

Pernicious Presuppositions of the Historical-Critical Method of Bible Interpretation

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Introduction

To us who are accustomed to using the grammatical-exegetical or grammatical-historical method of Bible interpretation, according to which we read an ancient text, we read a literary work, we read a historical document, and we read a sacred Scripture, the historical-critical method is something foreign, something strange, something we have seen others use, perhaps, have read about, know from hearsay, but have no real familiarity with from personal use.

We know that the Bible is *an ancient text* containing here and there words the meaning of which has been forgotten, containing passages in which copyists down through the centuries have made scribal errors, containing variant readings, therefore, depending on the ancient manuscript one uses. We know that all these difficulties cannot be removed at this late date because the autographs do not exist any longer. Yet scholars have succeeded in ascertaining on the basis of the textual evidence we have what the original reading of the text must have been. The variants that exist concern themselves with minor details and do not affect any doctrine taught in the Bible.

We read the Bible as *a literary work*, realizing that there are many different literary forms in it. Some of the Bible is historical narrative of events that have taken place. Some of it is poetical embellishment of such events. Some of it is prophetic, revealing God's plans for the future of His people. In the New Testament we have a series of letters containing doctrine and admonition. In both the Old and New Testament we have apocalyptic portions which reveal in part God's plans for the end of the world and for our translation into heavenly glory. Besides these basic genres there is praise, thanksgiving, glorification of God, worship material, and incidentally there are found here and there bits of information we would classify as geography, scientific data, botanical, zoological, historical, and biographical information.

We read *a historical document*. The Bible is not a complete history of mankind, nor even of God's people Israel, but is the historical presentation of God's plan of salvation as He worked it out in the history of this planet and its inhabitants. What is pertinent to this subject is included. What is of no importance to man's salvation is omitted. There are tremendous gaps in the chronological sequence of events in some parts of the Bible. It is not designated to tell us everything we can know about the past history of man but concentrates on those items which are of importance to us for our soul's salvation.

We read *a sacred Scripture*. To us the Bible is not mere human literature. It is God's revealed word recorded for posterity by men chosen by God to do this work and inspired by Him

to do it in the manner in which He wants it done. Thus the Bible is true and correct, reliable and infallible, since it is the Word of the God of Truth.

Viewing the Bible in this light we attempt to ascertain what the Lord who inspired the sacred Scriptures wanted to say to us in the inspired writings of the 66 books of the Bible. We do this by applying the knowledge of philology, lexicography, grammar, and syntax to these writings to ascertain what the text really says to us. Whether this is fully intelligible to us, sounds reasonable to our intellect, agrees with our own experience, seems logical to our mind, and tallies with the findings of scientific investigation or not does not make any difference to us. We regard every word of the Bible as God's inspired infallible errorless word to us.

A study of Biblical interpretation down through the centuries reveals that various methods have been employed. One of the oldest is some form of allegorizing. This dates back to the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament in the Targums and the Talmud and was employed in the early Christian church by such men as Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Even Jerome and Augustine used this method extensively. The latter distinguished a four-fold sense of Scripture, the historical, the moral, the analogical, and the allegorical. This four-fold sense was the common approach to interpretation in the Middle Ages. The literal sense was the evident meaning of the words themselves. The moral sense was regarded as the advice these words give us concerning our conduct—what to do. The allegorical sense told men what to believe, and the analogical sense told them what to hope for.

The Reformation rejected this four-fold sense and concentrated on the *unus simplex sensus* again. Luther himself was still taught the four-fold sense, but soon rejected it in favor of the one simple sense of Scripture. When Scripture seemed to conflict with human reason, Luther was willing to submit reason to God's truth. Calvin, on the other hand, felt that all Scripture had to be "reasonable" because of its absolute clarity. The doctrinal controversies that followed the solidification of Roman Catholic dogma in the Decrees of the Council of Trent led to intensive study of Scripture in the Lutheran church and resulted in the Formula of Concord, in which the doctrines in controversy at the time are thoroughly stated thetically and antithetically.

Soon there were reactions to this tendency to make thorough exegesis the basis for the formulation of doctrine. The Lutheran church experienced a period of pietism which tended to disregard dogmatics and to substitute subjective psychological interpretation which aimed primarily at edification.

