

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES: ESSAY

The historical-critical approach has lost its previous dominating position in biblical interpretation. Discuss and critically evaluate its role in the context of contemporary biblical studies.

This essay will briefly introduce how the historical-critical approach developed in western Europe and came to dominance within the field of biblical interpretation. It will describe the central tenets of historical-criticism and then critically reflect on them. The main criticisms levelled against the approach and their lasting impact on its continuing application will be considered. The final section of this essay will describe how the historical-critical method has developed in response to the challenges it faced and how its contemporary use has been transformed from an exclusive singular approach to a complementary, pluralistic one with a continuing valuable contribution to contemporary biblical studies.

Prior to the development of the historical-critical approach biblical narratives were accepted by Christian believers as being historically accurate. However, this is not to say that historical or critical inquiry of the Bible only became important with the development of the historical-critical method. J. W. Rogerson outlines how areas that would be at the forefront of concern to the historical-critical method, such as the original wording of texts, authorship, historical accuracy etc. were being argued over as early as the 2nd century CE.¹ John Barton also suggested biblical criticism had its roots in early Christian inquiry before being more fully developed in the Renaissance period (particularly the emphasis to rediscover older textual sources and awareness of literary genre)² and during the Reformation, which enabled biblical understanding to be “freed” from traditional readings and ecclesial authority.³ Barton also acknowledged that the Enlightenment, with its aims to use reason to seek objective truth without regard to tradition, as having a significant impact on the development of the historical-critical method and its subsequent influence and dominance of biblical criticism in the 19th century.⁴

1 J. W. Rogerson, “Historical Criticism and the Authority of the Bible” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. Judith M. Lieu and J.W. Rogerson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 841-859 (p. 847), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199237777.003.0045>>.

2 John, Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 130.

3 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 121.

4 Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, p. 123.

Paul Michael Kurtz in his essay on the history of the development of the historical-critical method, notes that Europe was going through a period of significant and dynamic change in the 19th century (politically, culturally socially), and that it was within the fertile ground of this context that criticism, including textual criticism, evolved.⁵ He further comments that criticism at that time was not easy to define but that its ends included “to recover original documents, to advance a knowledge of human past, to understand a (once) sacred scripture”.⁶

Within this century the historical accuracy and coherence of many ancient Greek and Roman writings were being critically analysed using the “scientific” historical method and these concluded that much of this “history” was really myths and legends.⁷ This inevitably led to biblical writings being investigated in a similar way and it produced results that challenged the orthodox understanding of the Bible leading to strong opposition from the church and the academy. Kurtz details examples such David Friedrich Strauss’s “The life of Jesus” (written in 1835), which questioned the miracle stories and asserted that the Gospels were not a unity but actually a collection of individual stories; and Julius Wellhausen’s assertion that Moses was a character in the Hebrew Bible rather than an author of it (in “Prolegomena to the History of Israel, 1883).⁸ In addition, within this period, there was a move within biblical criticism to focus not only on the history being narrated in the texts but rather to centre attention on the history of the texts themselves. These distinct inquiries resulted in an unhelpful separating of historical concerns from those of significance or meaning.⁹

Many inquiries arose from within the Bible itself as biblical scholars began to recognise the “existence of a gap between text and truth” and became open to a more scientific and historical investigative approach.¹⁰ This resulted in scholars who were working within the church to utilise and develop the historical-critical method as a means “to discover the

5 Paul Michael Kurtz, “A Historical, Critical Retrospective on Historical Criticism” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Ian Boxall and Bradley C. Gregory (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 15-36 (p. 18).

6 Kurtz, p. 21.

7 Kurtz, p. 16.

8 Kurtz, p. 16.

9 Kurtz, p. 23.

10 John Muddiman, “Historical Criticism: Truth in Biblical Criticism” in *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in Honour of John Barton*, ed. Katherine J. Dell and Paul M. Joyce (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 52-62 (p. 54), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199645534.003.0005>>.

message of the Bible in the light of new sources of knowledge of their day”.¹¹ They recognised that the Bible needed to be interpreted in a new way if it were to be relevant and able to assert its authority and deliver its missional imperative in their contemporary world.¹² However, regardless of their motivations, many of these churchmen and scholars were charged with heresy, or had to resign their posts, as their findings ran contrary to the orthodox positions of the day.

