CHAPTER 52

The Rise and Fall of *Quellenforschung* *

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A century ago, one of the most important modes of research in the professional study of Greco-Roman antiquity, as well as in a number of other fields, was a recently developed specialty called by its admirers (back then it had no opponents) *Quellenforschung*. By decomposing the compilatory handbooks produced by the erudition of Late Antiquity into their various sources and establishing the relations of dependence among them, the adepts of this method sought to trace back reports about a variety of aspects of the ancient world—primarily philosophy and history, but also such other fields as religion, law, and sculpture—to their earliest origins. They were convinced that they would thereby place themselves in a position to assess with greater precision the reliability of those reports and would hence be able to make claims of greater validity about those aspects of antiquity.

Nowadays, *Quellenforschung* is not dead, but it seems moribund. It has moved from the fashionable center of classical studies to the swamps at their periphery; it is practiced by relatively few scholars and seems to be ignored, if not held in suspicion or contempt, by most. Yet many of the results experts in this field obtained a century ago or more have continued to provide what has seemed, at least until recently, a solid foundation for studies in a wide variety

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1 By far the most important studies of *Quellenforschung* as a philological method are Jaap Mansfeld and David T. Runia, *Aëtiana: The Method and Intellectual Context of a Doxographer*, vol. 1, *The Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), esp. 87–106, 111–20, and vol. 3, *Studies in the Doxographical Traditions of Ancient Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 3–31. While their studies are focused especially upon Hermann Diels’s *Doxographi Graeci*, Mansfeld and Runia have also laid the foundations for study of the wider context of nineteenth-century *Quellenforschung* and have recognized its origins in earlier theology and its link with manuscript stemmatics. *Quellenforschung* in (especially German) classical scholarship is of course closely connected with *Quellenforschung* in (especially German) historiography, on which see esp. Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968; rev. ed. 1983).
of disciplines within classical scholarship and, beyond it, in related and dependent areas of research, for which classical scholarship seems itself to have functioned not only as a model but also as a source. Why this has been the case deserves analysis and reflection, and not only because of the implications of these developments for these disciplines themselves.

Quellenforschung is a very specific technique of philological scholarship that was especially fashionable in Germany (hence its name) and flourished particularly during the latter part of the nineteenth and the earlier part of the twentieth centuries; but it is only one variety of what I call here “source criticism,” the much larger and more diffuse activity of searching for possible sources and evaluating them that has flourished in many places and at many times. Modern Quellenforschung is methodologically a Siamese twin, whose two interdependent halves have rather different characteristics and genealogies.

On the one hand, Quellenforschung seeks to break apart the transmitted ancient texts that their authors went to so much trouble to weld together out of the various sources they consulted. Such an analysis, which we may term “deconstructive,” attentively examines the text for any evidence of errors or inconsistencies—self-contradictions, variations in language or style, anachronisms, and so on—which could suggest that different parts might have derived from different sources; yet at the same time it retains a conviction of the great value of that text despite its evident defects (for otherwise investigating it will lead not to analyzing its sources but just to repudiating its authority). Precisely this delicate combination of rational analysis and obstinate faith is a characteristic feature of some religious traditions that are based upon a sacred text; and it was above all in the Hebrew Bible that the Enlightenment found ample opportunity to exercise its skills in this variety of source criticism.2 By careful analysis of textual anomalies3 Baruch Spinoza was able to demonstrate that the Pentateuch could not possibly have been written by Moses, but only by someone else who had lived much later, perhaps Ezra; he thereby in effect replaced the notion of a unified text created all at once in a single act of divine afflatus with the image of a lengthy historical development involving contributions and modifications by human authors from different periods who were pursuing

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3 Deut. 31.9; Gen. 12.6; Deut. 3.14; Num. 12.3, 31.4; Deut. 33.1. See Kraus, Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments, 62. Still useful is Leo Strauss, Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grund seiner Bibelwissenschaft (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1930).