Who knows? Wikipedia, Teaching and Research

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[This is an earlier, more detailed draft of an article submitted to SBL FORUM (www.sbl-site.org) in October 2006. I found out very late in the process that articles on the SBL Forum are limited in length, so I had to omit quite a bit of material, including the appendix.]

Anecdotal evidence, personal experience, and the occasional news story would all seem to that students, particularly in the ‘first world’, are increasingly using Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) as a source of information. Given the radical nature of the concept of the Wikipedia project, it would therefore seem opportune to discuss some of the challenges and opportunities for teaching and research in our field.

1. The Wikipedia Phenomenon

Wikipedia is a free, internet-based encyclopedia which is written by its own users: it is a "free encyclopedia that anyone can edit". The term, should you wonder about that, derives from computer jargon: a wiki is a “type of website that allows the visitors themselves to easily add, remove and otherwise edit and change some available content." Set up in early 2001, Wikipedia now exists in the form of over 150 independent projects in as many languages, the largest being English, German, Polish, French, Japanese, Dutch and Italian (in that order). Anyone with computer and internet access can contribute: no special software is required on the part of the user (the internet browser will do), and there is no need to learn even a mildly complicated language like HTML – a few markup details to create section headings, bold text etc. are quickly learned and easily accessible on the user interface. As such, it is a good example of the recent trend to new levels of interactivity and collaboration on the web, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as 'Web 2.0' (though that term might be more of a marketing term than anything else).

The concept of the Wikipedia is therefore not to be confused with the much more traditional academic notion of a potentially free online encyclopedia such as the popular Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu). True, the SEP is free, available online, and was created specifically to allow for cost-effective updating, but that is where similarities end: the SEP otherwise follows standard academic conventions of inviting contributions from specialist authors, offering a professional editorial process, employing the usual copyright provisions, etc. Wikipedia, on the other hand, has dispensed entirely with the notion of the academic expert as the sole author, pushes the notion of collaboration of users/authors to its limits, and operates under a GNU Free Documentation Licence, thus allowing anyone to make use of the data generated.

Major Wikipedia projects have seen steady growth in the last three or four years. In January 2003, two years after its inception, the English Wikipedia project (hereafter: Wikipedia [en], http://en.wikipedia.org) had about 100,000 articles. Since then, the number of articles has roughly doubled every twelve months. To date (late
September 2006), Wikipedia (en) offers more than 1,400,000 articles. Of course, numbers can be deceptive: Wikipedia articles range from one or two sentences (e.g. 'Obed') to 9,000 words ('Jesus') and more; Wikipedia is stronger in some areas (e.g. computing) than others, and there are a large number of articles on topics that a traditional encyclopedia would not offer, in part also because it integrates news, a dictionary, and more. Nevertheless, the considerable growth rate of Wikipedia gives some indication of the vitality of this project, which is directly related to its popularity: a major search engine ranks Wikipedia as 17th on their list of the 500 most popular websites. Quite extraordinary for a project based almost entirely on the work of volunteers (not to mention funded by donations). It is true of course that there is a fairly small group of 'hardcore' writers, as opposed to thousands of occasional contributors. Their respective significance is disputed (much of it depends on how one defines the terms of the comparison), but then, the sociology of the Wikipedia community is necessarily a complex matter.

'In the beginning', users could edit any contribution as they saw fit, without any real restrictions; nor was there much guidance, let alone policies in place. This has increasingly changed; today, there are extensive policies in place, though they only seem to come into play in case of conflict. Policies include the commitment to writing from a neutral point of view (NPOV in wiki-speak); not to offer original research but to summarize diverse points of view; and to include references to reputable sources. Individual contributions conform to those policies to varying degrees. Some of us will no doubt wonder whether the NPOV policy in particular is not a trifle naive. While Wikipedia project writers clarify that the intention is not to achieve objectivity, and that a neutral point of view is still a point of view itself, we cannot get away from the fact that neutrality (never mind objectivity) is inevitably impossible to achieve. This is so in principle, but even more so in practice, given the collaborative writing style of the Wikipedia project. In my view, the NPOV policy effectively creates vagueness and a false sense of objectivity, however much Wikipedia protests that objectivity is not the aim. Having said that, a collaborative and open project like Wikipedia will have a hard time finding a better policy to limit constant in-fighting about the particular direction that certain articles may take.

As Wikipedia's popularity increased, user accounts were created, allowing people to identify themselves in some way. Following the Seigenthaler controversy in 2005, Wikipedia (en) began to require users to create an account before they could create new contributions; more recently, Wikipedia (en) has started to restrict certain pages from alteration by anyone with an account that is less than four days old (such as the entry on 'Jesus'). Roughly during the same period, there has also been a concerted effort to get users/writers for Wikipedia to offer sources for their material; this has met with varying success. Other Wikipedia projects (such as the German language project; hereafter: Wikipedia [de]; http://de.wikipedia.org) have not necessarily followed the example of Wikipedia (en), perhaps because they have a smaller user base at present. In general, it would appear that the volunteer Wikipedia administrators increasingly monitor changes. Since each version is logged and stored, changes can easily be reversed; and while the content is dynamic and may change at any time, users can cite and view a particular entry at a particular moment in its history. Wikipedia thus includes its own archive; although often
overlooked (getting students \textit{and} certain colleagues to reference this accurately is an uphill struggle), this function is of some importance for the academic context since it allows the user to refer to the precise version of the article that was actually consulted.