This was followed by the age of rationalism and higher criticism which attempts to verify everything in Scripture by modern methods of historical research. Since divine revelation is not verifiable in this way, the only religious truth in the Bible is that which agrees with man's understanding. Reason and logic are used to distinguish between fact in the Bible and what is regarded as the interpretation of the first century believers. This process denies verbal inspiration and the infallibility of the Scriptures. The human side of the Bible and progressive revelation are stressed. Literary criticism is said to supply the method of identifying sources behind the Bible. The main purpose of religious truth is said to be to maintain Christian morality. Supernatural elements such as miracles are denied or disparaged and are usually explained as historical influences on the writers of ancient beliefs in gods who control or influence events among men.

What is the Historical-Critical Method?

Because it is so highly subjective, it is difficult to define the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation. It would perhaps be easier to describe it. The historical-critical method, also sometimes called the New Hermeneutic, attempts to avoid reducing the use or the content of the Bible, as the 19th century rationalistic interpretation did, without denying the underlying principles of rationalism or the “insights” it contributed to interpretation. These “insights” are used to supposedly establish the “true Christ” for modern man in the modern setting by accommodating the “ancient” worldviews of the Bible to the modern “scientific” viewpoint.

In this process or “movement” (*Hermeneutik*), hermeneutics is to be widened from one of mere interpretation of Scripture (*Erklaerung*) into a wider function of the whole human understanding (*Vershehen*), i.e. making sense of and thus interpreting human experience rather than simply deciphering texts or pursuing the curiosity of what the texts had to say to an ancient group of unknown readers.

Three strata of Biblical material and historical contexts (oral tradition, literary source, and redactionary material) must be both *critically examined* and then *interpreted from the perspective of existential demythologizing*. Thus modern man will be confronted with the Gospel kerygma (the call to decision).

A. The Method

The method employed by the historical-critical method is first of all the examination of the three strata of Biblical material, oral tradition, literary sources, and redactionary material and their historical contexts (material principle).

According to Form Criticism (*Formgeschichte*) the first step in the production of the Scriptures was *oral tradition*. The supposition is that for about a century after the time of Christ’s public ministry fragmentary independent and self-contained stories (pericopes) of Jesus circulated among the early Christians as oral tradition before they were gathered and recorded in writing (Luke 1:1-4). It is assumed that the early church was not interested in giving facts about Jesus’ life but rather an interpretation of his life from the standpoint of his “exalted status as the resurrected Lord.” (*Geschichte*) They believe that often an earlier form of a narrative can be found by stripping off supposedly later additions made in the period of oral transmission and thus determining the original use or *Sitz im Leben* (i.e. sermon, liturgy, catechesis, etc.) of the form.

In the Gospels two main categories of such material are identified: sayings, which may be *apophthegmata* (short stories accompanying a saying of Jesus) or *logia* (sayings without any particular historical accompaniment); and narratives, which may be miracle stories or legends (stories which may or may not be historically grounded but instruct the reader about a truth, e.g. the Passion and Resurrection.)

In the Epistles various materials are cited, such as: early creeds, hymns, liturgy (acclamations, baptismal rites), early catechetical material, *Haustafel*.

These oral traditions (pericopes) are cited as one source of the literary sources.

The second step in the production of Scriptures is the so-called source criticism (*Quellengeschichte*). Critics endeavor to ascertain what sources were incorporated into the Scriptures as we have them today and where these sources came from.

As applied to the Old Testament these critics recognize four sources which they think they can identify either by the use of various names of God, the choice of words, syntax, or content. In many Old Testament books passages containing the tetragrammaton usually rendered as Jehovah or LORD are attributed to a Jehovist source, whereas other passages containing the name Elohim for God are attributed to the Elohist source. Still other passages containing restatements of the Law of Moses are attributed to the Deuteronomist, while yet other passages concerning themselves with liturgical matters are attributed to the Priestly code. The only real problem with this classification is that no one knows who the Jehovist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist, or the writer of the Priestly code actually were.

In the New Testament these critics concern themselves with the synoptic problem, trying to ascertain whether Matthew, Mark, or Luke are the basic Gospel text which was followed by the other two. Generally this problem is solved by assuming an *Ur-Markus* which is presumably the source used by both Matthew and Luke. A second source (Q) provides sayings of Jesus which are found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, and a separate source is assumed for material peculiar to Matthew alone or to Luke alone (M and L).

Just how it is possible to distinguish, identify, and detect these supposed sources at this late date is not apparent. Obviously there is much room for conjecture in this area, and among modern critics there is an abundance of theories, many of them highly subjective, as to what sources were used by what writer and in what way.