However, by the early 20th century the majority of English theological education institutions had accepted this approach to biblical criticism (influenced significantly by the publication of biblical commentaries supporting the approach)¹³ and mainline churches were openly acknowledging that the Bible did not always record events in a historically accurate way.¹⁴ Collins notes that consequently, historical criticism had a “revolutionary” impact on biblical studies in the Europe and North America.¹⁵

Features of the historical-critical approach

The aim of the historical-critical method was to objectively determine the meaning of the biblical texts within their historical context and to reconstruct them for the present age. Regardless of its name, it is not actually a single method but rather it utilised a range of “scientific” historical methods to search for what “really” happened in the past in an attempt to discover the meaning and significance the original author intended to communicate to his original audience.

Barton identified four central features to the historical-critical approach: i) “genetic questions”; ii) original meaning; iii) historical reconstructions and iv) disinterested scholarship.¹⁶ Each of these is briefly described below.

11 Rogerson, p. 853.

12 Rogerson, p.852.

13 Rogerson, p. 852.

14 John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), p. 7.

15 Collins, *The Bible After Babel*, p. 6.

16 John Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. Barton (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 9-21 (p. 9).

Firstly, “genetic questions” refers to inquiries that are asked about the biblical text itself rather than any focus on the meaning of its contents. They include questions regarding original authorship and audience, rhetorical intention, dating, origins, location and context (historical, political, social, literary, cultural etc.). The intention is to ascertain what influenced the authors to write what they did by considering the various sources that contributed to the final form of the text and to explore how the original audience understood it. Several methods are employed to consider these questions including: textual criticism, which aims to recover the most original wording of biblical texts from available versions; source criticism, which seeks to identify the sources used by the original author to create the final form; form criticism, which examines smaller literary units to determine their “setting in life” and purpose; tradition criticism which considers how the transmission process may have altered the earlier oral and literary traditions; redaction criticism which considers how the biblical authors or editors combined earlier sources into the final text. Shively T. J. Smith notes that “the connecting thread through these methods is the attempt to reconstruct the history of the text at the level of language, sources, collectors and editors”.¹⁷

The application of these methods has led to arguably insightful proposals such as i) the Pentateuch being made up of contributions from a variety of traditions, J, E, D and P; ii) the identification of the potential sources and influences of the synoptic gospels (Q, M, L and Sign source).¹⁸

Secondly, the historical-critical method had the ambition to discover the “original” meaning of a text, that is, how it was understood by its original audience. This feature states that it was essential to consider texts within their historical context if they were to be understood correctly and to thus, discover their “true” meaning. To accomplish this effectively means “travelling back in time” to the biblical period, and to choose to ignore how the church may have interpreted these texts through subsequent centuries. This endeavour faces the inescapable challenge of historical distance: the period of time elapsed between the interpreter and the biblical times in which the texts were written, recognising the significant differences there will be in terms of language, culture, practices and locations.

¹⁷ Shively T. J. Smith, “Historical Criticism: Methods” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Ian Boxall and Bradley C. Gregory (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023) pp. 37-54 (p. 42).

¹⁸ Smith, p. 41.

Thirdly, the historical-critical approach was interested in what “really happened” in the ancient past and sought to build biblical historical reconstructions that retold its stories. This has involved consideration of evidence and learning from such disciplines as archaeology, sociology and ancient literature studies. The narratives of the Bible were investigated to determine the extent to which they were historically accurate and to reconstruct the genuine happenings that the biblical authors reported on, rather than to merely accept how they may have presented them to their audience. This has led to the assertion that events recorded in the Bible do not necessarily reflect what actually occurred, and rather they are often at times historically inaccurate or suspected of being highly improbable. Examples of the former charge include how archaeological evidence raises doubt about the biblical account of the conquest of Canaan or how the existence of differing parallel accounts within the synoptic Gospels cannot all be “true”.

With respect to the latter charge, narratives that contained explicit supernatural elements such as miracles or angels, were determined as being intrinsically improbable. This suspicion regarding the supernatural was the consequence of what Collins refers to as the “principle of analogy”,¹⁹ that is, the suggestion that history is continuous in character and that people have not significantly changed over time. The implication is that the ancient past can be understood by comparing and analogising it with the present. Therefore as, arguably, the supernatural does not occur now (in 19th or 20th century western Europe), then it could not have happened in the ancient past. The historical-critical approach led to attempts to explain the biblical supernatural reports as the interpretation of “natural” occurrences (for example, a thunderstorm representing the voice of God in condemning Adam and Eve’s actions) or by dismissing miracles with logical explanations (for example the feeding of the five thousand being seen as an act of generosity by one young person that was then subsequently replicated by others).²⁰