2. Assessing relevant articles

The first question that most academics ask of Wikipedia is whether the quality of relevant articles is adequate. While I will have more to say about this in general later on (see the comments on the \textit{Nature} controversy in the next section),\textsuperscript{28} it seems sensible to look at this from the point of view of our field. What will students in biblical studies tend to see when they use Wikipedia material?

Of course, evaluating Wikipedia properly would require a rather comprehensive, not to mention tedious study, which I do not wish to undertake. Instead, I have looked at a small selection of articles which I chose more or less at random, based on whether they would seem representative of the kinds of articles one might expect to see in an encyclopedia of use for biblical studies. Since Wikipedia projects in different languages are, in principle, developed independently of each other, it would also seem sensible to compare some of them. For reasons of time, I restricted this to the two largest projects, that is, the English and German Wikipedia, Wikipedia (en) and Wikipedia (de). A detailed discussion of these eight examples follows in the appendix further below. At this point, I would like to summarize my observations as follows:

1. While the quality of material is uneven, is has to be said that there are some appropriate and at times quite informative articles. I have not found any really outrageous errors or howlers, though there are many minor errors. However, the problem often lies not so much in what is said than in what is not said at all, or what is said in inappropriate proportions.

2. Most articles tend to be short and are best compared with shorter Bible dictionaries\textsuperscript{29} rather than a larger one-volume Bible dictionary.\textsuperscript{30} There are exceptions, though: some articles are substantial, even though they are often rather descriptive. In part, this is also due to an unresolved conflict in the Wikipedia concept: there is no agreement as to what depth and breadth one should aim for in writing an article. Also: Wikipedia is conceptually a general encyclopedia, not a Bible dictionary. The point of comparison is thus hard to define.

3. There is a tendency to list information (which is sometimes less than useful) rather than discuss material in its context, which is probably encouraged by the hyperlinked character of this kind of an encyclopedia.

4. The 'tone' of articles in different Wikipedia projects can differ at times. For example, I frequently find the style of writing in relevant Wikipedia (de) articles more mature or sophisticated than in Wikipedia (en) articles. Yet I often get a disappointing sense of \textit{déjà vu} when reading certain Wikipedia articles, both
in English and in German: many remind me of student essays. This is both problematic (mistakes are inevitable, both by commission and omission, and one sometimes gets a rather limited view) and potentially useful; after all, students learn from each other as well as from their teachers. – One may also find that the tone or direction changes over time (though all of this would need to be studied and observed more systematically than I have been able to do): a year or 18 months ago, I had the clear impression that relevant articles in Wikipedia (en) often tended towards a more conservative theological agenda; I would not necessarily say that today. In contrast, Wikipedia (de) did not then seem to share that orientation (evangelicals would no doubt tend to see it as 'liberal'). In many ways, both projects reflect what is prevalent in a given context, or what might be considered 'mainstream' in that particular environment.

(5) Referencing practices vary wildly. Both Wikipedia (de) and (en) have a policy in place which requires that articles offer references, and Wikipedia (en) in particular makes more of an effort to encourage this. In practice, references are often absent from articles in our field. But then, common Bible dictionaries do not offer references either. Where they do exist, references tend to be to web-based sources of doubtful quality, and often to out-of-date public domain sources (Nave's Topical Bible and the like). Relevant Wikipedia (de) articles often do not have references either, but they tend to have appropriate bibliographies for books in print, though they are often quite specialized and not easily accessible unless one finds a good theological library. Curiously, neither Wikipedia (de) nor (en) tend to offer references to subject-specific metasites like Mark Goodacre's NTGateway.com.

(6) Some articles start off as copies of material from venerable dictionaries now in the public domain (Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913; Jewish Encyclopedia of 1901-1906; etc.). This can lead to stagnation in the development of articles; cf. the article on Philo of Alexandria in Wikipedia (en).

(7) Studying the history of the development of an article can be revealing in a number of ways. For example, why did the 'Biblical Covenant' article in Wikipedia (en) begin as recently as January 2005? On the other hand, other articles began as a short, simple statement of a few sentences, and blossomed into a useful article within a year or two.

(8) Some subjects find disappointingly little attention. For example, Wikipedia readers will not find much on feminist approaches to the Bible (a little more in the German project than in the English), which is probably related to the demographics of users/writers on both projects. As with everything, there is a (hidden) gender aspect to Wikipedia articles and their focus. A gender analysis of wikipedia projects would be interesting, but I have not yet come across any research into this.

(9) Since many articles in our field have a fairly small user/writer base, the element of community control over the content of such material is often quite
small. Sometimes it can take rather long for errors or even vandalism to get noticed and changed.