After the various books of the Bible, especially the New Testament, were put together by some pseudonymous editors from oral tradition and from various literary sources, further changes were made subsequently by so-called redactors. This process is known as *Redaction Criticism* (*Redaktiongeschichte*). This constitutes the third step in the development of the text as we have it today. These redactors are assumed to have added material, omitted other material, reinterpreted some items, emphasized or de-emphasized certain elements of the oral or literary sources. These redactors are suspected of having created temporal, geographical, or even ideal or typical contexts in which they placed their source materials.

In this manner the editors or redactors independently and creatively interpreted the existing tradition for their own generation according to their theological purposes. To them the Gospels are primarily historical sources for the age in which they were produced, rather than for the age of which they treat (namely the Life of Jesus). As proof for the redaction theory they cite the fact that individual characteristics of Biblical writers show through their writings, such as frequently repeated expressions, a general plan or theme, etc.

It is also assumed that all three of these strata of Biblical materials were influenced by various religious philosophies of the first century. This, it is said, necessitates a comparative religious study (*Religionsgeschichte*). The purpose of this study is to identify what is unique and distinctive in the religious thought of the Bible; and if anything reflects a Jewish or a Hellenistic environment, then supposedly it may *a priori* be eliminated as historical for the life of Jesus.

In the Old Testament such influences might have come from Egypt, the Canaanites, Babylonia, Persia—in the form of a creation epic, stories of supernatural gods, the nature cycle and fertility cults, divine kings, etc. In the New Testament Judaism, Eastern mystic religions, Greek philosophy, skepticism, magic, and astrology are recognized as such influences in references to a messiah and to dualism (Essene), the redeemer myth of the Gnostics, the emperor cult of the Romans, rabbinical parables and sayings, etc.

Thus the formation of the material of the Bible is supposed to be a mixture of preservation, creation, interpretation, and transformation at three different levels. The first task of the interpreter is supposed to be to sort out what has been done, by whom, at what time, and for what purpose at all three levels, in order to give the Bible reader a good “insight” into the background of the material and the kind of material he is reading. However, since the Bible language is mythical and the purpose of the Bible is existential, the interpreter’s work must continue if the Bible reader is truly to “understand” the message of the Bible.

How utterly subjective the historical-critical method is, is apparent from a consideration of the writings of several men who have employed it. Rudolph Bultmann approached the interpretation of the Bible from the perspective of existential demythologizing. He said that the key to understanding the New Testament is the realization that it is not history (*Historia*) but kerygma of the early church (*Geshichte*). Kerygma may indeed employ the form of historical narrative, but it has no objective meaning apart from its meaning at the time it is read or proclaimed. Thus kerygma is a special form of theological statement unique to the Bible which God chose to use in encountering man and calling him to decision (*skandalon*).

The “false skandalon caused by the supernatural element in the Bible is removed by recognizing that the New Testament kerygma is couched in mythical language (“myth” represents a peculiar kind of truth—the truth of picture language which expresses in story form the theological significance of certain events and realities). When demythologized, he says, the New Testament no longer requires a man to sacrifice his intellect by forcing him to accept a view of the world in the realm of faith which he denies in his everyday life (the “false” skandalon).

These myths are not to be cast aside, as rationalism and 19th century higher criticism did, but are to be interpreted. Basic to this interpretation is the existentialist philosophy (especially Heidegger) because it supposedly provides a key to what the New Testament kerygma is trying to do with mystical language, namely, challenge a man to make a decision to enter an authentic kind of human existence (the “true” skandalon).

This handicap of the mythological form of the New Testament message is not supposed to make the Bible a closed book to man because every man is absorbed in the question of the

meaning of his own life; and so he has the preunderstanding necessary to begin asking the right questions of Scripture, namely, the question about human existence. If he addresses this question to Scripture, he in turn will be asked questions by Scripture which will give him deeper existential insight; and so he will know better how to question Scripture as he begins a new cycle of questioning (Bultmann's hermeneutical circle).

Bultmann sees the task of the interpreter as exhibiting the existential meaning of the kerygma which is couched in the mythical language. He does this by showing the understanding of human existence which is implicit in any given text. This "spiritual reality" is expressed by the first century mentality in objective terms analogous to their world of daily experience (it is all figurative language expressed in the form of historical narrative).

