

HISTORICAL CRITICISM: ITS ROLE IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND CHURCH LIFE

JOSEPH A. FITZMYER, S.J.

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass.

THOUGH WIDELY used by Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant interpreters of the Bible, the historical-critical method of interpretation has come under fire in recent years. Criticism of it has been voiced in various quarters.

For instance, (1) integrists in the Catholic Church label it Modernist or Neo-Modernist, because they see it as emphasizing the human elements in the Bible and not paying sufficient attention to the Bible as "the Word of God." Attacks on Catholic biblical scholars who make use of it have appeared in the *Wanderer*, *U.S. National Catholic Register*, and *Catholicism in Crisis*.¹ Such integrists have never been able to accept the modern Catholic interpretation of the Bible and would have us return to the precritical mode of exposition in vogue since the Council of Trent.

2) Criticism has also come from the left in the person of Thomas Sheehan, a professor of philosophy at Loyola University of Chicago, who is said to be "someone with impeccably 'liberal' credentials . . . writing in . . . an impeccably liberal secular publication," the *New York Review of Books*.² In an article entitled "Revolution in the Church,"³ Sheehan claims that practitioners of the historical-critical method have come up with a "liberal consensus" which is "bringing the Church to what can be called the end of Catholicism." This liberal consensus is identified with the conclusions proposed by "Catholic scholars" such as Benoit, Brown, Fitzmyer, Meier, Murphy, Pesch, and Stanley—and such theologians as

¹ A priest-sociologist, Msgr. George A. Kelly, has published a book entitled *The New Biblical Theorists: Raymond E. Brown and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1983), in which he inveighs against the noted Sulpician biblical scholar who is a gifted practitioner of the method. I happen to be part of the "and beyond." Cf. R. E. Brown, "Historical-Critical Exegesis and Attempts at Revisionism," *The Bible Today* 23 (1985) 157-65.

² J. Hitchcock, *U.S. National Catholic Register*.

³ It was supposed to be a review of Hans Küng's book *Eternal Life? Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), but Sheehan used the occasion to express his opinion about those in the Church who use the historical-critical method of interpretation and theologians who exploit their findings. See *New York Review of Books*, June 14, 1984, 35-38. Cf. Sheehan's *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986), and the review by John P. Galvin in *TS* 48 (1987) 739-41.

Kasper, Küng, Schillebeeckx, and Tracy who make use of their work. Sheehan acknowledges this consensus as the "most vigorous intellectual renaissance since the high Middle Ages," being promoted by exegetes and theologians finally "awakened from a long hibernation." Having adopted advanced techniques from mainly Protestant scholars, they have used them for "a radical rethinking of the faith" and "have been dismantling traditional Roman Catholic theology"; their work has brought them to conclusions that "conflict with traditional Catholic doctrines," for they have been raising doubts about the divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the resurrection of Christ, the infancy narratives, and the gospel accounts of the claims Jesus supposedly made. Actually, Sheehan's article is a "mixed bag," a "breathless paean to the winning side" (R. McNerny), i.e. the liberal consensus, but also a recognition that the consensus stands in opposition to the "folk religion of most practicing Catholics," which still lives on the prerevolutionary fare generally served up from local pulpits—"and especially from the one currently occupied by the conservative Pope John Paul II."⁴

3) Criticism of the historical-critical method has also come from still other quarters more difficult to label. This criticism castigates the method for being overly preoccupied with the prehistory of the text and consequently neglecting its final form, its literary features, its canonical setting, and especially the theological meaning of the sacred text.

4) Related to the third type of criticism is that which comes from fundamentalism. In this case, insistence on the inspiration of the biblical text or on the authority of the written Word of God is accompanied by a literalist reading of the Bible to guarantee the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. It resolutely refuses to analyze the text or confront the problems that the text itself presents. Problems are not admitted; harmonization of the text is pursued.

Criticism of this sort has made some people think that the historical-critical method of interpretation of the Bible has had its day. But has it? Having been trained in this method and having used it widely, I should like to try to answer that question. I propose to discuss the problem under four headings: (1) origin and development of the method, (2) a description of the method, (3) presuppositions with which it is used, and (4) its role in the interpretation of the Bible and the life of the Church.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE METHOD

The historical-critical method of biblical interpretation was not used in patristic, medieval, or Reformation periods of the Church. Isolated

⁴"Revolution" 35.

patristic commentators, such as Origen, Augustine, or Jerome,⁵ may have used primitive forms of criticism that at times resemble this method, but the mode of exposition was then largely literal and/or allegorical, sometimes preoccupied with what has been called the "spiritual" sense of Scripture.

The roots of the historical-critical method are traced to the Renaissance, especially to its emphasis on "getting back to the sources" (*recursus ad fontes*). The Copernican revolution also had a bearing on the study of the Bible, especially in its aftermath, the Galileo Affair, which affected the interpretation of Josh 10:12-13 about the sun standing still. To this period is traced the study of the Bible in its original languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, instead of Latin, as was customary in practically all earlier periods in the West.

Though the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, did not radically depart from traditional interpretation of Scripture, they gave Scripture a primacy over the Church and its interpretation of the Bible that resulted in the abandonment of allegorical interpretation and in an emphasis on the literal sense of the original texts.⁶

In the 17th and 18th centuries the method was further developed in the work of the Dutch jurist and theologian Hugo Grotius, the French Oratorian and biblical scholar Richard Simon, and the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza—thus in the work of a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jew.

New impetus was given to the method at the time of the Enlightenment and by the movement of German historicism of the 19th century. There was, on the one hand, the influence of Leopold von Ranke, who as a historian sought to present the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, "how it really was."⁷ That ambitious goal of "objective historiography" affected many biblical scholars of the time. On the other hand, there were the deist attacks on historical Christianity, which also developed the method in various ways. The 18th-century deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus had already penned such an attack, but fear of consequences that might ensue deterred him from publishing it during his lifetime. Seven parts of his work were subsequently published by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing under

⁵ See R. F. Collins, "Augustine of Hippo Precursor of Modern Biblical Scholarship," *Louvain Studies* 12 (1987) 131-51. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975) passim.

⁶ See P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 32-36.

⁷ *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514: Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber* (Sämtliche Werke 33-34; 3rd ed.; Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1885) vii ("er will bloss zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen").

the title *Wolfenbüttel Fragmente* (1774–78).⁸ Reimarus' work led eventually to the so-called Life of Jesus research (*Leben-Jesu Forschung*) of the mid-19th century. Then scholars such as Ferdinand Christian Baur, Heinrich E. G. Paulus, David Friedrich Strauss, Bruno Bauer, and Ernest Renan composed their studies of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, treating the Gospels merely as ancient human records.

It is hard for us today to grasp the impact of the historical and archeological discoveries of the late 18th and early 19th centuries on the development of the historical-critical mode of biblical interpretation, but these discoveries were of major importance in that development. Though the Rosetta Stone, written in hieroglyphs, Demotic, and Greek, was discovered in the western delta of the Nile in 1798–99 by an officer in Napoleon's Egyptian expedition, its hieroglyphic text was not deciphered until 1827 by Jean François Champollion.⁹ It took another half century before that key unlocked the treasures of Egyptian literature. Thus for the first time the OT was able to be read against the literary background of Israel's neighbor to the west. Similarly, the literature of ancient Assyria and Babylonia became known to Old Testament scholars through the decipherment of the ancient Bisitun (Behistun) inscription, still *in situ* along the old caravan road from Babylon to Ecbatana. Written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian, it had stood there for centuries until an Englishman, Henry C. Rawlinson, made copies of it in 1835; its Akkadian version was finally deciphered in 1846.¹⁰ Eventually the OT was able to be studied against the background of the literature of ancient Assyria and Babylonia, Israel's neighbors to the east. Moreover, the discovery of thousands of Greek letters and other Greek literature in Egyptian papyri cast new historical light on the study of the Septuagint and the Greek NT.¹¹ Such historical and archeological discoveries could not help but

⁸ See *Reimarus: Fragments*, ed. C. H. Talbert (Lives of Jesus series; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); H. S. Reimarus, *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples*, ed. G. W. Buchanan (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

⁹ See J. Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past: The Archaeological Background of Judaism and Christianity* 1 (Princeton: Princeton University, 1974) 90, 133–34.

¹⁰ Also involved in the decipherment was the German scholar G. F. Grotefend; but Rawlinson deciphered the Old Persian text first and that led to the decipherment of the two other languages. See further J. Finegan, *Light* (n. 9 above) 234–36. In the early part of this century an Aramaic version of the inscription was discovered among papyri from Elephantine in Egypt. See J. C. Greenfield and B. Porten, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Aramaic Version* (Corpus inscriptionum iranicae 1/5; London: Lund Humphries, 1982).

¹¹ See G. A. Deissmann, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1901); cf. his *Light from the Ancient East: The*

have an impact on the historical-critical mode of interpreting the Bible.

In the light of such developments Pope Leo XIII set up the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1902.¹² Ostensibly it sought to promote biblical studies within the Church, but it also guarded against excessive critical interpretations of the Bible. These were seen as stemming from the rationalist spirit with which much of the critical interpretation of the 19th century had been pursued. The first word of Leo's apostolic letter *Vigilantiae* set the tone for the activity of the Commission in the first third of this century. Many of the Commission's responses were negative reactions to proposals made by interpreters using the historical-critical method (e.g., responses about the Synoptic problem, the historical character of the four Gospels, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch). Though the Commission never condemned the method itself, the effect of its responses was to cast a dark cloud of reaction and fear over Catholic biblical scholarship in the early part of this century. It deterred most Catholic interpreters from using the method. The great founder of the Dominican Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, M.-J. Lagrange, however, published in 1904 a small book, *La méthode historique*, which clearly showed that the method was perfectly usable by orthodox Catholic interpreters.¹³ Though he suffered greatly from the integrist of his day, his contribution to the debate is recalled with gratitude. The cloud of negative reaction was finally lifted when Pope Pius XII published his encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* in 1943.¹⁴

During the course of the 20th century the method itself was further developed with the refinements of source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. Other historical and archeological discoveries, especially in Syria and Palestine, shed further light on the biblical texts. It is again hard to grasp the import of such discoveries on the historical study of the Bible, but the decipherment of Ugaritic in 1929¹⁵ and the

New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World (London/New York: Harper, 1927).

¹² See his apostolic letter, ASS 35 (1902-3) 234-38; *Enchiridion biblicum* (Naples: D'Auria, 1954) §137-38.

¹³ Edition augmentée (Paris: Lecoffre, 1904); *Historical Criticism and the Old Testament* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1905).

¹⁴ See AAS 35 (1943) 297-325; *Enchiridion biblicum* §538-69; *Rome and the Study of Scripture* (7th ed.; St. Meinrad, Ind.: Grail, 1962) 80-107.

¹⁵ Ancient Ugarit was discovered almost by chance in 1929. Hundreds of clay tablets written in a Northwest Semitic language (in alphabetic cuneiform) provide many important Canaanite parallels to Hebrew poetry. The language was deciphered by H. Bauer of Germany, and by E. Dhorme and C. Virolleaud of France. See further J. Finegan, *Light* (n. 9 above) 171-74.

discovery of the Qumran Scrolls (1947–60)¹⁶ have contributed greatly to that study. So much, then, for the origin and development of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.

DESCRIPTION OF THE METHOD

The method is called “historical-critical” because it borrows its techniques of interpreting the Bible from historical and literary criticism. It recognizes that the Bible, though containing the Word of God, is an ancient record, composed indeed by a multiplicity of authors over a long period of time in antiquity. Being such an ancient composition, it has to be studied and analyzed like other ancient records. Since much of it presents a narrative account of events that affected the lives of ancient Jews and early Christians, the various accounts have to be analyzed against their proper human and historical backgrounds, in their contemporary contexts, and in their original languages. In effect, this method applies to the Bible all the critical techniques of classical philology, and in doing so it refuses a priori to exclude any critical analysis in its quest for the meaning of the text.

The method makes use of two preliminary steps, borrowed from classical philology: (1) the consideration of *introductory questions* concerning (a) the authenticity of the writing (e.g., Did Paul write the Epistle to the Ephesians?); (b) the integrity or unity of the writing (Did Paul write all of it, or has the text suffered secondary interpolation?); (c) the date and place of composition; (d) the content of the writing, analyzed according to its structure or outline, its style, and literary form (Is it a letter, a parable, a prayer? Is it poetry, rhetoric, historical narrative, or fiction?); (e) the occasion and purpose of the writing (i.e., the author’s intention in composing it); and (f) its background (Has the OT writer been influenced by Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, or Canaanite ideas? Has the NT writer been influenced by Palestinian Jewish, Hellenistic, eastern Mediterranean ideas?). All such preliminary questions help much in the comprehension of the biblical writing as something that comes to us from a definite literary context, time, and place in antiquity.

Likewise borrowed from classical philology is (2) *textual criticism*, which is concerned with the transmission of the biblical text in its original language and in ancient versions. In what manuscripts does one find the best form of the transmitted text? What are the best families of manuscripts? Do any of the ancient versions contain readings that attest to a text superior to the transmitted Greek or Hebrew text? This is a

¹⁶See G. Vermes, *The Dead Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

very complicated and technical aspect of critical interpretation of the Bible, yet it is clearly fundamental, even though preliminary.