Fourthly, and possibly most controversially, the historical-critical method’s feature of “disinterested scholarship” aimed to approach biblical writings with objective detachment and attempt to uncover the historical facts behind the text with no prejudice. The

19 Collins, *The Bible After Babel*, p. 5.

20 Rogerson, p. 849.

assumption was that the interpreter should lay aside their own presuppositions (including and especially that of ecclesial influence and personal faith) and seek to analyse texts in an objective way to discover their “true” meaning. As Barton stated “The historical-critic’s calling was to be a neutral observer, rescinding from any kind of faith-commitment in order to get at the truth”.²¹

Criticism of the historical-critical approach

The historical-critical method rose to dominance in the 19th century and remained at the forefront of biblical interpretation until the 1960s when new discoveries and the development of other interpretative approaches led to challenges and increased criticism about its appropriateness as a method.

Although an admirable ambition, the historical-criticism’s aim to retrieve and reconstruct the original meaning of biblical texts, could never reliably deliver this reality. The sources available were often incomplete, in languages not fully understood, and the original events which were being referenced lacked evidence or may have been too complex to be easily reconstructed. Consequently, several reconstructions could often have been possible, and the one proposed was that which was “most probable” based on the available evidence as understood by the interpreter. However, this approach could never completely deliver the “whole truth” and the reality, as Smith states (quoting Renita Weems), is that “a historical-reconstruction of biblical events is itself interpreted history”, one which was determined by the interpreter.²² This has become more apparent as new discoveries (such as the Akkadian texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls) have resulted in challenges to previously held reconstructions, highlighting some of problems with the historical approach’s findings.

Smith also contends that the search for the “original” meaning of biblical narratives limits their potential meaning by “locking” them solely into a narrowly reconstructed historical understanding which often tends to ignore aspects such as social and cultural issues, inequalities, power dynamics and ideologies. This not only affects the particular understanding of a text itself but it also constrains how future interpretative communities

²¹ Barton, *Historical-Critical Approaches*, p. 12.

²² Smith, p45.

are expected to approach and understand it.²³ Smith continues her criticism by stating that the search for the original meaning of a text undermines one of the historical-critical method's own presuppositions: that writings reflect a process of development through time and don't just reflect a single moment. To that end Smith argues that consideration of a text's reception history, and not just its pre-history, is equally important to provide a deeper and richer historical interpretation and understanding of its meaning.²⁴

By far the primary criticism of the historical-critical method relates to its practitioners and the impossibility of ever bringing a neutral, objective perspective to biblical interpretation. Collins describes postmodernism's response to "objectivity" as it "is no more than a pretense that masks the vested interests of the interpreter"²⁵ Although a harsh observation, it accurately identifies that all interpreters have their own interests and presuppositions when they investigate texts, whether these are acknowledged or not. In response to this, Barton argues that this pretense should be abandoned and that interests and presuppositions should be openly acknowledged recognising that no one can "only" serve the truth.²⁶

In the 19th and 20th centuries the majority of biblical scholars were white, Western and male. However, as biblical studies have become more inclusive of broader voices, liberation and feminist theologians have argued that this lack of diversity has led to significant "blind spots" in the way texts were reconstructed and interpreted. In particular they argued that the interests of women and marginalised groups have been ignored. Interestingly, in reaction to this, there has not been a universal call for the rejection of the historical-critical approach but rather that its critical methods be utilised to consider these overlooked areas, effectively abandoning objectivity and recognising vested interests in the pursuit of specific inquiries.²⁷

Eric M. Vanden Eykel agrees that objectivity may constrain understanding and also suggests that an acknowledgement of presuppositions, especially as related to faith, might

23 Smith, p. 43.

24 Smith, p. 43.

25 Collins, *The Bible After Babel*, p. 12.

26 Barton, *Historical-Critical Approaches*, p. 13.

27 Rogerson, p. 844.

bring “deeper meaning” to texts. He particularly comments that biblical writings were meant to be read and interpreted by communities of faith, and that these presuppositions can assist to understand not only the original meaning of the text but the potential application of this ancient meaning to modern Christian believers.²⁸ Similarly, R. Kendall Soulen, in describing Christianity as a historical faith, suggests Christians should be willing to consider the findings of historical research and be prepared to refine their biblical understanding in the light of it.²⁹