As the "Word of God" is thus read or proclaimed, the "eschatological event" takes place; God encounters man and challenges him to make the decision to become what he is meant to be (*Sein*). If man makes this decision (faith) in this encounter with God, God will lead him to make the cross of Christ his own by denying the ever-present temptation to allay his anxiety (flesh) by surrendering himself to the world and immersing himself in its being (law). God will also lead him to participate in Jesus' resurrection by finding the freedom (Gospel) to be his own true self (spirit): open to God's love, trusting in God alone, living the present in love, and having a nonchalance about the future.

Because the New Testament is said to be couched in mythical language, the point is argued whether the historical Christ is important or not. Bultmann feels that the "quest for the historical Jesus" must be abandoned since faith does not rest on the knowledge of the historical Jesus but upon man's being confronted ever anew (Easter event) by the kerygmatic call to decision of the early Christian proclamation (Easter preaching). He says, it is a sure sign of "unfaith" to seek support for faith in historical fact. "The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself."

Post-Bultmannians such as Fuchs, Ebeling, and others argue that the historical Jesus must not be entirely ignored lest faith become only a faith in the early church. They admit it is a difficult process because of the strata of Biblical material, but they say the knowledge that some facts and sayings of Jesus are genuine should spur the interpreter on. Scholars will vary in their opinions as to what is historical, but all sincere searching and the resultant propositions ought not be ignored but carefully panned for any flakes of genuine gold from the original historical vein (now hidden by the successive layers of the early church kerygma and mingled with them by the process of creation, interpretation, and transformation).

At the risk of oversimplification, the following mathematical formula illustrates the process of the New Hermeneutic:

$$\frac{\text{oral tradition} + \text{literary sources} + \text{redactionary material}}{\text{existential demythologizing}} = \begin{matrix} \text{the Gospel} \\ \text{kerygma} \end{matrix}$$

Two so-called "conservative" approaches to historical-critical interpretation might still be mentioned, the "theological" of Karl Barth and Salvation History (*Heilsgeschichte*).

According to Barth revelation is not a permanent posit of truth (static propositions) but the events of living-divine human encounter. God's Word is a happening and cannot be equated with the Bible. The happening of the Word of God took place in the event of God's self-revelation in Christ (the living Word) and comes to man today in the two other forms of the happening of the Word of God: the witness of Scripture (the written Word) and the proclamation of the church (the preached Word). Apart from the written Word and the preached Word, Barth says, the living Word can never become revelation for man. So it is the task of the interpreter to make the revelation of the living Word recorded in the *fallible* written Word *relevant* in the preached Word, so that the divine-human encounter which demands decision takes place in each situation of modern man's life.

According to Salvation History (Heilsgeschichte) God's creative activity has been active in and through all history to save. Revelation is objectively given in historical events but the understanding of the meaning of this revelation rests upon subjective decision and so is isolated from "objective divine truths" of an "inspired" Bible. For example, the events of Christ's life are objective fact, but the writer's interpretation of them is subjective and so needs to be critically examined and often reformulated for modern man.

While these two approaches repudiate the presupposition of the more radical historical-critical school that the task of exegesis is an existentialist understanding of the New Testament, their view of the revelation nevertheless is that what the Bible says is the witness of the witness of fallible man, and thus their view of interpretation is that what the Bible *means* must still depend on subjective spiritual decision rather than letting Scripture interpret Scripture.

B. The Result

Now that we have reviewed the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation and have an idea of what it attempts to do, we can readily see what its pernicious presuppositions in effect do to the sacred Scriptures. We observe six obvious results of this procedure. According to this method these can be:

1. No clarity of Scripture.

It is obvious that no untrained layman is prepared for the process of examination and interpretation required by the new hermeneutic. For this procedure thorough training in the techniques and familiarity with the background materials is necessary. Only professional theologians trained in the historical-critical method can interpret Scripture in this way.

Demythologizing is really only the old allegorizing in a new dress. The only difference is that in this type there is not even some objective body of doctrine as a point of reference, such as Jerome, Augustine, and medieval theologians used.

This subjectivity is not only defended but applauded since, it is said, it rids the church of dogmatism and always leaves the meaning of the text open. The danger involved in this is said to be overcome by the sharing of “insights” so that the subjectivity of one man is always tempered by the “insights” (more subjectively!) of all other “scholars.”

2. No history.

The early church supposedly created the “Christ” of the kerygma according to the ritual patters of tribal life; the presence of Christ in history is reduced to little more than a phantom appearance. The history of the early church, it is said, must be reconstructed on the basis of the kerygma (so tribal life can be used as a pattern!); the Book of Acts is not the real historical situation.

