC are no different from those of any empirical science (Fales (2009), 308).
4. Although the critiques to which I refer tend to refer to one homogeneous entity called HBC, or take one small aspect of it and label it HBC, this kind of scholarship is actually quite varied and multi-layered. See Fitzmyer's (1989) description of the varieties.
5. *Ibid.*, 259. This is not to suggest that HBC is in some way wholly objective, or that these scholars are not influenced by their beliefs and traditions. Certainly and unavoidably they are.
6. Whether Pope's reading can be considered typical, or whether the majority of Job scholars would accept his interpretation, is not obvious to me. A small sampling of recent works on Job show the diversity of approaches to the book (Zuckerman (1990); Newsom (2003); Schifferdecker (2008); Janzen (2009)).
7. A second-person experience, as defined by Stump, is an experience in which one person is aware of another (conscious) person and has direct and immediate personal interaction with that person (2010, 75–76).
8. Note, however, Levenson's 2004 review of Carol Newsom's *The Book of Job*, in which he criticizes her for interpreting aspects of the book in ways that would have been unlikely to be embraced by its original readers. Interestingly, Plantinga quotes Levenson to the exact opposite effect as Stump regarding historical study of the Bible (Plantinga (2000), 388, 417).
9. The most important of Plantinga's critiques, in my view, is 'the fallacy of creeping certitude' (Plantinga (2000), 402). It has been my experience that often HBC scholars do not take this seriously enough in the certainty with which they assert their theories. In addition, sometimes HBC scholars are so focused on what is behind the text that they fail to see the literary artistry, or even give an interpretation, of the final form, as Stump complains.
10. For the sake of one's physical health, it may be that average people should pay attention to the results of research in the medical field and dietetics. There may be other exceptions to the general rule.
11. Sound judgements. As has been observed many times, historical study of the Bible is not in a position to produce sound judgements (whether for or against) on such truth claims as 'Jesus is divine'.
12. At this point, one might wonder about the pastoral concern which Plantinga is apparently seeking to address. Avoiding HBC scholarship is certainly a very effective way for people of faith to prevent it from posing a challenge to their faith, though this solution is decidedly unhelpful for Jews and Christians who practise HBC. For those people of faith who have an interest in the subject and who are not inclined either to bury the difficulties or to bow to them, there is a large middle ground between ignoring the challenges of HBC or becoming an expert in it (see, e.g., Enns (2005) and Sparks (2008)). In addition, it seems to me prudent not to sweep all difficulties into one pile to be dealt with, but to note that the level of difficulty, as well as the certainty of conclusions of HBC scholarship, differs from case to case.
13. See Kasher (2004, 584–594) for various formulations of these 'rules of interpretation'.
14. The divine words, in this view, have a life of their own beyond the intention of the author, so the modified quotation of Amos can be said to be accurate, even if it does not match Amos' original meaning (Kugel (1986), 79).

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15. See, e.g., the conclusions of scholars regarding the shift in how prophecy was conceived of (Schniedewind (1995), 1–22; Sommer (1998), 174).
16. See, e.g., Cassuto (1961–1964, I, 13–17) on the unity of Genesis 1.
17. Kristeva (1980), 66; Barthes (1987), 160.
18. Literary artistry is not by any means absent from the former model of textual composition; it takes a great deal of skill and creativity to weave together citations, references, and echoes on the part of an author/editor, who in turn must be very aware that s/he is 'standing on the shoulders of giants', as it were, and owes a great deal to those giants.
19. <www.yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/SeriesPage.asp?Series=144>.
20. There would have been several such conversation partners had Stump wished to seek them out, for example, Zuckerman (1990); Newsom (2003); Schifferdecker (2008).
21. Kuyper (1959); Patrick (1976); Curtis (1979); Newell (1984); Morrow (1986); Muenchow (1989); Wolters (1990); Dailey (1993); Michel (1994); van Wolde (1994); Fox (2005).
22. See Balentine (2006), 692–701) for an accessible discussion of the alternatives. Pope's commentary (1965) does not address the issue, because it was published roughly a decade before Patrick (1976) instigated the discussion about the translation of Job's final words.
23. Thanks to Michael Rea, Michael Bergmann, Alvin Plantinga, Eleonore Stump, Trent Dougherty, and David DeJong for their comments on previous drafts of this article. Thanks also to the University of Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion discussion group for reading and discussing a previous draft.

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