

Historical Criticism

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Historical criticism is the attempt to verify the historicity of and understand the meaning of an event that is reported to have taken place in the past. The basis for this evaluation is the tools of historical science.

The historical-critical method assumes the autonomy of the human scientist from the Bible as the word of God. It assumes that one must start with the secular world as a norm for determining meaning and for deciding what has happened in the past. This method does not accept at face value the Bible as the Word of God. It would be unscientific and unhistorical to do so. Rather its claim to be the word of God and its statements claiming to report history (and finally its statements about theology) must be verified and accepted as one would accept a statement from the documents of any other ancient national people. Such a conception implies that the Bible has come about in the same manner as has any other piece of literature. Theories of inspiration are interwoven with secular science by more "conservative" groups. For example, a common concept is that God superintended the production of Scripture in a manner similar to the way in which the theistic evolutionists conceive the superintendance of God in the evolution of life. There are many variations possible within this central theme, some finally saying that in some sense God gave general direction to the development of the traditions within Israel and the Christian church and special guidance to the prophet as he collected these traditions. Some would finally put emphasis upon the inspiration of the church in knowing which documents to choose. In general, however, those who hold to the historical-critical method would find it necessary to reject the idea that God imparted to the prophet specific objective knowledge regarding Himself, the nature of the world, and historical events.

Even if the historical critic accepted that possibility it would be necessary for him to verify it on the basis of historical science. Historical criticism then assumes the time-conditions; the historical character of the Scriptures. This does not mean that the historical critic conceives of God revealing Himself objectively within history, but that he conceives the production of Scripture to have taken place within historical causes. If God is to be seen as a cause within the production of Scripture, that must be verified on the basis of principles of historical science.

The production of Scripture is seen to have taken place in a similar manner to that of any other piece of literature. The Bible must thus be studied critically with the same methods which are used to study any other ancient literature. The Bible is to be read historically. This does not mean simply that one must give consideration to the historical background, but that the Bible must be read as a production of history; therefore, it must be read on the basis of the principles of secular historical science.

A basic principle of historical science is autonomy. History is divorced from revelation; the Bible is not the criterion for writing history; rather, history is the criterion for understanding and validating the Bible. Man grants to historical science its own authority. The decision as to what has taken place in the past is made on a basis external to the Bible, the historian deals with that aspect of the past which is accessible to him, which is amenable to rational explanation and interpretation. His goal is to determine what really happened. The historical-critical method thus serves the historian's need for valid, reliable evidence to determine whether or not testimony was actually given by a competent, reliable witness. The historian questions his sources for their adequacy, veracity, and intelligibility. The sources are like witnesses in the court of law. The task of the historian is to interrogate their answers and evaluate their validity. The process of interrogation and evaluation is called criticism. This procedure relies upon the judgment and philosophical context of the historian. The historian thus confers authority upon a witness.[1]

The historical-critical method has been under development since the age of the enlightenment. It was popularized for biblical studies by Ernst Troeltsch at the end of the nineteenth century. He enunciated three basic principles to guide the historian: (1) the principle of criticism or methodological doubt indicates that all knowledge relies upon the judgment of historical science and receives a status or probability, (2) the principle of analogy indicates that present experience is the criteria of probability for that which took place in the past—all events are in principle similar, (3) the principle of correlation indicates that events are so interrelated that a change in one phenomenon necessitates a change in its causes and effects. Thus historical explanation rests upon a chain of cause and effect.[2] The methods of Troeltsch were used to rule out the possibility of the supernatural, and contemporary historical critics question the old historical-critical method precisely at this point. It a priori rules out the possibility that God could intervene in human affairs. Thus there has been felt the necessity of reexamining the process of history in order to extrapolate new principles which allow for the possibility of the supernatural. (Notice that the historical critic reexamined history; he did not go to the Bible to discover where he went wrong, or to build a new method.) Historians have thus noted new principles; for example, the principle that every historical event is contingent, that is, that history is not driven forward by some static nature within the universe, but that history is in fact in process, that it is open, and that therefore it is possible for something new to take place within history. To reaffirm our point, it must be emphasized that even for the contemporary biblical critic, the supernatural can be accepted only on the basis of historical science.

The presumed autonomy of the historical-critical method may be illustrated by its refusal to accept the testimony of Scripture at its face value; for example, the Bible declares that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead and that the tomb was empty. This declaration of Scripture is not accepted because it is stated by Scripture; it is accepted only if it can be confirmed by historical science, and its meaning is also interpreted within the context of this

confirmation. On the basis of this type of reasoning theologians range from those who accept a bodily resurrection to those who accept only some kind of spiritual resurrection in the faith of the disciples. The biblical declaration of a supernatural historical event is accepted only if there are effects within history which are explainable only on the basis of the reality of that supernatural event. Pannenberg deals, for example, with the reality of the resurrection (not with the event). He accepts the reality of the resurrection because he feels that the appearances were instances of extrasensory perception in which a reality objective to the perceiver himself was encountered. It is not possible to accept the theory of subjective visions because such a theory fails to account for the faith of the disciples which could scarcely have survived death had not the reality of the appearances overwhelmed them. Furthermore, Pannenberg finds it inconceivable that the notion of a single resurrection already accomplished could have arisen within Palestine, for the apocalyptic expectation of the Jews was that of a general future resurrection. It is therefore unthinkable that within the traditions of the Christian church there could have arisen the idea of the resurrection of a single person as an event already accomplished. The only way to account for the fact that such a tradition arose within Israel is to accept the idea that indeed such an event took place. Furthermore, Pannenberg continues, we cannot accept the concept that the appearances were simply a psychological chain reaction, for the number of appearances and their temporal distribution militate against such an idea. The final result of the historical-critical method is that everything is relevantized to some particular philosophy of history and to the method which results from that philosophy.

The science of historical criticism is a new method based upon a secular understanding of history. In its basic intent it therefore differs radically from biblical studies which arose out of the Reformation. The Reformation assumed that the content and production of Scripture resulted by the will of God rather than the will of man, and that, although the prophet himself operated within a historical situation and within a particular language, culture, and thought

form, that he was nonetheless guided by the Holy Spirit in such a way that the result was the Word of God. Since the result was the Word of God, the Bible was the authority; and because the Bible was the result of one author, it was conceived to have a unity. Because of the authority and unity of the Bible it was to be its own interpreter. That meant not only that text was to interpret text but that methodological considerations were to arise out of the Bible alone rather than out of contemporary culture or philosophical understanding external to the Bible. It was not considered appropriate to impose upon the Bible any external method, concept, or principle; rather, these were all to arise from within the Bible itself. The historical critical method has violated this basic principle by imposing extraneous norms upon the Bible via historical science.

The historical-critical method often uses terminology which sounds familiar to Adventists; however, since this terminology is placed within a different context its meaning is also radically different. (1) The words "historically conditioned" might mean the historical context within which God revealed Himself through the prophet, whereas for the historical critic it means the historical context which is responsible for the production of the text. (2) The historical-critical method states that Christianity is a historical religion. By that it means, at the very least, that Christianity must be studied and verified by the tools of historical science. But in general this means that Christianity has resulted from the historical circumstances in which it found itself. At very best it would allow that God was part of that historical context by virtue of His acts and providential guiding. For the Adventist, terminology indicating that Christianity is a historical religion points to God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ and the Bible, a revelation which took place in history, and a revelation which is both the basis for history and for understanding history. (3) When historical critics state that contemporary methodology is moving toward more historical interpretation of the Bible they do not mean by that an understanding of the historical context within which God revealed Himself, but rather an understanding of the Bible and its meaning on the basis of causes and effect which

take place in history.

Certain procedures within the historical-critical method appear to be identical with biblical-critical studies arising within the recognition of the supreme authority of the Bible, yet when placed within context these procedures arise out of a different foundation and are therefore quite diverse. For example, both methods attempt to establish the best possible text. For the historical-critical method this is based upon the laws of probability in conjunction with a weighing of the value of the various texts in use. For method arising out of Scripture it is the teaching of the Scriptures as a whole that is the final determiner.

Both methods attempt to understand the meaning of words. For the historical-critical method this is done independently of the unity of Scripture; for method arising within the Scriptures this is done within the context of the teaching of Holy Scripture.

Both methods attempt to understand the particular viewpoint of a writer of Scripture. For the historical-critical method (taking an example from its application to the gospels) the purpose is to ascertain that which is common to the surrounding culture, and that which is unique (that which cannot be explained on the basis of the contemporary culture); and to determine what is similar and what is "contradictory" in the gospels. The goal is to derive the kerygma (the central core) from the gospels, by excluding that which is "contradictory" and that which can be accounted for within the contemporary culture. Method arising out of Scripture does not assume contradiction in the Bible writers. Rather it attempts to gain an understanding of the unity within the various emphases in order to gain an understanding of the whole of the teaching of Scripture--not simply of the critically assured minimum that can be affirmed on the basis of critical method.

Both methods attempt to answer the question, "What is meant?" However, the historical-critical method answers that question by isolating the pericope from the rest of Scripture; whereas biblical method answers it by reference to the unity of Scripture.

Both methods attempt to understand the historical context. The historical-critical method

attempts to understand the life situation which produced the text; the biblical method desires to understand the life situation in which God revealed Himself. In the latter case it is the whole of Scripture that is normative for the application of the historical background to the texts; furthermore, Scripture as a whole is the final context for understanding the text. Although these various procedures may seem, from a superficial standpoint, to be parallel; yet, because of the radically different contexts out of which they arise, they are at variance 180 degrees.

It is tempting to state that the problem with the historical-critical method lies with the presuppositions which are brought to it. It is stated that we can use the historical-critical method if we change the presuppositions; however, it must be recognized that it is the presuppositions which make possible the method. When the presuppositions are removed, one no longer has the method. A clear example of this is form criticism, which is designed specifically to deal with folk literature which arises on the basis of traditions which are formed according to the laws inherent in the development of folk traditions (notice that we are not here referring to something which comes specifically by the will of God through the Holy Spirit, but rather something which develops naturally within a particular culture and according to particular laws). If one assumes folk tradition, which arose by these laws, then he is also free to use the form-critical method. But if one does not assume folk traditions arising within such a natural context, then one is no longer free to use the form-critical method. The form-critical method simply is not designed to operate on materials which have not arisen by the laws governing the formation of folklore.

If one removes from the historical-critical method the presupposition of criticism, then he no longer has the historical-critical method. Criticism means the autonomy of the investigator to make a judgment on his own apart from the specific declaration of the text. The investigator may choose to place himself under the text, but only after he has made an autonomous judgment regarding the text.

It is also tempting to think that the differences between the two are slight, but here again we must recognize that the two methods arise from radically different starting points. One starts with a recognition of the authority and unity of the Scriptures; the other starts with secular science and accepts unity and authority only if a case can be made for them on the basis of historical-critical methods. Methodologically the procedures are 180 degrees apart.

It is easy for the church to recognize a theological position when that position is taken to its logical conclusion—when it is finally stated, for example, that the Old Testament sacrificial system came from the pagan world—but it is more important for the church to be willing to discern why it is that the theologian arrived at that conclusion. The church must ask not only what is the disease but what is the cause of the disease, because the causes often predate the results by many years, and it is often too late to treat the patient when he has arrived at his final destination. We must be sensitive to the fact that when a certain road is taken one is headed in a particular direction and that the end results, in a general sense at least, are predictable. The historical-critical method has emptied churches in Europe, it has taught man to live autonomously relative to God's Word. As a church we must take a decisive stand before we find ourselves in similar circumstances. We must recognize where we are and treat the causes of the disease before the results are fatal.

Biblical Criticism

There are a number of procedures which operate within the general context of the historical-critical method: source criticism, form criticism, traditional criticism, and redaction criticism make the same basic assumptions as does historical criticism. There is no neat way of dividing one method from the other, and biblical scholars are still debating exactly where to draw the lines. It is not the purpose of this short presentation to contribute to that debate; rather, we are attempting to give a general understanding as to how biblical-critical studies work. We will use the general definitions of the Interpreter's *Dictionary of the Bible*,

Supplementary Edition, as the basis for our designations.

Source Criticism. Source Criticism was popularized by Wellhausen at the end of the nineteenth century. It attempts to determine whether or not a piece of literature is a unity or compositional in character. If the latter, it attempts to determine the nature of the sources used and the stages of composition. It also asks about the setting within which the sources emerged and the motives which were the directing force for the production of the various sources. The sources are delineated by observing changes in literary style, shifts in vocabulary and phrasing, breaks in continuity, types of connectors, changes in theological viewpoint, duplications, and logical, thematic, chronological, and factual inconsistencies. Such items indicate different sources. On the basis of these kinds of observations Wellhausen hypothesized four sources for the Pentateuch—*J E D P*. These sources were composed in different centuries ranging from the tenth to the sixth century. At approximately the time of the exile they were brought together into the form in which we now have them in the Pentateuch.

Source criticism "assumed that the production of Scripture was conditioned historically not only by the fact that it had combined documents with a prior history of their own, but also that wider movements in human life had influenced their contents." [3] To use the source-critical method means, for example, that it is not appropriate to use Genesis 1 to interpret Genesis 2, or vice versa, because they come from different sources which themselves arose out of different life settings on the basis of different theological motives. Thus it is that we have two contradictory accounts of creation which cannot appropriately be harmonized.

Form Criticism. Form Criticism was introduced into biblical-critical studies by Hermann Gunkel at the beginning of this century. It was first developed in secular literature by the Grimm brothers at the turn of the nineteenth century in their attempt to understand German folk literature. Hermann Gunkel felt that the methods they employed were adequate, seeing that the book of Genesis and the Psalms were themselves folk literature. Interestingly enough,

the form criticism of the Grimm brothers is no longer applied to German folk literature as it is now seen by folklorists to be inadequate.

Form criticism attempts to classify units of written and oral material in their relation to a conjectured sociological setting out of which they could have arisen within the life of the community. It assumes that the literary style and structure (for example the form of our current business letter) and content of a unit of literature exists by reason of a particular motive and sociological setting. The form critic attempts to reconstruct that motive and life setting. Form criticism accepts the work of source criticism but builds upon it by saying that each of those sources are themselves composed of smaller units of literature which evolved in different life settings. "Form Criticism presupposes that, however unwittingly, all Israelites over many centuries contributed to the making of the Bible; that it was simply a result of their having had a communal existence as Israelites." [4]

Tradition Criticism. Tradition criticism accepts the results of source criticism and form criticism, but attempts to place emphasis upon the history of a unit of literature (earlier form critics actually combined both processes in their work). Tradition criticism attempts to trace the process by which a piece of literature moved from stage to stage until it reached its final form. Tradition criticism thus attempts to study the long history which lies behind a pericope within our present Bible. In the Pentateuch, for example, tradition criticism may think in terms of small units of literature being produced within varying cultures under specific life settings (*Sitz im Leben*). As these traditions or units of literature are passed on from generation to generation they are transformed within new life settings, and as cultures merge, traditions also merge. Thus the unit of literature as it occurs in our current Bible resulted from merging traditions which were transformed within each new life setting. If the preacher is to rightly interpret the Bible as a basis for his sermons (according to the tradition critic) it is necessary for him to ascertain the tradition history which lies behind the current text in order to determine the varying life settings within which this tradition was transmitted, and to

isolate those aspects which come from different life settings. It is only on this basis that he can understand the historical setting of the text, and thus interpret it rightly so that he might understand its appropriate meaning for our contemporary generation. The Bible must be interpreted historically. "Tradition criticism assumes that the whole community in all expressions of its existence, participated in giving shape to the tradition and in handing it on, generation after generation"[5]