The clear testimony of Scripture that a given text is historical fact is simply ignored, or Jesus’ parables are cited as one example that the Bible is made up of non-historical material presented in a historical form (creation, Johan, Jesus’ resurrection, etc.). It is reasoned that history is never really factual but always ambiguous because historical “facts” merely represent the viewpoint of the writer; the important thing is not whether things really happened that way, but what meaning any given report of “facts” leads me to find in my life especially in regard to the making of personal decisions.

It is said, therefore, that truth exists in the Bible which does not depend on historical facts, but which uses historical narrative in a unique way. The “witness of faith” replaces interest in the “facts of history.”

3. No revelation.

Some exponents of the historical-critical method may object to being classified as a group which denies objective revelation. There may be differences at secondary levels, but all agree in denying divine revelation as objectively given in historical events and information from God mediated through chosen writers in simple intelligible words and concepts.

Biblical language is said to be a phenomenon in which man becomes man through the disclosure of God in language. The New Testament text is not revelation but “witness” to the drama of God’s dialogue with man in Christ. When a man receives this witness it becomes the means whereby God’s presence in judgment and promise dawns on him with the same freshness and excitement as it did in Christ. Thus revelation takes place when the kerygma of the New Testament is “preached” (interpreted) for modern man and he becomes aware that it is his story of God fashioning him to be his authentic self.

Revelation then is described as only a modern event since the Bible becomes God’s Word only in the kerygmatic encounter. Existential experience, it is said, rather than objective history is the pivot of divine revelation.

4. No unity.

The critical and theological immaturity which sees an underlying unity in the Bible, it is said, only hinders the progress in solving the “problems” of interpreting the Bible.

Supposedly there is conflict in Jesus’ own teachings (love vs. eschatology), and between Jesus and Paul (love vs. atonement and judgement). James and Hebrews, it is said, do not agree with Paul on justification. John’s understanding of faith is supposedly unique. The New Testament is said either to reinterpret or reject the Old Testament law, etc.

For the historical-critical interpreter the idea of the continuity between the historical Jesus and the early church’s kerygma has replaced the idea of unity.

5. No authority.

Making the Bible the sole and final norm for the church denies, it is said, the biblical truth that God is Lord and leads to “bibliolatry.” It is argued that the idea of authority of Scripture which implies a “legal, externally imposed right to control thoughts and actions” is foreign to a mature understanding of the role of the Scriptures. Since no unity is recognized, obviously no authority will be either.

The authority of the Bible is reduced to a purely subjective matter also. Since the Bible becomes God’s Word supposedly only in the kerygmatic encounter, its authority is only that which is experienced by the individual in his personal decision of response. The Bible is replaced as the norm by dozens of men saying “the norm for me;” a sample of doctrinal smorgasbord is served, and the individual is urged to select the norm which suits his existential situation best.

6. No salvation.

It is implied that there is not *necessarily* any such thing as sin and grace in the sense in which these concepts have always been understood. Neither is there *necessarily* any resurrection and eternal life.

“Salvation” is thought to be authentic existence: freedom in “Christ” from anxiety and living in *love*. This is supposed to be a modern route between the “old” idea of faith and 19th century historical skepticism. Its devilish character can be seen in this that it appeals mightily to both human intellect and the desire to have religion serve the purpose of love among mankind while at the same time deceiving people that they are “saved” by “God’s grace” with the “true Christ” at the center of their “faith” and that all they believe is based on the whole “Bible.”

Conclusion

If one asks about the eighteen centuries of Christianity which did not understand the Bible this way, he is told either that we ought not concern ourselves with that but only worry about the present, or an answer is given something like this: In its basic form the Bible served the people of the ancient and medieval times well because it conformed perfectly with their

supernatural worldview and so helped them in their lives to find “salvation” (i.e. authentic existence). In the modern *scientific worldview*, a new approach to the Bible is needed if it is to fulfill its purpose of helping modern man find his true being. It is the genius of the Biblical language, it is said, that enables it to serve it two such totally different worldviews so well.

How anyone brought up in the Lutheran tradition of regarding the Bible as the verbally inspired inerrant Word of God in whole and in all its parts from Genesis to Revelation can justify the careful use of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation by stating that adequate safeguards are used, has always been a mystery to me. To me it is obviously a substitution of human subjective ideas for the eternal truth of God’s Word. It empties the sacred Scriptures of their saving power and deprives man of the one solid foundation on which he can rest his faith and his hope for eternal life.

May the Lord in His grace preserve us from falling victims to these pernicious presuppositions of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation!