

Assignment Title:

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.

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1. Introduction

To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the demise of the historical critical movement are greatly exaggerated. Sounding quite alarmed, Barton states that a “paradigm shift” has occurred in biblical studies that has abandoned the study of the origins and meanings of text in favour of “text immanent” approaches.¹ It is certainly true that some contemporary biblical scholarship assigns little value to the traditional historical-critical quest that seek to uncover the original meanings of texts and bring clarity to the contexts in which they were written. Moore, for example, can write: “The avoidance of anachronism is not, perhaps, my strong suit as an exegete.”² But Moore, a postmodern interpreter, seems to be an exception rather than the rule. That is not to say that the inheritance and the methods of historical criticism always sit comfortably in contemporary biblical interpretation.

This essay will focus on the role played by the tools of the historical-critical method in contemporary biblical interpretation. It seems that the demise that Barton reports was caused because of the approach’s underpinnings and assumptions rather than its methodology. Yes, the historical critical approach has lost its pre-eminence, but its tools continue to be used in contemporary biblical interpretation. Through the evaluation of various contemporary approaches to the biblical text, I will argue that the tools of the historical criticism regulate and control contemporary “text immanent” and reader centred interpretations.

2. The historical-critical method

The historical-critical method is difficult to define. Chilton, for instance, even seems to suggest that there are as many methodologies as scholars who claim to belong to the historical critical tradition.³ It certainly contains a broad range of approaches. For Miller, historical research is primarily focussed on texts.⁴ But for Aichele, Miscal and Walsh, the historical method includes

¹ John Barton, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by John Barton, 1st edn (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 9–20 (p. 9)
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521481449.002>>.

² Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 123
<<https://archive.org/details/godsgym00step/mode/2up>> [accessed 4 May 2023].

³ Bruce Chilton, ‘Historical Criticism’, in *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament*, ed. by Paula Gooder (Louisville, KY: SPCK/Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 12.

⁴ J. Maxwell Miller, ‘Reading the Bible Historically: The Historian’s Approach’, in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, ed. by Stephen L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), pp. 17–34 (p. 17).

archaeology.⁵ Rogerson is right to call the label “historical critical” a “blanket term” and adds “sociological studies” to the list also.⁶ To be more specific, particularly in terms of textual analysis, the historical-critical method includes source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism and grammatical criticism. This list is not exhaustive. Suffice it to say that the historical critical method deploys a broad range of techniques to fulfil its aims. Barton provides four helpful headers under which to discuss the aims of the historical-critical approach. Firstly, the historical-critical method seeks to establish the origins of biblical texts.⁷ This involves researching the authors of the texts, to investigate their intended readership and to scrutinize the stages by which they came into being. Barton, a defender of the historical-critical approach, offers his own criticism of this aim: the final form of the text is eclipsed by its underlying sources. Secondly, the historical-critical method seeks to recreate the original meaning of the biblical texts under scrutiny.⁸ The implication here is that the texts, placed in their historical context, cannot be interpreted in a way that would be unintelligible to their first readers. Thirdly, the historical-critical method seeks to establish “what really happened”.⁹ In relation to this Whitlam’s article is illuminating. Not only does he illustrate the challenges in accurately reconstructing history on the basis of the biblical texts, he also argues that, in the case of reconstruction of Israel’s history at least, that these attempts have focussed more on textual matters than on history.¹⁰ Fourthly and finally, Barton states that the historical-critical method is characterised by “disinterested scholarship”.¹¹ Miller states it unequivocally: “Historians seek objectivity.”¹² He, however, does join Barton in stating that no scholar can achieve “complete objectivity”.¹³ Barton admits that all observers influence scientific experiments.¹⁴ Miller is more specific: biblical scholars bring their own experience and opinions to their research.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that while these scholars can convincingly critique this aspect of the method they defend, they, nonetheless, do not discard this idea of objectivity and keep it

⁵ George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, ‘An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible.’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 128.2 (2009), 383–404 (p. 384).

⁶ J. W. Rogerson, ‘Historical Criticism and the Authority of the Bible’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. by J. W. Rogerson and Judith Lieu (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 842.

⁷ Barton, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’, p. 9.

⁸ Barton, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’, p. 10.

⁹ Barton, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’, p. 11.

¹⁰ Keith W. Whitlam, ‘Introduction: General Problems of Studying the Text of the Bible in Order to Reconstruct History and Social Background’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. by J. W. Rogerson and Judith Lieu (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 260 & 259.

¹¹ Barton, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’, p. 11.

¹² Miller, ‘Reading the Bible Historically’, p. 18.

¹³ Miller, ‘Reading the Bible Historically’, p. 18.

¹⁴ Barton, ‘Historical-Critical Approaches’, p. 12.

¹⁵ Miller, ‘Reading the Bible Historically’, p. 18.

as an ideal. Similarly, detractors also mischaracterise historical-critical scholars as holding on to this illusion. Aichele, Miscall and Walsh go so far as characterise the aims of the historical-critical school as “myth”.¹⁶ To summarise, the historical-critical method employs a broad range of tools to investigate the origins of texts, to propose interpretations that would cohere with the original intended meaning while striving to maintain an attitude of impartiality.

In an increasingly diverse and pluralistic world, the historical-critical method may give a problematic impression of normativity. Horrell makes this case particularly convincingly by drawing on the academic discipline of whiteness studies.¹⁷ In his article, Horrell shows that whiteness has come to be seen as “unsituated, non-specific” and representing a “universal human perspective”.¹⁸ This (mis)conception probably finds its roots in the Enlightenment (that emanated from “white” Europe) and the colonial movement a century or so later. This self-perception of neutrality and impartiality gave rise to a sense of superiority.¹⁹ Horrell’s article focusses on the impact of this sort of thinking on Biblical studies, particularly the interpretation of Gal. 3:28. Whereas Barton focussed on the methods of historical criticism, Collins gives a clear exposition of the assumptions that underpin this approach. For Collins, the traditional historical-critical movement assumes a position of “autonomy”, “analogy” and “criticism”.²⁰ Criticism, as understood by Collins, is largely unproblematic. Collins argues that the findings of historical criticism “are always provisional and never final”. It might be said that this is a departure from the purest forms the enlightened scientific method that would have sought absolute truth. Autonomy and analogy are more problematic. For Collins, autonomy signifies the freedom from interference, and analogy the fact that texts are produced by humans and are there intelligible for humans even centuries later. These last two assumptions outlined by Collins may reflect something of the attitude that Horrell critiques in his piece. Horrell might argue that Collins has fallen foul to the illusion that, as a white western scholar in the traditional historical-critical lineage, scholars, such as he, are without their biases and can evaluate texts objectively. This is possibly the principal argument against historical criticism as a standalone

¹⁶ Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh, ‘An Elephant in the Room’, p. 401.

¹⁷ David G. Horrell, ‘Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness: Particularizing Interpretation’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 40.2 (2017), 123–47 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X17739204>>.

¹⁸ Horrell, ‘Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness’, p. 132.

¹⁹ Horrell, ‘Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness’, p. 137.

²⁰ John J. Collins, ‘Historical Criticism and Its Postmodern Critics’, in *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 1–25 (pp. 5–6).

discipline: it claims intellectual superiority by observing objectively, impervious to outside influence but struggles to recognise that no scholar is totally neutral.

Aichele asserts that contemporary biblical interpretation makes fruitful use of the methods of historical criticism.²¹ I have argued that the historical-critical approach's dominance was not lost because of its methods, it was lost because the assumptions - namely normativity, but also objectivity - that permeate it. As such, the remainder of this essay will be focussed on exploring how three contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation use the methods of historical criticism. I will start by investigating the role of the historical-critical approach in literary criticism.

3. Literary criticism

I noted above that historical criticism, in its purest form at least, is so focussed on the origins and evolution of texts that it has little interest in the final form of the text. This is in part due to the fact that the focus on identifying the building blocks of the text can give the impression that the text is corrupt and, in some way, unreliable as a whole. Literary criticism on the other hand seeks to analyse the final form of the text. The following section will explore the role played by the methods of historical criticism in literary approaches to the biblical text.

For some literary critics, like Mark Powell, the methods of historical criticism play no significant role in literary criticism. After all, as Powell writes in direct critique of source criticism in particular: "These books are stories about Jesus, not compilations of miscellaneous data concerning him."²² While Powell is primarily concerned with the Gospels, his point stands – biblical texts have a purpose beyond the layers of their composition. He also emphasises the fact that the Bible can function as story. The focus of his argument is on the effect texts, as stories, can have on their readers, and the meanings that the readers can then derive from the text. Powell offers an interesting image: the historical critical approach views the text as window through which to view its origins; in a literary approach the text is more like a mirror that represents an interaction between reader and text.²³ In this image, the origins of the text cannot be seen *through* it; rather, the text allows the reader to reflect on themselves. Powell takes

²¹ Aichele, Miscal, and Walsh, 'An Elephant in the Room', p. 386.

²² Mark Allan Powell, 'Scripture as Story', in *What Is Narrative Criticism?: A New Approach to the Bible*, by Mark Allan Powell (London: SPCK, 1993), p. 2.

²³ Powell, 'Scripture as Story', p. 8.

seriously the reader's interaction with the text as it stands, which is how, at least initially, the vast majority of readers approach any text. He is more circumspect about the usefulness of historical methods: they merely provide the background Powell concludes that the historical-critical and literary approaches "do not overlap".²⁴

Rhoads, on the other hand, has a far more favourable vision for the interaction between the two methods and is keen to demonstrate how historical-critical methods can support literary approaches. For Rhoads, and similarly to Powell, texts are stories that are to be experienced by their readers.²⁵ It almost goes without saying then that the reader participates in the story by bringing themselves to the reading. With regards to narrative criticism's relationship with historical critical methods, Rhoads states that they have been bracketed.²⁶ Historical-critical methods are not then totally abandoned. But Rhoads is unequivocal that they have been bracketed because they are incompatible with literary criticism principally because the traditional method rejects the validity of the final forms of texts.²⁷ This seems to be a fundamental problem for Rhoads' approach, however it does not mean that he does not envisage a role for historical-critical tools in literary approaches. For example, he acknowledges that, while literary critics study the final form of texts, redaction criticism can play a role in clarifying the sources used by an author. It would be "foolish" to ignore this.²⁸ Rhoads does not neglect the fact that texts are historical documents that emanate from a particular context that historical criticism can help elucidate. In addition to this, Rhoads also outlines ways in which literary analysis may contribute to more traditional approaches, particularly as it relates to the rhetorical functions of the Gospels.²⁹ To summarise, Rhoads envisages interactions between the traditional and his ascendant approach. It is important to note that Rhoads does not ignore the findings of the traditional method and in a sense, this gives validity to his more recent approach and prevents possible accusations of being unmoored from history. This is an important point. Rhoads' most significant contribution in this debate, however, is the way in which new. Contemporary methods can inform more traditional ways

²⁴ Powell, 'Scripture as Story', p. 9.

²⁵ David M. Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism: Practices and Prospects', in *Reading Mark, Engaging the Gospel*, by David M. Rhoads (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 24.

²⁶ Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism', p. 25.

²⁷ Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism', p. 25.

²⁸ Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism', p. 26.

²⁹ Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism', p. 28.

in which to interpret biblical texts by providing them with safeguards that regulate their meaning.

I have run the risk, particularly at the top of this essay, of caricaturing Barton's position. This is, I believe, because Barton himself caricatures it as he responds to the postmodern challenge to his preferred approach. He is far less of a purist than the opening pages of his article might suggest. In fact, Barton argues for a far more literary, text-based understanding of the historical-critical method. He argues that the historical-critical approach in biblical studies has been far less interested in history than its name suggests.³⁰ The discipline has been more focussed on texts than history. As such Barton suggests abandoning the term "historical" and renaming the study of biblical texts "Biblical criticism". In doing so, Barton creates an important distinction and emphasises the importance of criticism. This critical task, for Barton, serves to free the text from the "alleged authorities" of both faith-based and academic institutions and allows the text to speak for itself. One might say that Barton's approach is the mirror image of Rhoads'. Whereas Rhoads begins with final form of the text and is willing to apply historical-critical methods to support literary interpretations, Barton starts with the critical methods to peel away layers of interpretation and interference to discover the true meaning of the text. Both scholars, however, share a desire to allow the text to speak for itself.

This brief discussion has shown that historical-critical methods are not antithetical to literary approaches and, in fact, that they can enter into, hopefully, fruitful discussions. The important point to note at this stage is that historical critical method provides extremely useful tools to control more creative, reader-based approaches. Literary criticism is clear, however that historical criticism should not be conceived as an end in itself.

4. Post-critical approaches

Having briefly outlined Barton's vision for Biblical criticism, I now move to an approach that claims to have transcended criticism. Post-critical approaches approach the text from the standpoint of faith and in the context of the Church or community of faith. It is tempting to say that this approach is the way in which the scriptures of the Old Testament (and, indeed, the Bible in Judaism) and the New Testament have been apprehended for the longest part of their

³⁰ Barton, 'Historical-Critical Approaches', p. 14.

histories. The contrast with historical criticism is stark but this is not to say that traditional, critical methods cannot play a role.

This approach is particularly reminiscent of the thinking of Karl Barth, where it may find its origins. Barth might have chosen the following quote to summarize his theological approach: “The possibility of knowledge of God’s Word lies in God’s Word and nowhere else.”³¹ For Barth, God is revealed in Jesus Christ and this revelation is recorded in the Bible. Furthermore, this revelation is validated by the faith that it engenders in believers.³² In Karl Barth’s work, we see appearing a very theological understanding of what the Bible is. In a sense, the Bible then transcends both literature and history (as well as science), and a departure from the methods already discussed is marked. In my judgement, Barth’s influence is felt in the works of both Johnson and Soulen that I will discuss now.

Johnson shares the confidence in the final form of the text of literary criticism, but he does so on philosophical grounds with regards to the text, and on theological grounds with regards to the contents. At the same time, Johnson freely admits that postmodernity and the challenge to objectivity gives rise to the approach he espoused.³³ Johnson makes his argument in three stages. Firstly, he argues that God is a secure foundation for all meaning. With this in mind, and quoting Frei, Johnson can say that the biblical narrative “means what it says.”³⁴ In an instance of Barthian thinking, Johnson states that that the Christian faith provides the criteria to authenticate this.³⁵ This being the case, it seems fair to assume that God, as the inspiration of the Biblical texts, stands outside of history. Secondly, biblical interpretation, for Johnson, is more than a quest for meaning. The point of biblical interpretation seems to be a faith response.³⁶ To make this point, Johnson relies on the work of Jacques Derrida, one of the first theorists of postmodern thought. Johnson at first sets out to correct a misunderstanding of Derrida that claims that texts can have an unlimited number of meanings, in other words that texts can mean anything at all.³⁷ Rather, once written (and freed from their authors and received

³¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 2.1, p. 222.

³² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 2.2, pp. 191–92.

³³ Williams Stacy Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully in a Postmodern Age’, in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 110.

³⁴ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 112.

³⁵ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 112.

³⁶ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 116.

³⁷ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 117.

by readers), texts can take on a multiplicity of meanings.³⁸ As such the biblical text are stories that are “multivalent and open-ended”.³⁹ In this context, a quest for an original meaning seems futile. Thirdly, biblical interpretation, for Johnson, is a call to action.⁴⁰ The Bible, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is an impetus to Godly living. In this framework, the Bible is very much a *present* document. Johnson gives little value to the methods of historical criticism because they seek, according to him, “a singular determinate meaning”.⁴¹ Johnson challenges the fact that the text itself “possesses” meaning.⁴² For Johnson, the Bible is the possession of the church and finds its meaning in shaping the lives of believers. The results are multiple, and the methods of historical criticism serve no purpose.

Soulen’s postcritical approach is more explicitly developed in opposition to the historical critical method (as opposed to Johnson’s philosophical approach). From the very outset, Soulen is unequivocal that the canon of the Bible is historical but not in the sense that historical critical method would understand it.⁴³ So, for Soulen, the Bible relates events as they truly happened, and these events shaped their era.⁴⁴ Soulen is unequivocal: the Bible must not be interpreted in ways that are divergent from the original meaning of the text or that contradict historical evidence.⁴⁵ Soulen’s goal is to combine two important issues. Firstly, Soulen affirms the theological significance of the biblical narrative and maintains the community of faith as the location of interpretation. To this, Soulen adds a commitment to historical criticism, so long as it does not become an in and of itself. Soulen also betrays some Barthian influences. For him, the central preoccupation of the Bible is the revelation of God and making that revelation known in the world.⁴⁶ In this regard, Soulen is aligned with Johnson. In a striking critique of the historical critical method, Soulen rejects the premise that the Bible is only properly understood when it is detached from its religious function. On this point, Soulen disagrees with Barton, who seeks to peel away the layers of interpretation, including by the Church, to allow the text to speak for itself. Finally, and in summary, Soulen offers what he terms a “third way” that recognises the theological nature of the Bible with a subordinate use of historical critical

³⁸ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 118.

³⁹ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 122.

⁴⁰ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 122.

⁴¹ Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 119.

⁴² Johnson, ‘Reading the Scriptures Faithfully’, p. 119.

⁴³ R. Kendall Soulen, ‘The Believer and the Historian: Theological Interpretation and Historical Investigation’, *Interpretation (Richmond)*, 57.2 (2003), 174–86 (p. 174) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430005700206>>.

⁴⁴ Soulen, ‘The Believer and the Historian’, p. 175.

⁴⁵ Soulen, ‘The Believer and the Historian’, p. 175.

⁴⁶ Soulen, ‘The Believer and the Historian’, p. 177.

methods. He recognises the Bible's potential for distortion and the use of these traditional methods comes to the fore to prevent and rectify this possibility.⁴⁷

There is something extremely attractive about the post-critical, theological response, principally, I suggest, because of my own faith commitment. On balance, I find Soulen's approach more palatable, specifically because he does not deny historical criticism a role in Biblical interpretation. He recognises the dangers of creative reconstructions and admits the need of tools to provide boundaries.

5. Post-colonial readings

Up until this point, I have considered contemporary approaches to biblical studies whose foundations are primarily philosophical or theological. I now move to an important strand of contemporary biblical interpretation that finds its roots in movements towards liberation. My focus in the next section will be on post-colonial approaches to the biblical text. Rogerson recognises that the locale of biblical scholarship has been principally situated in the West and chiefly conducted by men with all the privileges associated with this position.⁴⁸ While Horrell has only recently highlighted the limitations of the sense of normativity of academic biblical studies, this Western (academic) self-perception as normative was detected by those on the margins for a significantly longer time. Segovia makes this case particularly well.⁴⁹ His starting point is that the vestiges of colonialism are omnipresent and, as such, the world is defined by "binomial opposition" between the colonial centres and "subordinate" colonised lands. The manner in which he characterises this opposition is not benign. He writes of the contrast between "civilized/uncivilized; advanced/primitive; cultured/barbarian; progressive/backward; developed/undeveloped-underdeveloped."⁵⁰ Segovia's quote provides a savage depiction of how formerly colonised countries have felt themselves to be perceived by the colonial centres but also an equally savage way in which people at the centre have looked down on those at the margins. With this in mind, and in the context of postcolonial studies particularly, Segovia advocates for a biblical hermeneutic that recognises the "shadow of empire" both in the production of texts and in their interpretation. It is then questions of justice

⁴⁷ Soulen, 'The Believer and the Historian', p. 183.

⁴⁸ Rogerson, 'Historical Criticism and the Authority of the Bible', p. 844.

⁴⁹ Fernando F. Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Optic', in *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins*, by Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 125–26.

⁵⁰ Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies', p. 126.

and liberation that shape biblical enquiry. Segovia then advocates what I shall call a hermeneutic of resistance, where people from the margins oppose the centre.⁵¹ Segovia provides quite a bleak picture that stands in stark contrast to the claimed objectivity and normativity of the historical-critical movement. In terms of the utilization of the tools of historical-criticism Segovia is silent, but his project certainly challenges the very foundational assumptions of that approach.

Post-colonial interpretation can also be a grass roots movement. Mwaura makes this case from an African feminist standpoint.⁵² First and foremost she advocates an inclusive approach that includes all genders, all socio-economic categories as well as academics and non-academics.⁵³ The tools, therefore, are varied and included “popular methods of reading” as well as critical approaches.⁵⁴ Mwaura strongly emphasises the liberationist aims of postcolonial biblical interpretation.⁵⁵ Mwaura’s overall emphasis is on the democratic nature of postcolonial biblical interpretation. This is very much a final form, text-based approach. For the majority of participants in reading the Bible, the methods of historical criticism only play an extremely limited role. In this sense, it is liberated from what Segovia would call the colonial centre and is free to interpret in a way that is appropriate for the context.

In her book (edited in collaboration with Jeffrey Staley), *John and Postcolonialism*, Musa Dube proposes to decolonise texts, in this particular instance, the story of the woman at the well found in John 4.⁵⁶ From the outset, Dube overtly uses methods from the historical-critical approach. The very premise of her argument rests on the hypothesis that advances that John’s Gospel narrates versions of Jesus’ life and ministry that reflect the experiences and concerns of a later Johannine community. By doing so, Dube proposes that the story of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at the well is a metaphor for the situation of the Johannine community. This being the case, the story represents the early Christian community’s failure to take the ascendancy over the Pharisees and the consequent need to expand their mission from Jerusalem

⁵¹ Segovia, ‘Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies’, p. 129.