Redaction Criticism. Redaction criticism builds upon the methods of source, form, and tradition criticism; however, each of these methods assumed that the final redactor (generally thought of as a school of thought rather than as an individual) who brought the materials together did so willy-nilly on the basis of subject material without any particular theme, motive, or life setting of his own. The redaction critic, in contrast, affirms that the final editorial work took place on the basis of an individual or school of thought working as an author within his or their own right. Thus it attempts to discover and describe the life setting theological themes, and motives which determine the basis upon which the redactor selected, modified, and shaped the materials into their final form. We must notice that Mrs. White's concept of the Bible writers, each writing with their own emphasis, is radically different from redaction criticism which assumes that the final collector(s) of the document was himself an author working within and conditioned by a specific sociopolitical-economic-religious life setting--the basis upon which he modified, restructured, edited, altered, and added to the materials in order to make them say what was appropriate within the new life setting according to new theological motives. Thus it was that the Matthean community produced these materials within a Palestinian culture; the Lukan community within a Hellenistic culture, and the Markan within a Roman culture. The traditions concerning Jesus were collected, interpreted, and modified according to these various cultures. In order to have an authoritative saying as the basis for church action, words were placed in the mouth of Jesus so that the church could confidently face its contemporary situation. The goal of the biblical

critic, then, is to sort back through the process of collection, interpretation, and modification, attempting to understand these various aspects within their particular cultural context, for the purpose of finally arriving at the "historical Jesus." In order to do this it is necessary to remove everything that can be accounted for on the basis of the Palestinian, Hellenistic, or Roman culture. Once the critic has arrived at a critically assured minimum, as some scholars argue, it is possible to reintroduce items which are consistent with this critically assured minimum, but which can also be accounted for on the basis of the contemporary culture. After all, scholars say, it was possible for Jesus to say something which could have been said by someone living within a Palestinian context.

Such a procedure finally means that it is not appropriate to use Matthew to interpret Mark or Luke, and certainly not to interpret Paul, seeing that it is not appropriate to use one author writing in one life setting to interpret another author living in another life setting. Thus it is not appropriate to use the proof-text method (a smoke screen for the concept that the Bible is its own interpreter). Each author must be interpreted on his own independent of the others, and his particular theology must be contrasted with those of the other Bible writers. Only after the radical differences have been eliminated (which are accounted for on the basis of the cultural life setting), is it possible to arrive at the kerygma (the limits of which vary from scholar to scholar.)

Is it any wonder that some students trained with this method find it difficult to preach the Bible? It takes a scholar to ascertain the probability that Jesus actually spoke a given thought or paragraph!

Summary and Critique. Biblical-critical methods are the attempt to apply to Scripture contemporary literary methods used for the study of ancient national documents and folk literature. They impose an external method upon Scripture. Although there are seeming similarities to methods arising out of Scripture, because of the vastly different contexts from which they arise, these similarities are more in appearance than they are in reality. There have

always been interpreters within the history of Christianity who have pointed to the need for understanding the type of literature under consideration (for example, the parable, typology, etc.); however, this consideration is quite different from form criticism which attempts to account for the genre (type of literature) and content of the literature on the basis of the life setting which produced it.

Ellen White warns, in several places, against procedures such as those just described. Note for example the following:

The warnings of the word of God regarding the perils surrounding the Christian church belong to us today. As in the days of the apostles men tried by tradition and philosophy to destroy faith in the Scriptures, so today, by the pleasing sentiments of higher criticism, evolution, spiritualism, theosophy, and pantheism, the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths. To many the Bible is as a lamp without oil, because they have turned their minds into channels of speculative belief that bring misunderstanding and confusion. The work of higher criticism, in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation. It is robbing God's word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives. By spiritualism, multitudes are taught to believe that desire is the highest law, that license is liberty, and that man is accountable only to himself.[6]

Historical criticism and source criticism were well-developed methods at the time this statement was written. Tradition criticism was not yet fully developed as described in this paper. The principles Ellen White describes of dissecting, conjecturing, and reconstructing the text apply to all of the historical-critical procedures; however, it is easiest to illustrate with tradition criticism. The tradition criticism first of all dissects the text into its various components. It then conjectures a *Sitz im Leben* for each of those components, and then reconstructs the text on the basis of the conjectured varying life settings. Ellen White still speaks to the question of the validity of the use of these methods within the Adventist Church.

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- [1] Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*, iv.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 474.