However, it is worth noting that one of the most important implications of the historical-critical approach was its challenge to the traditional view that the Bible was inspired, which was understood to affirm both a literal interpretation of the Bible and its historical accuracy. The conclusions from historical-critical inquiries necessarily resulted in an undermining of this certainty and led to questions about the nature and unity of the Bible. This inevitably provoked negative responses and opposition from the church, although as Barton argues most interpreters had been believers whose priority was its relevance to faith and whose reconstructions he claimed had “normally been heavily influenced by their religious beliefs”. He concluded that neutrality had “hardly gone far enough to be a threat to most believers”.³⁰ That being said, however, as the historical-critical method’s influence spread it has led Christian scholars and communities to reflect on their presuppositions regarding the Bible and its nature, with attempts to either reconcile traditional views with these findings or to revise their understanding of the Bible in the light of them.³¹

As David Law comments, the historical-critical method claimed to be the “sole correct, ‘objective’ method”³² and this led it to essentially ignore other critical investigations. Although it has undoubtedly brought greater insight and explanation as to the origin of biblical writings it hasn’t necessarily contributed in terms of its theology, significance or meaning because the focus has rather been the objective history behind and within the text rather than on the meaning of the narrative’s content. As Rogerson notes, the rise of

28 Eric M. Vanden Eykel, “Beyond Historical Criticism? Avery Dulles’s Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture.”, *The Heythrop Journal* 58.2 (2017), pp. 195-206. p. 199.

29 Soulen, R. Kendall, “The Believer and the Historian: Theological Interpretation and Historical Investigation”, *Interpretation* 57.2 (2003), pp. 175-86 (p. 175).

30 Barton, *Historical-Critical Approaches*, p. 15.

31 Collins, *The Bible After Babel*, p. 7.

32 David R. Law, *The Historical-Critical Method: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, T&T Clark International, 2012), p.237.

other interpretative approaches such as literary structuralism and final form criticism began to focus on the final received version of the biblical writings rather than focusing on what was “behind the text”. These approaches challenged the results of the historical-critical approach by maintaining that the sources it based its proposals upon were really only hypothetical³³. In essence these text-centred approaches suggested that greater understanding comes by examining the structure and literary aspects of the text itself to discover meaning. They criticised the historic-critical method for effectively ignoring these areas of investigation and thus to limiting the breadth of meaning any text may have.

However, there is a potential danger that these new approaches, particularly influenced by a postmodern dismissal of the reality of “truth”, could result in an infinite number of meanings that ultimately result in the text effectively being meaningless. So, whilst not diminishing new approaches to biblical interpretation, Barton contends that there are limits to the understanding of texts and that to offer a reading as something the initial audience could not have understood them to mean is to misunderstand them and to give them “false” meaning.³⁴ This assistance in guarding the potential meanings of a text is arguably one of the valuable legacy contributions of the historical-critical approach.

Future of the historical-critical approach

Considering the significant criticism brought against the historical-critical method as a result of challenges from textual and archaeological discoveries, the development of new approaches to biblical interpretation and the welcome diversity within biblical scholarship it is legitimate to ask what is the likely future for the historical-critical approach?

Certainly Kurtz questions whether historical-criticism has “had it’s day”?³⁵ Although acknowledging the significant contribution the approach has made in terms of understanding the ancient past, he suggests it may have reached the end of its useful endeavour in biblical studies unless there are further new discoveries to analyse. Otherwise he argues, continuing with the historical-critical approach is a fruitless exercise of asking the same questions, in the same way to produce the same results as those

³³ Rogerson, p. 845.

³⁴ Barton, *Historical-Critical Approaches*, p. 11.

³⁵ Kurtz, p. 34.

already delivered over the past two hundred years. He concludes his recent essay by stating that it is a futile enterprise to be “clinging to historical-critical inquiry as the whole or highest means of knowledge”³⁶

Other scholars, although agreeing with Kurtz’s concluding remark, do however believe that the historical-critical approach (albeit in a redefined and revised form) continues to have a valuable contribution to make to contemporary biblical studies. Rogerson notes that the “historical-critical method is not a monolithic and unchanging phenomenon” but is a discipline that has critiqued itself. He asserts that where earlier conclusions using the approach have subsequently been questioned (such as the dating and relationship of the sources making up the Pentateuch) this does not necessarily discredit the entire methodology rather it is the refining of conclusions that presuppose the approach.³⁷

Similarly, as previously noted, theologians representing standpoint positions such as feminism and liberationism, who have justifiably criticised the impossibility of interpreters being objective, have not dismissed the historical approach but rather acknowledged their interests and applied its methods to enable tailored exploration of the biblical writings.