Along with such preliminary questions to which the biblical text is submitted, there are refinements of the historical criticism itself that have come to be associated with it. Though they are not per se historical criticism, they are forms of criticism that in the long run affect the historical judgment about a text.

1) *Literary criticism*, which is concerned with the literary and stylistic character and content of the text. Part of this criticism has already been mentioned under the introductory questions above (*d*). In fact, this sort of criticism has long been associated with historical criticism, though some modern literary critics of the Bible often give the impression that such study of it has been overlooked, whereas it is, in their opinion, really superior to historical criticism and of greater importance.¹⁷ It is important because it curbs the historical judgment about a text. When one realizes that the ancient writer has written poetry (and poetry of a definite ancient kind), or has employed rhetorical devices (*inclusio*, chiasmus, catchword bonds), or has argued in a definite way (from cause to effect, from effect to cause), one then realizes that the historical aspect of his writing may not be the primary one.

2) Another refinement of historical criticism has been *source criticism*, which seeks to determine the prehistory of a biblical text. What sources did the biblical writer use in composing his text? In some biblical books the text simply cries out for such source analysis because of parallel accounts of the same event, stereotyped phraseology, etc. If the book

¹⁷See D. Robertson, "Literature, the Bible as," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume 547-51. "These scholars, who come from diverse philosophical and theological traditions, are united in considering the Bible primarily and fundamentally as a literary document (as opposed, e.g., to considering it as a historical or theological document)" (547). In this regard it might be good to quote an assessment of the literary criticism of the Bible once penned by T. S. Eliot: "While I acknowledge the legitimacy of this enjoyment, I am more acutely aware of its abuse. The persons who enjoy these writings solely because of their literary merit are essentially parasites; and we know that parasites, when they become too numerous, are pests. I could fulminate against the men of letters who have gone into ecstasies over 'the Bible as literature,' the Bible as 'the noblest monument of English prose.' Those who talk of the Bible as a 'monument of English prose' are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity. I must try to avoid the by-paths of my discourse: it is enough to suggest that just as the work of Clarendon, or Gibbon, or Buffon, or Bradley would be of inferior literary value if it were insignificant as history, science and philosophy respectively, so the Bible has had a *literary* influence upon English literature *not* because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered as the report of the Word of God. And the fact that men of letters now discuss it as 'literature' probably indicates the *end* of its 'literary' influence" (*Selected Essays: New Edition* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950] 344-45).

forms part of the Pentateuch, the interpreter has to discern the difference of composition among the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic, and Priestly writings. If the text is part of a Synoptic Gospel, the distinction of it as derived from Mark, or "Q," or from private Matthean or Lucan sources is an important aspect of the interpretation of the passage. Source criticism is not an end in itself, and the interpreter's task is far from over once the source of a passage has been determined. But the difference in the parallels, analyzed as derived from different sources, often affects the historical judgment about a text and aids in the final understanding of the text.

3) A third refinement of historical criticism is *form criticism*. Applied first of all to the OT by H. Gunkel, it was used to interpret the Synoptics in the work of M. Dibelius and R. Bultmann in the early part of this century. It seeks to determine the literary form or subform of a given biblical writing. What kind of a psalm is it? Is the text part of apocalyptic or Wisdom literature? Is it a parable or other type of saying of Jesus, a miracle story, a pronouncement story? These forms are diverse, and one learns from form criticism to switch mental gears in reading the passages. But one also learns much about the history of the form and how it has developed in the tradition. Such form-critical analysis of biblical passages certainly affects one's historical judgment about them. Moreover, from such analysis we have learned that the truth of the passage is analogous to its form.¹⁸ And therein lies the crucial relationship of form criticism to historical criticism.

4) *Redaction criticism* is also a refinement of historical criticism, because it seeks to determine how certain biblical writers, using traditional materials, have modified, edited, or redacted the sources or whatever they might have inherited from writers or communities before them in the interest of their own literary goal or purpose. Such redaction is often evident in the language and style of a given biblical writer. Once such redaction is discerned, it too has a bearing on the historical judgment of a passage.

Finally, it should be clear that the use of all such criticism is geared to one end: to determine the meaning of the text as it was intended by the human author moved long ago to compose it. Since the truth that he has enshrined in his text is analogous to the form used, historical criticism teaches us that we cannot read an ancient text without the sophistication that the form calls for.

We have learned through this method that not everything narrated in

¹⁸As Card. A. Bea once put it, "Sua cuique generi literario est veritas" (Each literary form has its own truth). See *De sacrae scripturae inspiratione* (2nd ed.; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1935) 106, §90.

the past tense necessarily corresponds to ancient reality, and that not everything put on the lips of Jesus of Nazareth by evangelists was necessarily uttered by him. In regard to the historical criticism of the Synoptic Gospels, we have learned through this method to distinguish three stages of the gospel tradition: (I) what Jesus of Nazareth did and said (corresponding roughly to A.D. 1-33); (II) what disciples preached about him, his words, and his deeds (corresponding roughly to A.D. 33-65); and (III) what evangelists wrote about him, having culled, synthesized, and explicated the tradition that preceded them, each in his own way (corresponding to A.D. 65-90). The relationship of Stage III to Stages I and II is *the* problem for 20th-century readers of these Gospels, and herein lies the crucial need of the historical-critical method of gospel interpretation.

PRESUPPOSITIONS WITH WHICH THE METHOD IS USED

One reason why the historical-critical method falls under suspicion today is that it was tainted at an important stage in its development with presuppositions that are not necessarily part of it. Thus, it was seriously tainted by the rationalist presuppositions with which the *Leben-Jesu Forschung* once used it. The *Wolfenbüttel Fragmente* of Reimarus and the lives of Jesus by Baur, Strauss, Renan, and others stemmed either from deist attacks on historical Christianity or historical studies that sought to be liberated from all dogmatic influence so that the Gospels could be analyzed solely as records of antiquity. Adolf von Harnack, the patrologist and church historian, sought to curb the extreme tendencies of this allegedly presuppositionless study of the historical Jesus, and emphasized a respect for tradition; but he never abandoned the historical-critical method itself. It remained for Albert Schweitzer to unmask the efforts of the Life of Jesus research. In his famous book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* he showed that such investigation of the life of Jesus had sprung not from a purely historical interest in Jesus but from a "struggle against the tyranny of dogma," and that the greatest of such "lives" of Jesus, those by Reimarus and Strauss, had been "written with hate"—"not so much hate of the Person of Jesus as of the supernatural nimbus with which it was so easy to surround him."¹⁹ Thus rationalist attacks on traditional Christianity, especially in its supernatural aspects, were linked to an otherwise neutral method and tainted it unduly. What was at fault was the presupposition with which the method was used, and not the method itself.

At a still later period the method was again used by K. L. Schmidt, M.

¹⁹ *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: Black, 1910; repr., 1948) 4-5.

Dibelius, and R. Bultmann in their work on NT form criticism. Bultmann's contribution proved to be the most influential; yet he too associated the method with presuppositions. He linked historical criticism with a form of kerygmatic theology which depended heavily on Luther's justification by faith alone, D. F. Strauss's mythical interpretation of the Gospels, and M. Heidegger's existentialism. Emphasis on the preached Word and justification *sola fide* resulted in Bultmann's lack of interest in Jesus of Nazareth himself, what the Jesus of Stage I of the gospel tradition did or said in Nazareth, Capernaum, or Jerusalem. Bultmann was solely interested in what the gospel proclaims and how its preached Word affects the individual believer of today. He thus sought to subordinate event to word; indeed, for him the word may be said to generate the event. Hence Bultmann's lengthy treatment of the form called by him an "apophthegm,"²⁰ and his unconcern about the implied lack of continuity between Stage I of the gospel tradition and Stage II. The narrative of the event was unimportant so long as the reader was accosted by the pronouncement or punch line enshrined in it. Thus Bultmann was led to the demythologization of the event. For the quest of the historical basis of the kerygma was for him a betrayal of the principle of faith alone. Rather, NT theology begins with the primitive kerygma—and not before it.²¹ But the kerygma addresses us through the NT, and its Word is the basis as well as the object of our faith. Moreover, that preached Word has to be understood in a Heideggerian existentialist fashion, as it elicits from us a "yes," the affirmation of one's personal authentic existence. In reality, this authentic existence is a gift of God that comes from the opening of one's self to the grace of forgiveness announced in the kerygma.²² Yet, despite the laudable pastoral thrust of Bultmann's concern to make the NT message a challenge for people in the 20th century, he thus associated the historical-critical method with philosophical and theological presuppositions that proved to be not

²⁰ *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). M. Dibelius (*From Tradition to Gospel* [New York: Scribner, 1935]) called them "paradigms," whereas V. Taylor (*Formation of the Gospel Tradition* [London: Macmillan, 1949]) more accurately labeled them "pronouncement stories."

