

Historical-Critical Approaches

Historical-critical interpretation has its origins in German scholarship of the late 18th and 19th century. It is not one single method of interpretation but consists in a number of methods which all have in common that the historical dimension of the biblical text is perceived as being of particular importance. Historical-critical approaches are driven by questions concerning the 'behind' and 'beneath' the text. The text is perceived as a mirror to events in the past allowing us to get insights into authorship, dates, intent and circumstances mirrored/reflected in the text. To understand the meaning of a text it is perceived as necessary to unearth the authorial intent of a text in his/her historical circumstances prior to any further interpretation and application. Historical-critical interpretation encompasses a number of different methods such as *canon criticism*, *text criticism*, *form criticism*, *source criticism*, *tradition criticism*, *redaction criticism*.

The designation of this form of interpretation as historical-critical indicates that two components are combined here:

- 'historical' indicates that it is presumed that the text involved in interpretation has a history. The written form is probably preceded by oral forms and in a process of transmission has gone through various stages of minor or major alterations.
- 'critical' indicates not a critique as in colloquial language. The aim of the method is not to criticize the Bible. This interpretation is critical in that it presupposes that there are general/universally recognized criteria for academic research which should be applied as much to the interpretation of the Bible as of any other historical text. This does not mean that each analysis must necessarily come to the same conclusions but each interpretative step must be coherent and intelligible for others.

A widespread misunderstanding of historical-critical interpretation is that it aims at the destruction of the sacred texts or that through its various methods the unity of the Bible is ignored. One has to keep in mind that historical-critical interpretation and its various methods developed out of the desire to escape an unintelligible dogmatic church authority. The tools were meant as an aid to the deepening of spiritual life at a time which came to be known as the period of rationality. Thus, it had a liberating aspect at the time of its emergence. In the 19th/20th century its basic presupposition, Western-type male rationality gained dominance

over many realms of life, thus becoming a hegemonic power exercising power in a dominating and sometimes even oppressive way. With respect to the universalizing, hegemonic claims which go along with it, the underlying paradigms and the method of historical-criticism have been rightly criticised from a variety of perspectives in the last thirty or more years. But as one tool among many which contribute to the process of interpretation of a doubtlessly historical set of texts, it is invaluable.

Essential Readings:

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

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.

R. Kendall Soulen, 'The Believer and the Historian: Theological Interpretation and Historical Investigation', *Interpretation*, 57, No. 2 (April, 2003), pp. 175-86.

John Barton, 'Historical-critical Approaches', in J. Barton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 9-21.

Paula Gooder, 'From Text to Event', in *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2008), pp. 3-44.

Further Readings:

John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005).

Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997).

James G. Crossley, *Reading the New Testament: Contemporary Approaches* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-32.

James G. Crossley, 'An Immodest Proposal for Biblical Studies', *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*, 2, No. 1 (2012), pp. 153-77.

[<http://www.relegere.org/index.php/relegere/article/viewFile/515/473>]

Larry W. Hurtado, 'On Diversity, Competence, and Coherence in New Testament Studies: A Modest Response to Crossley's "Immodest Proposal"', *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*, 2, No. 2 (2012), pp. 353-64.

[<http://relegere.org/index.php/relegere/issue/current>]

Activity:

How has historical criticism impacted the way in which we read the Bible?

What is the value of historical-critical approaches to the Bible?

What are the limitations of historical-critical approaches to the Bible?

From the insights gained in this unit try to formulate an interpretation of a biblical text along the following lines.

- Who is involved?
- What is happening/is said?
- When do things happen – the question of time – past-present-future
- Where do things happen?
- How do things happen?