Barton, in the late 1990s, responded to criticism of the historical-critical method and to calls for a “paradigm shift” away from it, by offering a redefinition of the historical-critical approach founded on his observations of how he considered it to have been applied in practice. His redefinition was based on the argument that reading the Bible critically had not evolved or been especially driven by an interest in history. Rather he suggested it was linked to the Reformation principle that every Christian believer has the right to question the veracity of the church’s traditional understanding and meaning of the Bible. The purpose of biblical criticism was to the “let the text speak”, unencumbered by previous interpretations. This inevitably led to the use of historical methods both to determine meaning and to evaluate whether the traditional understanding could have been possible at the time it was written. Barton contends that the distinguishing feature is the “critical” nature of “historical-criticism” rather than its “historical” focus, which he describes as “at best partial and occasional.”³⁸ He advocates for an openness to permit the asking of free

³⁶ Kurtz, p. 36.

³⁷ Rogerson, p. 842.

³⁸ Barton, *Historical-Critical Approaches*, p. 16.

questions of biblical texts, unhindered by the limitations of “official methods” whether they are from church, traditions or academies. As such Barton’s redefines the historical-critical method from this original singular approach of historical reconstruction to a pluralistic one with the aim to “revive a true spirit of criticism, for which there is no such thing as ideological purity, only open-mindedness and honesty.”³⁹

Smith, in her recent chapter on historical-criticism titles it “Historical Criticism: Methods” supporting Barton’s pluralistic redefinition and notes he had also titled his own essay in the plural, “Historical-critical approaches”.⁴⁰ Throughout her essay Smith intentionally refers to either “historical criticism(s)” or “methods of historical criticism” explaining this as a “corrective to the exclusionary foci of the former historical-critical method”⁴¹.

Smith describes how modern historical inquiries have now been reframed to take account of a breadth of concerns such as “social-history, material culture, contextual histories, power hierarchies, and interpretive histories.”⁴² She also notes how contemporary historical reconstruction is not only interested in the ancient past in which the texts were written but also in the subsequent reception histories. This extension of historical-inquiries to beyond the pre-history, or immediate history, of biblical writings has enabled it to valuably contribute to uncovering histories “in, behind and in front of the text”.⁴³

Historical-critical methods are now incorporating learning from other disciplines and increasingly taking an inter-disciplinary approach to biblical studies, recognising historical analysis as one means of biblical criticism but no longer the primary one.⁴⁴ Smith describes how this redefinition to a more inclusive approach of the historical-critical method has resulted in there no longer being a “single” historical inquiry. Rather there are a variety of historical investigations for interpreters to select from with methods that allow for multiple questions and possibilities.⁴⁵ This has enabled the strengths of the historical-critical approach to be integrated within contemporary biblical studies as an important tool,

39 Barton, *Historical-Critical Approaches*, p. 19.

40 Smith, p. 37.

41 Smith, p. 48.

42 Smith, p. 46.

43 Smith, p. 52.

44 Smith, p. 53.

45 Smith, p. 38.

to be utilised amongst others, in the attempt to advance the meaning and significance of biblical writings.

Conclusion

This essay has described how the historical-critical approach has transformed over the past two centuries, rising to being the dominant approach to biblical studies from the 19th century before being toppled from its position in the latter half of the 20th century.

However, although it's purpose in seeking to discover the historical "truth" of the Bible was admirable, it relied heavily on questionable assumptions such as an ability to accurately reconstruct the ancient past with only partial, interpreted evidence, and in particular, the inability of historical-critics to bring a value neutral, objective perspective to their investigations.

Criticism of the historical-critical approach came from several directions including new archaeological discoveries that challenged its earlier findings and the development of new biblical approaches which argued that solely focusing on the "original" historical meaning of a text prevents the many potential rich meanings a text may have. These resulted in an undermining of the approach's value and led to were calls for there to be a shift away from it.

Although in the light of extensive criticism the demise of the historical-critical approach may have been expected, this essay describes how it has been subsequently transformed and reinvented. Historical-criticism has evolved from being a singular, exclusive approach focused solely on reconstructing the historical past to becoming a pluralistic approach that recognises the importance of not only understanding the past histories behind and within the biblical text but also the various reception histories of the text. The renaming of the approach (e.g. "methods of historical criticism"⁴⁶) by some scholars is an attempt to reflect this transition and affirm that historical investigations continue to be an important concern in the search for the meaning of biblical texts. This essay has highlighted how the complementary contribution from historical approaches are being integrated and valued as

46 Smith, p.48.

part of diverse interdisciplinary strategies to explore and discover yet richer meanings within biblical writings.

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