²¹ *Theology of the New Testament* 1 (London: SCM, 1952) 3. See also Bultmann's *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1958); *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

²² See further J. Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (New York: Macmillan, 1955). Cf. B. Jaspert, *Rudolf Bultmanns Werk und Wirkung* (Darmstadt; Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984); C. W. Kegley, *The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: SCM, 1966); N. Perrin, *The Promise of Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

universally acceptable.²³

The foregoing are two examples of presuppositions with which the historical-critical method has been used in the past: the rationalist, antidogmatic presupposition and the demythologizing, existentialist presupposition. Modern Christian practitioners of the method, however, also use the method with presuppositions—but presuppositions of a rather different sort.

To explain such presuppositions as are used by Catholic interpreters, let me first say a word about “exegesis,” a term by which the interpretation of Scripture according to this method is often known. Greek *exēgēsis* is derived from the verb *exēgeisthai*, “draw out”; its aim is to draw out from a book the meaning of its words, its phrases, and its text as a whole. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* defines exegesis as a “critical interpretation of a text or a portion of Scripture.” Thus English and some other modern languages have a special term for such critical interpretation of the Bible. For exegesis, though it uses philological tools and techniques, differs from philology, because it is *philology plus*. And the plus is the presupposition with which one employs the critical method.

Exegesis is concerned in the long run with the sense of a biblical passage in its final form: it seeks to draw out the meaning of the passage intended by the inspired writer. This includes not only the *textual meaning* (the sense of its words and phrases—what the medievals meant by the “literal” sense) but also its *contextual meaning* (their sense in a given paragraph or episode) and its *relational meaning* (their sense in relation to the book or the corpus of works as a whole). The relational meaning is sometimes called its biblical-theological meaning, because it seeks to interpret the words and phrases according to the synthesis of ideas of the biblical writer. This combination of the textual, contextual, and relational meaning of a passage leads to the discovery of its religious and theological meaning—to its meaning as the Word of God couched in ancient human language.

Herein lies the plus or the presupposition with which a modern Catholic interpreter of the Bible employs the philological tools and techniques characteristic of the historical-critical method. For the plus consists of elements of faith: 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

²³ See further J. Ratzinger, “Foundations and Approaches of Biblical Exegesis,” *Origins* 17, no. 35 (Feb. 11, 1988) 593–602. The same article was published under the title “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” *This World* 22 (summer 1988) 3–19.

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.

Because the historical-critical method is *per se* neutral, it can be used with such faith presuppositions. Indeed, by reason of them it becomes a *properly-oriented* method of biblical interpretation, for none of the elements of the method is pursued in and for itself. They are used only to achieve the main goal of discerning what the biblical message was that the sacred writer sought to convey—what the medievals termed the “spiritual” sense.

Because the method is neutral, it can still undergo refinements in either its historical or literary features. New modes of biblical interpretation are proposed from time to time—some of them claiming to be even of a “postcritical” nature²⁴—and some of them serve to correct or refine the basic critical method. I refer to such modes as canonical criticism, feminist criticism, political criticism, sociological criticism, structuralist criticism, etc. What is valid in these modes can be used to refine the basic method, but none of them is a substitute for that fundamental approach—nor can they be allowed to replace it.

ROLE IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND CHURCH LIFE

The use of historical criticism in the interpretation of the Bible is not a fad, because it has been advocated by the highest authority in the Church. In his encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* Pius XII never uses the term, yet his recommendations for the correct interpretation of the Bible clearly follow the principles of historical criticism.²⁵ For he insisted (1) on the study of the Bible in its original languages; (2) on the interpretation of it according to original ancient texts; (3) on due regard for the ancient literary forms that the human authors had employed; and (4) on the application to the biblical text of modern discoveries, “whether in the domain of archeology or ancient history or literature, as well as their manner and art of reasoning, narrating, and writing” (§40). That insistence of Pius XII freed Roman Catholic biblical interpretation from its own form of fundamentalism, inherited from the post-Tridentine era. Pius XII did, indeed, emphasize the need to spell out the literal meaning of the sacred text, but with due regard for the literary form with which

²⁴See D. Farkasfalvy, “In Search of a ‘Post-Critical’ Method of Biblical Interpretation for Catholic Theology,” *Communio/International Catholic Review* 13 (1986) 288–307.

²⁵See further H. Cazelles, “Anwendung und Erfahrungen mit der historisch-kritischen Methode in der katholischen Exegese,” *Die historisch-kritische Methode und die heutige Suche nach einem lebendigen Verständnis der Bibel*, ed. H. Riedlinger (Freiburg im B.: Katholische Akademie; Munich: Schnell & Steiner, 1985) 72–88.

it was composed:

In the performance of this task let the interpreters bear in mind that their foremost and greatest endeavor should be to discern and define clearly that sense of the biblical words which is called literal. Aided by the context and comparison with similar passages, let them therefore by means of their knowledge of languages search out with all diligence the literal meaning of the words; all of these helps indeed are wont to be pressed into service in the explanation of profane writers, so that the mind of the author may be made abundantly clear (§23).

But Pius XII did not stop there, for he clearly saw that literal sense in its relation to the "theological doctrine in faith and morals of the individual books or texts" (§24). Such a theological exposition of Scripture would reduce to silence those who claim that "they scarcely ever find anything in biblical commentaries to raise their hearts to God, to nourish their souls or promote their interior life" (§35). For Pius XII realized that the "spiritual sense" of Scripture, clearly intended by God, could not be something other than "the literal meaning of the words, intended and expressed by the sacred writer" (§26), and that the interpreter is bound to "disclose and expound this spiritual significance, intended and ordained by God" (§27). This is precisely what the properly-oriented use of the historical-critical method can and does achieve in the interpretation of the Bible and the life of the Church.

But the recommendation to use this method did not die with Pius XII. In 1964 the Biblical Commission issued an instruction *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels*²⁶ which did not merely reaffirm their historicity but proved to be a nuanced, enlightened discussion of the three stages of the gospel tradition that I have already mentioned. It thus emerged that the most important word in the title of the instruction was not the adjective "historical" (as might have been expected) but the preposition "on." The Commission insisted:

Unless the exegete pays attention to all these things [the three stages of the gospel tradition] which pertain to the origin and composition of the Gospels and makes proper use of all the laudable achievements of recent research, he will not fulfill his task of probing into what the sacred writers intended and what they really said (par. x).

Among the "laudable achievements" the Commission had singled out the "reasonable elements" of the form-critical method, which it mentions explicitly by name (par. v). Thus the method itself that was derived from

²⁶ A translation of this instruction, along with a commentary on it, can be found in the appendix of my book *A Christological Catechism: New Testament Answers* (New York/Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1982) 97-140.

non-Catholic interpreters of the Bible received a clear approbation, but not the presuppositions with which it had sometimes been used. Indeed, the substance of the instruction was taken up and adopted by the Second Vatican Council in its dogmatic constitution *Dei verbum* (§19).²⁷

In 1984 the Commission issued another document, *Bible et christologie*.²⁸ It discusses eleven different approaches to Christology in modern times and points out the risks that each one runs; then it gives an overview of the biblical testimony to Jesus the Christ. It is a lengthy document that names names, mentioning scholars who are representatives of the various approaches: from traditional manual Christology based on Nicaea, Chalcedon, and medieval scholastics to such modern theologians as Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Küng. What is striking in the document is the number of obiter dicta scattered throughout it that call for a critical reading of the OT and NT. Nowhere in the document does the Commission speak of the historical-critical method, but in its effort to present an overview of "integral Christology" (the total testimony of the Bible to Christ Jesus) it insists time after time on "the demands of biblical criticism" (e.g., 1.2.7.2), which it clearly distinguishes from "critical hypotheses . . . always subject to revision" (1.2.10). One paragraph of the document is worth quoting:

Indeed, many problems still remain obscure about the composition process of the sacred writings that finally emerged from their inspired authors. As a result, those who would dispense with the study of problems of this sort would be approaching Scripture only in a superficial way; wrongly judging that their way of reading Scripture is "theological," they would be setting off on a deceptive route. Solutions that are too easy can in no way provide the solid basis needed for studies in biblical theology, even when engaged in with full faith (1.3.3).

What ultimately lies behind this critical approach to the study of the Bible in the Church is the conviction that God's revelation in Christ took place in the past, and the ancient record of that self-manifestation of God in him is disclosed to the Church above all in the Bible, in the Word of God couched in ancient human wording. This is the fundamental reason why historical criticism of it plays an important role in the life of

²⁷See further J. Dupont, "Storicità dei vangeli e metodo storico dell'esegesi nella costituzione dogmatica 'Dei verbum,'" *A venti anni dal Concilio: Prospettive teologiche e giuridiche: Atti del convegno di studi "Il Concilio Vaticano II venti anni dopo" Catania 21-22 aprile, 5-6 maggio 1983* (Palermo: Edizioni O F Te S, 1984) 51-73. Cf. J. Gnllka, "Die biblische Exegese im Lichte des Dekretes über die göttliche Offenbarung (Dei verbum)," *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 36 (1985) 5-19.

²⁸An English translation of it can be found in my book *Scripture and Christology: A Statement of the Biblical Commission with a Commentary* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1986); see esp. 56-58.

the Church itself. This, of course, is not to deny the guidance and assistance of the Spirit in church life. Yet that Spirit is never conceived of as a revealer. The Spirit guides the Church through the centuries into a fuller and deeper understanding of the historical revelation once given in Christ Jesus. As the Fourth Evangelist put it, "The Paraclete, the holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:25); "when the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all truth, for He will not speak on His own authority" (16:13). Thus historical criticism assists the Church in its ongoing life, by helping it to uncover the essence of the revelation once given to it—the meaning of the Word of God in ancient human words.²⁹

But the modern literary critic sometimes insists that a text once composed takes on a life of its own and may even convey a meaning beyond that of the original author's intention. There is some truth in such a view, but such a "meaning" that goes "beyond" that of the historical biblical author can never be understood as losing all homogeneity with the meaning of the original author. However, such a meaning that goes "beyond" the original biblical meaning may become part of the Spirit-guided postwritten status of the text, viz. that which results in genuine dogmatic Tradition.

Finally, this defense of the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible may seem as though I am imposing a heavy burden on readers, who might justly object: "Why does one have to know all these things about the Bible? Why cannot one just open the book and read it—read it as the Word of God?" Such a question is often asked. An answer to it comes from two passages in the Bible itself. The first is found in 2 Pet 3:15–17.

Consider the forbearance of our Lord as salvation, just as our brother Paul once wrote to you according to the wisdom granted to him, speaking of this in all his letters. Some things in them are hard to understand, which the unlearned and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. Knowing this in advance, beloved [Christians], be on your guard that you be not carried away by the error of lawless people and fall from your surefootedness.

Whoever wrote that passage at the beginning of the second Christian century was already aware of the difficulty that people were having with

²⁹ It might be worth noting here that this sort of critical reading has to be extended from the Bible to teachings of the Church's magisterium itself. Thus, *Mysterium ecclesiae* (AAS 65 [1973] 116–17) admits the need to recognize the historical, time-conditioned character of church pronouncements. Though the Church can teach infallibly, its exposition of revelation may involve language of a given time, may be expressed at first incompletely, may be limited in character, and may involve changeable conceptions of a given period.

the proper understanding of Paul's letters.

The second passage is still more eloquent. It is found in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8. Philip the Evangelist, who has been preaching the Word of God in Samaria, is told by the angel of the Lord to go down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He does so and encounters the eunuch of the Ethiopian Candace seated in his chariot and reading Isaiah 53. Philip draws near and asks him whether he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian's answer is well known: "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (8:31). Thus the soon-to-be-baptized Ethiopian Jew reveals his difficult experience in trying to understand a passage about the Servant of the Lord in the Book of Isaiah—an experience that is often that of 20th-century readers of the Bible. Yet it is also the experience with which the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible is trying to cope.

Finally, there is an aspect of the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible in the life of the Church that has to be mentioned briefly, viz. its impact in ecumenical relations with other Christian churches. The use of this method by Catholic interpreters since 1943 had much to do with the preparation of the Church for the developments at the Second Vatican Council. On the heels of the Council emerged ecumenical dialogue with many Christian ecclesial communities. No little reason for that emergence of dialogue was precisely the fact that Catholic interpreters of the Bible were pursuing the same kind of interpretation of the Bible that was in current use among many non-Catholic interpreters. This is not a direct consequence of historical criticism of the Bible, but it is an aspect of it that cannot be overlooked.³⁰ Would the bilateral consultations be where they are today if it were not for the use of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation in the Catholic Church?

³⁰ See further R. E. Brown, "The Contribution of Historical Biblical Criticism to Ecumenical Church Discussion" (forthcoming in a book to be edited by R. J. Neuhaus); also T. R. Curtin, *Historical Criticism and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture: The Catholic Discussion of a Biblical Hermeneutic: 1958-1983* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1987).



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.