3. Use and Abuse

Reasons for the increasing popularity of Wikipedia among students are not hard to fathom: it is free; available online; often written in a simple and straightforward language; and it makes its content easily accessible via its own search engine – though searching it with good search engines like www.google.com tends to give better results. One might well speculate on deeper reasons for the popularity of Wikipedia: some will no doubt like the anarchic principle of the project. Be that as it may, some academics now take this phenomenon seriously enough to circulate advice to students on the appropriate use of Wikipedia; some even prohibit the use of Wikipedia altogether. In fact, reactions to student use have become so strong that Jimmy Wales, the founder of the Wikipedia project, recently seemed compelled to indicate that "he wants to get the message out to college students that they shouldn't use it for class projects or serious research."31

At first, this assertion seems to stand in curious contrast to Wikipedia's proud reference to the findings of a study published last year in Nature which suggests that the Encyclopedia Britannica, the gold standard of the traditional encyclopedia, makes as many mistakes as Wikipedia (en) does. Some forty-two expert reviewers, Nature stated, "had picked up errors (the great majority of them minor) at a rate of about three per online Britannica item and about four per Wikipedia item."32 EB eventually rose to the challenge and delivered a furious response – hardly surprising given that the EB has an online version, which is available for a fairly steep annual subscription fee.33 This is not the place to evaluate that debate,34 but it is important to mention it here nevertheless, for it highlights the first issue with public perceptions of Wikipedia that I wish to raise here: reliability. Though based on Wikipedia natural science articles, Nature’s study is often referred to as an authority on Wikipedia in all fields of study. However, the uneven and dynamic nature of Wikipedia projects means that the reliability of Wikipedia articles varies considerably depending on the particular field of study, probably exacerbated by the high likelihood that theology / religion / Bible will get more than its fair share of, shall we say, highly-strung Wikipedia users, which might skew the picture further.

While the claims made in Nature might therefore not be all that relevant to our field, the debate that followed the Nature article did usefully highlight a number of points about the challenge posed by the Wikipedia projects: experts vs amateur; academic culture vs. Wikipedia culture; etc. I will discuss some of these further below. Before I do this, I would seem opportune though to consider a range of other reactions to the use of Wikipedia in academia. Most of these are negative, but that probably relates to the nature of gathering my 'data'.35 Based on a brief and non-systematic review of internet sources, as well as anecdotal evidence, it seems to me that academics tend to see Wikipedia negatively for a range of reasons, including the following:36

Picking up on the findings of the Nature story again, academics often see Wikipedia as inaccurate, perhaps quite instinctively so because it is not written by experts (i.e.,
themselves). In Wikipedia, anyone can write anything they like, and the strange mixture of anarchy and complaints-bureaucracy in Wikipedia today may well mean that it takes many months before a blatant error or outrageous bias is corrected. However, this involves much broader questions: how do users understand and use sources; what constitutes an 'authority'; and how do we use an 'authoritative source'?

One might argue that the use of Wikipedia without an appropriately critical attitude is more likely to lead to questionable student work than, say, consulting a professional encyclopedia with a similarly uncritical attitude. This is an unhelpful shortcut, though: the fundamental problem is the lack of criticality. Some criticism of Wikipedia is really about our concerns about how students generally handle material in so-called information societies. This also relates to our attitudes to research based on internet resources, and indeed students' reading habits, as the current generation in the 'first world' is increasingly shaped by (computer) screens rather than books. Some studies suggest that reading material on a computer screen, and in particular reading hyperlinked internet resources, tends to foster bad research habits: web users tend to skim over texts on the internet rather than read them in-depth. Once again, this is a broader issue rather than a problem with Wikipedia as such. Students in the 'first world' who have grown up in the digital age are highly likely to use Wikipedia as a matter of course. (It is equally likely, I think, that many of their academic teachers will be suspicious or concerned in part because we did not grow up in the same environment.) Yet such matter-of-fact use of electronic resources by students does not imply competence in an educationally meaningful sense: a number of recent studies indicate that students' use of technology is often uncritical and naive. This is, in my view, the main reason why we should adopt a pragmatic attitude to the use of Wikipedia which tries to make positive use of it as a teaching tool rather than fret about its potential lack of accuracy.

Given the fact that there are at least some good Wikipedia articles, it seems unlikely that a blanket 'ban' on using Wikipedia, as some academic teachers practice it, will be all that effective: we may be able to enforce it, but it is more likely to lead to resentment rather than understanding, which is detrimental to the entire point of education. In any case, one should not get too hot under the collar about the inevitable abuse of Wikipedia: less accomplished students will always make mistakes regardless of what their teachers told them: not listening to one's teacher is the prerogative of students. As with other electronic resources, Wikipedia no doubt invites certain students to succumb to the 'copy and paste' temptation (but then, given that biblical scholars are trained in textual and source criticism, such plagiarism is usually not difficult to detect). Yet Wikipedia is by no means the cause for what some perceive as a rise of plagiarism among students: it is part of a broader phenomenon. For a number of reasons related to cultural changes, unacknowledged use of sources may well be on the increase, whether out of ignorance or malice. But this is a general issue, not a Wikipedia one.

Instead of banning the use of Wikipedia, it would seem preferable to train students (and, dare I say it, some teaching staff as well) in the appropriate use of Wikipedia simply as part of training in the use of sources in general. Such student training
should include not just obvious observations on the nature of Wikipedia, the unevenness of articles derived from it, etc., but also on the fact that Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, i.e. a tertiary source (something that the Wikipedia project itself stresses) which should therefore primarily be used as one initial point of contact to seek information. In other words, Wikipedia articles may have their place in a bibliography, but not usually in a citation.42

Working with Wikipedia as an example of a new media source serves as a good example of what sources are, and may well contribute to training in critical thinking.43 It could therefore become a tool to illustrate how history (and indeed knowledge) is a contested process; how and why knowledge is power; and so on. Properly managed, Wikipedia could therefore serve not just as source for information (however problematic at times), but also as part of an effective educational strategy to foster critical thinking as a vital (and transferable) academic skill. Contributing to Wikipedia articles could become part of a learning exercise, which would also help improve Wikipedia itself.

The more adventurous and technologically adept among us might also want to explore the use of wiki software itself (freely available), for example as an additional tool for creating virtual learning environments. Wiki software enables us not just to create our own wiki projects,44 but, more to the point, use wikis as creative and collaborative writing tools.45 Research in this area shows that this is beginning to happen in all sorts of ways, and as educational specialists begin to analyze this, one should quickly be able to avoid common pitfalls: once again, no need to reinvent the wheel.46

A fundamentally positive attitude towards Wikipedia projects does not preclude notes of concern, though. A recent article by the historian, Roy Rosenzweig, sounds such notes of caution.47 Concerns also include the particularly 'presentist' nature of articles in Wikipedia: by its very nature, Wikipedia work is driven by day-to-day issues. Of course, all history writing is driven by contemporary concerns, but this can be much more stark in Wikipedia articles than in traditional (academic) work. For example, while the Wikipedia (en) article on Genesis is largely a descriptive summary, it offers a substantially longer, broadly hermeneutical introduction than, say, the article on Matthew's Gospel. Might that be due to the creationism debate in North America? Also, there is an article on 'The Bible and Homosexuality', but nothing on sexuality in general (discounting a less than helpful piece on 'Sex in the Bible'). Is that because of an implicit understanding that only those who 'deviate from the norm' need to be discussed here? Further critical concerns include the observation that Wikipedia writing has a tendency towards 'listmania'; it tends to conceive of knowledge not as making connections, but as a series of 'facts', an accumulation of bits of information. Teaching with Wikipedia must actively work against this tendency.

A further concern is that, for the foreseeable future, much work in Wikipedia will not be systematic enough to offer a good overview; it will continue to have large gaps, and as literary theory has taught us, gaps are just as (if not more) important than everything else. Related to this is the problem of community control, which is
supposed to watch over misinformation and blatant bias. Articles in their early stages of construction, especially those on topics which are not popular, are less likely to benefit from this practice.

Another concern is that most administrators, and indeed many contributors, tend to be technology-savvy, English-speaking people in ‘first world’ countries. Wikipedia may be free and available anywhere in the world, but it is likely to reflect a point of view that relates to this key user group.

The fundamental concept of doing away with the 'expert view' is both Wikipedias's strength and its weakness. It is strength because that is what allows it to flourish and grow quickly. Yet it is also its weakness because it encourages what one might want to call 'the revenge of the amateur': anyone with a grudge against 'the experts' (teachers, pastors, whatever) can muck about on Wikipedia, and admire his or her results online. In its worst form, Wikipedia is the equivalent of a vanity press. The problem of the internet in general is magnified here: anyone can publish whatever they wish, wallowing in seeing their views online, for the whole world to see. Of course, in most cases seriously problematic views will quickly be edited out of Wikipedia, but the principle remains. Frequent cases of mostly infantile vandalism (defacing article with nonsense, swearwords, etc.: "hey look, I wrote a dirty word on the internet!") are another instance of this.

Yet another concern is the possibility for abuse of Wikipedia to create commercial or party-political advantages. Some people in business (especially marketing) speak quite openly about the possibilities that Wikipedia offers to them. In other words, there are and there will be attempts to manipulate Wikipedia to sell a certain product. In many areas, there are and hopefully will continue to be a sufficiently large number of vigilant people infused with the anarchic spirit of Wikipedia to prevent this from getting out of hand. One could also see this as a problem for political affairs, and I suspect that some observers are already making plans on how to study how Wikipedia will be used (and abused) in the run-up to the next presidential elections in the USA. Theologically, too, one could well see how concerted efforts could be made to find enough people to invest sufficient time to try and impose a certain theological slant on key articles.

4. Writing for Wikipedia Ourselves?

Some time ago, I e-mailed a colleague (a specialist in a field beyond my expertise), requesting his opinion on a particular Wikipedia article. He replied, noting a couple of minor mistakes, but rather than spending a few minutes correcting those errors in article, simply complained generally about the lack of accuracy in Wikipedia. Clearly, the thought of making those changes just did not occur to him.

So: would the answer to some of Wikipedia's problems be more active involvement by the academic community? At first sight, this is an attractive proposition; yet those who have in fact written for Wikipedia will find that a number of challenges emerge from such practice.
For starters, writing for Wikipedia may be detrimental to our job prospects: our contributions are effectively anonymous and, more importantly, not subject to peer-review; therefore, they can hardly count in job applications, research assessment exercises, or tenure processes. It might help beef up a teaching experience portfolio, but it is not going to contribute to the all-important research side of our CV.

More problems result from a culture clash: much of our knowledge of how to work the system, how to write and publish, is just not applicable. The rules of academic and subject-specific rhetoric and logic do not necessarily work here. The more popular the topic that I would want to write on, the more likely it is that I will have to negotiate and discuss the issue with a variety of people. Discussions about fundamental issues can be protracted, frustrating, and sometimes ill-tempered: as with e-mail and other forms of text-only electronic communication, the absence of body language, the lack of intonation in speech, etc., often leads to inadvertent miscommunications. One does not always want to discuss what feels like Remedial Hermeneutics 001 at Doonesbury’s Walden College. On the other hand, it is precisely such a democratic debate that is a positive challenge for academics – for all their limitations and faults, Wikipedia projects are in the end at least as democratic as the average ‘first-world’ state.

Writing for Wikipedia does raise yet more fundamental issues which space does not permit me to develop here. Who creates knowledge? In fact, what constitutes knowledge? How do individual and collective processes of knowledge-creation work and interact? If history, for example, as Roy Rosenzweig has argued, is a ‘deeply individualistic craft’, is it actually possible to write complex, larger arguments in this amorphous virtual collective? How do we understand the needs of popular versus academic knowledge? Is the author-less and owner-less work of Wikipedia ultimately commensurate with academic culture and practice? To what extent is the challenge to academic culture desirable?

5. Appendix: Discussion of Eight Articles in Wikipedia (en) and (de)

Eight article were chosen as representing relevant entries for the field of Biblical Studies, namely:

**Covenant**: as a central biblical concept.
**Cyrus**: as an example of a fairly important figure in the Ancient Near East.
**Feminist interpretation**: not only a fairly recent approach to studying scripture, but also one which invites doctrinal controversy and hence possibly diverse interests among users/writers.
**Haggai**: as a minor ‘book’ of the Hebrew Bible.
**Philo of Alexandria**: as a person of importance in early Judaism and Christianity.
**Redaction criticism**: an established historical-critical tool.
**Two-source hypothesis**: as an example of a well-known, standard topic.

**Covenant**: the article ‘Biblical covenant’ in Wikipedia (en) sports a prominent warning note that this article ‘is in need of attention from an expert on the subject’ –
though this simply means that at least one user felt that such a standardised warning is necessary; many other articles would clearly also need some revision in this light, but do not necessarily sport such a warning. The treatment of the term is short: there is an introductory paragraph which defines that term very broadly, followed by a number of short sections on the covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc., up to the 'New Covenant (Christian View)'. Each of these sections lists basic characteristics in bullet-point form. There is no real analysis or discussion of the concepts. Four online links are provided, all of which are to traditional, conservative websites (Nave's Topical Bible, etc.). No print literature is referred to. There is an additional link to a Wikipedia (en) entry on 'Covenant Theology', which discusses mostly conservative evangelical doctrine. The 'Biblical covenant' article appears to have started as recently as February 2005, substantially with much the same content as today. On the whole, the article offers little more than what one would find in a short Bible dictionary.

Wikipedia (de) has two somewhat more in-depth, though still fairly short articles for this topic ('Bund [Altes Testament]' and 'Bund [Neues Testament]'). The OT article offers a concise, analytical definition in two paragraphs, followed by a useful discussion which runs through basic aspects throughout the OT and its reception. While there is just one weblink (though this turns out to be a useful, informed article at www.buber.de, reflecting a Jewish-Christian dialogue context and concern), there is also a long bibliography of German works in print, apparently put together by someone who is familiar with German theological abbreviations for journals and the like (I wonder how many readers will be, though). The NT article is a single short paragraph which is little more than a reference to Mt 26:26. The OT article started off as a simple, apparently single-paragraph, faith-based assertion that 'God established a covenant with his people...', with reference to Ex 19:5), the NT article began at the same time but was never really developed. In sum, then, these two articles are a little better than their English counterpart, but not much.

*Cyrus* (i.e. Cyrus II): the Wikipedia (en) article is of considerable length, in some respects quite informative, and reasonably well documented. It discusses the name, dynasty, major military campaigns, death and legacy. Weblinks are useful, and some print literature is cited, though it is mostly out of date. The focus of the article is on traditional 'historical facts' as opposed to placing Cyrus in his context. For example, although mention is made of the Cyrus cylinder and its broader significance, this is not explored, although there is some debate about this matter in the 'Talk' pages. The biblical significance of Cyrus is limited to a single paragraph: 'Before leaving Babylon, Cyrus also freed the Israelites by allowing them to return to their native land, effectively ending the Babylonian captivity. The return of the exiles reinforced the Jewish population in their homeland, which had been waning since the start of the Babylonian rule.' A reference to the Internet Ancient History Sourcebook is provided, which offers the text of the Cyrus Decree as well as Ezra 1, 1-8. The article seems to have benefitted from the attention of contributors interested the history of Iran / Mesopotamia. It started in October 2004 with a fairly substantial contribution, and has developed quite steadily ever since.
The Wikipedia (de) contribution is considerably shorter: it explores the name, mentions basic historical data, but also has a few paragraphs on biblical relevance in the form of references to the usual texts (2 Chr 36:22; Ezra 1:1; Is 44, 45; Dan 6). There is one reference to the article on Cyrus in the *Encyclopedia Iranica* (1993), which is available online, as well as a few weblinks. The article started in November 2003 with a short paragraph, and has since seen considerable expansion.

On the whole, both the English and German article are a little better than what one finds in a short Bible dictionary, though the connections with biblical material have not been explored enough – but then, since this is a general encyclopedia, one should not expect to find a specific focus on the Bible.

*Feminist interpretation*: in Wikipedia (en), one finds very little on this topic. There is nothing under 'feminist interpretation' or similar expressions. Searching for 'feminist theology', one gets redirected to the very broad, and not terribly informative category of 'religious feminism' (subcategory of 'feminism'). Indirectly, some perspectives may be gleaned from a fairly long article on 'God and gender', though this is badly in need of some editing to merge formerly separate articles properly. However, the tone of the discussion is fairly neutral and not marred by bitter discussions over doctrinal matters. The lack of information on feminist interpretation, and feminist theology in general, seems a little surprising at first. One wonders though whether this is not related to the problem of limited user participation: although it is impossible to determine this, there is a widespread assumption that many contributors, particularly for topics in religious studies, are male.

The picture is only slightly better in Wikipedia (de). There is no article on feminist interpretation or exegesis (a cross-reference to 'Feministische Exegese' is listed in the 'Biblische Exegese' essay, but it has not been written yet), but there are least the beginnings of a reasonably good article on 'Feministische Theologie', which includes some reflections on biblical interpretation. There is only one weblink, and a single reference to a book – somewhat ironically, a book written by a man.

Clearly both Wikipedia (en) and (de) are inadequate on this topic.

*Haggai*: there are two short paragraphs in the Wikipedia (en) entry on Haggai, which are derived from *Easton's Bible Dictionary* of 1897. The article is explicitly highlighted, as is typical for articles in their early stages of development, as a 'stub' that needs expanding. There are no weblinks, and there is no bibliography.

Again, Wikipedia (de) is hardly better, though it does at least offer a rudimentary structure for Haggai, and a reference to Hans-Walter Wolff's article on Haggai in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* – not that this will help the ordinary user much.

Again, both the German and the English are roughly equivalent to what one might find in a pocket dictionary for biblical studies.
*Matthew: the Wikipedia (en) entry on the "Gospel of Matthew" is fairly long.\textsuperscript{67} Some of this length is however created by lists. This includes a list of 'detailed contents' which contains 76 pericope titles, mostly with cross-links to other Wikipedia articles on those pericopes, which are not necessarily discussed from the point of Mt: the link from Mt 3:1-12, for example, is to the general article on "John the Baptist". An "overview" section offers a structure of Mt, but no indication is given as to the provenance of this particular structure, nor the importance of the debate about it. A further section on "authorship" discusses a limited range of views in five paragraphs, much of which is dominated by a summary of the synoptic problem, which does not seem to fit very well here. Only H. N. Ridderbos and F. W. Beare are mentioned as 'critical biblical scholars' who disagree with the traditional identification of the author with St. Matthew, the Evangelist, which seems a little limited. A further section on dating the gospel lists a range of views, but with little insight into why different dates have been proposed. Another section discusses theories on the possibility that Mt was originally written in Aramaic, and there is a short section on the "theology of canonical Matthew", much of which concentrates on the expression 'kingdom of heaven / basileia ouranos' (sic). Two short examples of "Islamic views" are given, which turn out to have been taken from a private apologetic website on geocities.com. Various links to online versions of Mt, as well as a few links to relevant websites (again not including standard academic sites like the NTGateway.com) complete the article. – Apart from several minor errors, the article shows several gaps: there is nothing on Mt's narrative structure; not enough on Mt's particular characteristics; there is no serious bibliography/referencing.

The German article at Wikipedia (de) is of similar length, but the bulk is once again created by lists.\textsuperscript{68} There is a short section on authorship which ends with a perhaps overly confident assertion: "Allgemein wird angenommen, dass das Matthäusevangelium dem syrischen Urchristentum zuzurechnen ist." The following section on dating is very short, and I wonder whether it is wise to reduce the problem of dating to the two questions about the temple destruction as vaticinium ex eventu (or not), and whether Jesus foresaw the founding of the church. A further short section mentions basic characteristics of Mt. A long list of different pericopes follows, many of which are linked to separate Wikipedia (de) articles. Similiar in nature to the English Wikipedia contribution on Mt, this does not help much to work out Mt's gospel but tends to aid a kind of gospel harmony understanding. The article ends with a considerable bibliography to books on Mt, and a few weblinks. – On the whole, the article is stylistically better written than the English contribution, though it offers little more information, apart from its useful bibliography.

*Philo of Alexandria: apart from the introduction, which appears to have been written afresh, this long Wikipedia (en)\textsuperscript{69} article is, in essence, a slimmed down version of the online text of the venerable Jewish Encyclopedia entry (1901-1906) – including some of the spelling mistakes left by the OCR process in the online version (particularly evident in certain Greek phrases).\textsuperscript{70} In fact, the version history of the Philo entry in Wikipedia (en) shows that it began life as a copy of the JE article (April 2003), and while there has been some editorial work on it since, and some discussion about modernising its language and tone, it is still essentially a version of a 100-year old article. This is not, however, explicitly pointed out. There are cross-
links to other Wikipedia (en) articles on 'Philo's views on God' and 'Philo's Works' (both culled from the same JE article), 'Pseudo-Philo' and 'Philosophy', as well as a few external links. There is no bibliography, even though there are occasional references (taken over from the JE article) to 19th century literature.

In contrast, the Wikipedia (de) article, which is somewhat shorter, seems to have been written from scratch. It began its life as four simple sentences in January 2004; in June 2005, several reasonable paragraphs about his philosophical and exegetical practices were added, as well as a list of works (by a user who identifies himself as a doctoral candidate in theology); this forms the basis of today's version. Occasionally, unusual words like "Katenenhandschriften" occur, which are not likely to help students at an introductory level. The article includes a section on his life and family; on "Philo zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus" (not a happy way of putting it, I would have thought); a list of his works; and several paragraphs on allegorical interpretation, major theological and philosophical themes, and so on. There is a good list of relevant primary and secondary literature, as well as weblinks. However, the article is not referenced.

