

RUSKIN'S CRITICAL METHOD AND INTENTIONS:
TOWARDS A MATERIALIST EPISTEMOLOGY

In the later 19th century there were renewed attempts at re-shaping scientific analysis in many areas. The bulk of Ruskin's later work, particularly The Laws of Fiesole (1877-78), Deucalion (1875-86), Proserpina (1875-86), Love's Meinie (1875-81), Mornings in Florence (1875-77), St. Marks Rest (1877-79), The Bible of Amiens (1880-85), The Elements of English Prosody (1880-81), with the Oxford Lectures (1870-74 and 1883-84) in the background, consisted in 'grammars' or essential studies, each one intended to be a scientific summary in its special domain.¹ Ruskin's work as a whole exhibits a consistent attitude to the acquisition and exposure of knowledge, although the nature of the late books shows him determined to express his approach yet again. It is useful to see Ruskin's work in connexion with that of two contemporaries who also consciously developed fresh methods of critical analysis.

To produce his work The Pentateuch and Joshua Critically Examined (begun about 1860) John William Colenso, Bishop of Natal, had to develop a method. Though he was by no means the first, he wanted to confront the Bible with the fruits of recent geology and to expose its claim to inerrancy. At first he was experimental. With relentless seriousness he worked out that, to accomplish the exodus, 2,000,000 Israelites and 2,000,000 animals left an area the size of Hertfordshire in the dead of night with no notice. "I do not hesitate to declare the possibility to be utterly incredible and impossible"² he concluded.

However, by Part V of the Pentateuch -- published three years later in 1865 -- Colenso had adopted a more structured method of criticism. He now realised that the Pentateuch had a multiple authorship. From the beginning he had been comparing the views of authoritative Biblical critics such as Kurz and Hengstenberg, and by Part V had discovered two pairs of authors, two 'Elohists' and two 'Jehovists'. He now delivers himself in this way:

"A glance at" the text "will show that in this section 'Elohim' is used EXCLUSIVELY (six times) viz. in 3, 6, 11, 15, 17, 17; and the same phenomenon occurs again" later "where we have 'Elohim' nine times, v. 6, 12, 17, 17, 19, 20, 22 and no 'Jehovah'. It is impossible to assign those passages to the original Elohist because they exhibit no trace of his style . . . and contain also a number of decidedly Jehovistic formulae."³