⁵² Philomena Njeri Mwaura, ‘Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Hermeneutics of Liberation: An African Woman’s Perspective’, in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. by Silvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 374 (London New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

⁵³ Mwaura, ‘Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Hermeneutics of Liberation’, p. 79.

⁵⁴ Mwaura, ‘Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Hermeneutics of Liberation’, p. 79.

⁵⁵ Mwaura, ‘Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Hermeneutics of Liberation’, p. 81.

⁵⁶ Musa Dube, ‘Reading for Decolonization (John 4:1-42)’, in *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space, and Power*, by Musa Dube and Jeffrey Staley (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), pp. 51–75.

to Samaria (John 4:1). For Dube, this expansion is an example of colonialism. She detects relationships of power throughout the account and suggests that the woman stands as a metaphor for her land: “The ideology of this story is that foreign lands are immoral women which wait taming by foreign saviours”. Written from an African context, where the aftermath of colonialism is still felt, this conclusion resonates quite powerfully. If liberation is the goal of postcolonial movement, and postcolonial hermeneutics too, this text, taken seriously and in context, cannot fulfil this ambition. Dube recognizes the need for a feminist re-interpretation of the text.⁵⁷ But, it seems, she cannot offer one from her perspective as a scholar in the historical-critical tradition and has to turn to a work of literature for a positive, liberationist reinvention of the story of the woman at the well by Mositi Totontle. The flavour of Totontle’s reconstruction is very much African, which in itself is liberating in the sense that it appropriates the narrative for that context. In order to decolonise the text and neutralise any sense of oppression, particularly as regards to gender, the principal character (Jesus in John’s “original” gospel) is a woman. Furthermore, whereas the woman in the gospel account on her own initiative returns to her village to tell of her encounter with Jesus, here the woman at the well is sent. This is certainly an empowering image. I use two examples only (there are more) to raise the question as to the validity of these reconstructions. Dube, using traditional historical-critical lenses, concludes that the text itself is oppressive. Does Totontle step outside the bounds of the text? Dube evidently does not think so. My own evaluation is that Totontle’s rewriting is only valid in as much as it is read within the context of the whole gospel and because it maintains themes of transformation, restoration and, ultimately, hope.

We see in Musa’s interpretation an example of the uneasy co-existence of the historical-critical method and post-colonial readings, particularly when a liberating message cannot be found in the extant text.

6. Conclusion

Aichele, Miscall and Walsh are right: current biblical interpretation is caught between two myths, one where the historical critical school mythologises its own aims of objectivity, and the other, where postmodernism espouses the myth that historical criticism has nothing to offer.⁵⁸ I have attempted to show in this essay that as an end in itself the historical critical

⁵⁷ Dube, ‘Reading for Decolonization’, p. 71.

⁵⁸ Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh, ‘An Elephant in the Room’, p. 401.

approach as reached the end of the road. Its tools, however, remain useful and, indeed, helpful. It seems that the central point of contention when it comes to biblical interpretation is the question of meaning. Does the text have an original meaning? What role does the reader play in the eliciting of meaning? If readers do produce meaning, then are these meanings only limited by the number of readers? A repeated maxim, in, admittedly, more traditional scholarship is that a text can have several meanings, but it cannot mean anything.⁵⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza is particularly clear-eyed on this issue.⁶⁰ She asserts the “rights” of texts to be interpreted according to their own context.⁶¹ In consequence, interpreters have a responsibility to accept interpretations that they may not fit their chosen ideology. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the text is not an assemblage of data that offers an insight into the composition of the text, rather the text offers an understanding of the “symbolic universes” in which they were created.⁶² Schüssler Fiorenza then proposes that the role of biblical interpretation is not to find out “what the text meant” but to draw out interpretations that “do justice to the text in its historical context”.⁶³ This vision validates the role of the reader and respects the text’s right to speak for itself. I contend that it is the methods of historical criticism that allow this interaction to happen.

⁵⁹ For example, Collins, ‘Historical Criticism and Its Postmodern Critics’, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship’, in *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*, by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

⁶¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 18.

⁶² Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 27.

⁶³ Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation’, p. 27.

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