On the whole, both the English and the German article offer useful information, though (not surprisingly) little in respect of Philo's relevance for early Christianity. While not quite at the level of a professional article, the German contribution in particular is a useful introduction. The English article raises broader questions in respect of the value of making use of scholarship that is rather dated – in this case, without even telling the reader.

*Redaction criticism:* the short Wikipedia (en) article begins by stating that redaction criticism is "also called Redaktionsgeschichte, Kompositionsgeschichte, or Redaktionstheologie". I wonder whether these terms are really synonymous, but perhaps more importantly, what would a non-German reader might make of these terms? The article is then divided into five sections. "What is redaction criticism" offers a one-paragraph definition, describing it as a "recent [sic] critical method", mostly in contrast to form criticism. There is no indication though how 'recent' redaction criticism might be; nor is there a reference to the usual names (e.g. Bornkamm or Marxsen for NT redaction criticism). The paragraph also contains the strange claim that form criticism is the "child discipline" of redaction criticism. However, this turns out to be random vandalism: the article did originally read 'parent discipline'. (It is noteworthy though that this change took place more than a month ago, and has not since been corrected.) Of course, one could still argue whether the phrase 'parent discipline' is all that appropriate, especially since it is not explained. A further paragraph lists how "a modern Redaction Critic detects editorial activity", listing repetitions, comparisons of parallel accounts, and vocabulary / style of a writer as indicators of redaction. A few "pros and cons" are listed in subsequent sections. There are no examples, no bibliography, nor any references apart from a link to the article "Biblical Criticism". On the whole, the article gives the impression of having been written by a student who has some familiarity with the topic, but not enough experience to write a truly informative article (note for example the absence of any real exploration of links to source and form criticism; or the implicit focus on NT redaction criticism). Curiously, the article was only started about a year ago, and has
since only seen minor changes. One could speculate about the reasons for the disappointing quality and lack of attention give to this entry: is it because it is of minor significance to both conservative and 'postmodern' readers?

There are two related Wikipedia (de) entries: "Redaktionskritik" and "Redaktionsgeschichte". Both entries are fairly short, and seem to overlap a lot. (1) "Redaktionsgeschichte" consists of a single paragraph which focuses mostly on the origins of (NT) redaction criticism, mentioning Marxsen, Bornkamm, and Conzelmann. There are several cross-links to other topics (including "Redaktionskritik"), and about ten print works, both classics and contemporary introductions to redaction criticism. (2) The article "Redaktionskritik" is of similar length, but focuses less on the history of redaction criticism and more on how one might go about practising it: it offers several standard concepts in a bullet-point list. The focus is once again on the NT. There is no bibliography, and there are no examples. One wonders why these two entries have not been amalgamated. On the whole, though, the articles are comparable to entries in a short Bible dictionary. Once again, the articles themselves as well as the associated 'discussion' pages would seem to indicate that this is the work of fairly well informed students, somewhat more advanced than the article in Wikipedia (en).

*Two-source hypothesis:* Wikipedia (en) has just four paragraphs on this topic in an article that is dominated by the historical development of the 2SH, and some prominent names of proponents and critics. There is the usual kind of 2SH diagramme, and there are links to other relevant Wikipedia articles (e.g. 'synoptic problem' or 'Markan priority'), but they are not well integrated into the text of the article: the connections are not obvious. While reference to the basic constituent parts of the 2SH is made (i.e. Q and Markan priority), only the reference to Q is clear, whereas in most places where one would expect a hyperlink to 'Markan priority', there is instead a link to 'Gospel of Mark', which is not helpful. The article offers few references (and none to 'standard' print sources, nor indeed standard internet sources like Mark Goodacre's NT Gateway, http://www.ntgateway.com). There is a curiously placed quotation by the modern historian, David Hackett Fischer, attempting to show that the Church Fathers ought to be listened to more since they were closer to the events in question. Style, focus, lack of useful sources etc. all point to the article having been written by a number of well-meaning but not terribly well informed amateurs (in this case: perhaps conservative theology students, given the tone of the piece). This is in spite of the fact that the entry was actually started with four short but clear sentences by Stephen C. Carlson (in December 2002), who is quite familiar with the synoptic problem.

In comparison, the Wikipedia (de) article seems rather more appropriate and informative: it explains in short, bullet-point style the main reasons why the 2SH was developed, and offers the usual diagramme to illustrate the 2SH (in its modified form, including special sources of Mt and Lk). The article points to variations on the 2SH, as well main criticisms and some of the fundamental weaknesses that critics point out (e.g. minor agreements). There are cross-references to related topics (e.g. 'synoptic problem') and a list of about ten appropriate books in print, as well as good webresources. As usual, one could quibble with some aspects of the discussion
(e.g. the wording in the illustration: *abschreiben* is hardly the right word for how Mt relates to Mk), and one would like to see this article expanded, but on the whole, it does offer a reasonable, short overview, and points the user in helpful directions for further research.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for a cautiously positive attitude to the use of Wikipedia material, in part because of the strengths of these projects, but also for pragmatic reasons. But this should not stop us from reflecting on the potentially problematic consequences of the Wikipedia concept and its practices. Perhaps this article can serve as a springboard for further discussion.

Of course, much of what I said, especially at the end of the last two sections, must remain speculative. The use of the web as a research tool, and (more specifically) the use of Wikipedia, are still in their infancy, and we will just have to think on our feet as things progress. Five years ago, Wikipedia was not an issue for us, and fifteen years ago, the internet was not either. In five years’ time, other projects might supercede Wikipedia; for example, *citizendium.org*, which is initially to be based on Wikipedia (en) content, but then re-introduces the concept of ‘the expert’ as the editor.

After all, who knows?

Endnotes

1. The first part of the title of this article ('Who knows?') has been shamelessly appropriated from Simon Waldman's article in *The Guardian*, October 26, 2004 (online at: [http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/news/0,12597,1335892,00.html](http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/news/0,12597,1335892,00.html), accessed October 1, 2006)


Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,  


22. Malicious misinformation was included in the biography of John Seigenthaler Sr.,  
a journalist and former staff member in the Kennedy administration. Seigenthaler  
took this extremely seriously and went public with his criticism of the Wikipedia  
project, as a result of which project managers took the unprecedented step of  
removing the offending versions from the archives of the server. See: Wikipedia  
contributors, "John Seigenthaler Sr. Wikipedia biography controversy,"  
Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,  

23. Johnson, Bobbie, "Wikipedia bans anonymous contributors to prevent libel",  
The Guardian (Dec 8, 2005),  
http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,1661693,00.html (Accessed December 9, 2005).


25. Wikipedia contributors, "Jesus,"  
Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,  

26. For instance, the following link will show the entry on the SBL as created on  
October 21, 2005 at 13h05:  

27. Rather superior to the otherwise useful Internet Archive (or 'Way Back Machine'):  
http://www.archive.org/web/web.php

28. Also helpful is the recent, brief evaluation of historical, and in particular  
biographical information in: Rosenzweig, Roy. "Can History Be Open Source?  
Wikipedia and the Future of the Past."  


33. Links to the relevant documents about this controversy, from both *Nature* and *Encyclopedia Britannica*, may be found at: [http://www.nature.com/nature/britannica/index.html](http://www.nature.com/nature/britannica/index.html) (Accessed Sept. 29, 2006).

34. There is a useful article in *The New Yorker* which explores some avenues of further thinking in this regard: Schiff, Stacy. "Know It All", *The New Yorker*, 2006-07-31. [http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060731fa_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060731fa_fact) (accessed October 1, 2006)

35. Reactions to student use in the teaching profession is difficult to assess without, for example, a survey of a representative sample of academics. What one learns from a cursory look at internet sources is likely to be biased in favour of the opinions of those who are technologically savvy enough to recognize the issues involved, and of course bothered (or excited) enough to respond on their own volition. In other words, hardly a good sampling process.


39. See the results generated by www.google.com for a search on the string "do not use wikipedia" on US-American college and university sites: http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en&as_qdr=all&q=%22do+not+use+wikipedia%22+site%3Aedu


41. A good example is the recent (June 29, 2006) advice to students given by Alan Liu (University of California, Santa Barbara), circulated on the Humanist discussion group: http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/lists_archive/Humanist/v20/0080.html (accessed July 3, 2006). Good advice to teaching staff is also given on the website of the library at Carleton College: 

42. The fact that Wikipedia material is freely available under a GNU Free Documentation Licence has resulted in versions of Wikipedia becoming incorporated into other reference websites (e.g. www.answers.com, www.reference.com, www.bookrags.com). This potentially misleads the casual user since there is no clear indication of the nature of the wikipedia project on those websites.

43. This is, of course, not a new argument for the use of internet resources. See, for example: Jones, Debra. "Critical Thinking in an Online World (Proceedings of the Conference Sponsored by the Librarians Association of the University of California, Santa Barbara and Friends of the UCSB Library, April 26, 1996, University Center, University of California, Santa Barbara)."

44. Most easily set up on the Wikia hosting site: http://www.wikia.com/wiki/Wikia. A useful example of a separately hosted wiki is one at Case Western Reserve University, which invites contributions about Case Western Reserve and its environment: http://wiki.case.edu. A similar wiki exists for Washington State University: http://wiki.wsu.edu/WSUWiki/Main_Page. Other examples of wikis, though not necessarily recommended examples, are: Bible Wiki, http://bible.tmtm.com/wiki/Main_Page; Biblewiki, http://biblewiki.net/Main_Page. The proliferation of such similar sites on biblical material does not strike me as helpful.

45. In fact, there are certain pages on Wikipedia itself which offer advice on writing; e.g. writing on historical subjects: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_History


50. See the instructive (though hardly surprising) results of this study: Kruger, Justin, Nicholas Epley, Jason Parker, and Zhi-Wen Ng. "Egocentrism over E-Mail: Can We Communicate as Well as We Think?" Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 89, no. 6 (2005): 925-36.

(accessed September 29, 2006).


(accessed September 29, 2006).

Bearbeitungsstand: 13. Juni 2006, 12:08 UTC. URL:


57. Halsall, Paul 1998. *Ancient History Sourcebook*: Kurash (Cyrus) the Great: The Decree of Return for the Jews, 539 BCE.


(accessed September 29, 2006).

(accessed September 29, 2006).

Bearbeitungsstand: 25. September 2006, 10:56 UTC. URL:


73. A user identified only by his or her TCP/IP address made this change. Tracking other instances of changes made via this address show this to be a persistent feature over the past two years.


