

Reconsidering the Relevancy of Historical-Criticism to the Bible Today

When Steve Moyise observes that our sense of history in the modern world is one of our “chief features,”¹ he is undoubtedly correct. For much of the last hundred years of biblical scholarship, this has been much the same: historical perspectives maintain a firm grip in the mainstream academic study of the Bible.² There have, however, been major shifts in the primacy of “historical criticism” in this discipline over the last few decades. Historical perspectives are alleged to have taken a back seat in favour of other forms of interrogating the Bible such as literary and social-scientific readings. These developments are said to “have had a debilitating effect” on types of historical-critical approaches.³ Although the historical methods of form and source criticism of the Hebrew Bible are still somewhat in vogue, with their legacies found in redefined methodologies and refined practices, their original incarnations from the 19th and 20th centuries are now heavily scrutinised.

In this essay I will explore the relevancy of these methods in the modern world of biblical studies and assess whether they are consistent methods of analysing the Hebrew Bible. Additionally, I wish to further expand on whether these developments are the same for both academics and lay readers. The dynamics between the popular and academic realms of biblical studies are precarious; the historical-critical method has been reappropriated in the non-academic world for apologetic and counter-apologetic purposes. I will hope to demonstrate that the popular world has taken a liking to these methods whilst the academic world has begun to treat them with suspicion.

¹ Steve Moyise, *Introduction to Biblical Studies* (3rd edition; GB: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

² Richard S. Ascough, “Historical Approaches” in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007), 157.

³ Tremper Longman III and Raymond D. Billard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (2nd edition; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 50.

Source Criticism

“Critical” refers to a “state of intellectual awareness,’ a ‘critical spirit’ that must be present in the task of interpreting biblical texts.”⁴ One must set aside dogma and embrace rationality to perform the task of criticism. Combining this perspective with a historical lens, it produces a mindset that recognises the Bible as a product of another period and should thus be considered in light of what evidence we have from that time which could illuminate our understanding.⁵ “Criticism” is thus not a negative evaluation, but rather careful analysis.

Our first and oldest form of criticism applied to the Hebrew Bible is source criticism, which attempts to discover the texts used by an author or authors in the production of a new text. “Source criticism” is sometimes conflated with historical criticism itself, whilst the German expression *Quellenscheidung* refers specifically to the Documentary Hypothesis of the Torah.⁶ The primary principle of source criticism is that “ancient authors oriented themselves towards traditions”⁷ which contributed to a practice of taking that which came before and incorporating it into new texts. Given the lack of surrounding context for the biblical texts, source critics could only analyse what the text itself said and hypothesised as to what was hidden the current version. The J, E, D, and P division of the Pentateuch, which still “exercise[s] considerable influence,”⁸ is an example of mainline source criticism still in use today. Various anomalies in the Torah, including the differences between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, the

⁴ Leo G. Perdue, “Preface: The Hebrew Bible in Current Research” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. xi.

⁵ Douglas A. Knight, “Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomists” in Mays. J. L., Petersen. D. L., & Richards K. H. (eds.), *Old Testament Interpretation: Past Present and Future* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 76; John J. Collins, “Historical Critical Methods” in Chapman. C. B., Sweeney. M. B. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 129.

⁶ See Jan Christian Gertz, “Source Criticism in the Primeval History of Genesis: An Outdated Paradigm for the Study of the Pentateuch?” in Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (eds.), *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 169.

⁷ Gertz, “Source Criticism,” 180.

⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (3rd edition; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 4.

flood narrative (Gen. 6-9), the Melchizedek episode (Gen. 14), and the enslavement of Joseph (Gen. 37) are all seen as evidence of a patchwork of authors in the final form of Genesis.⁹

It must be said, however, that “debate continues as to the significance of this evidence”¹⁰ in relation to how it can help reconstruct an original version of the Pentateuch. T. Desmond Alexander, in his introductory work to the Pentateuch, outlines two primary features of source criticism that cause problems for its application: (1) that it gives way to conflicting and speculative results, and (2) that it is quick to present a solution to a perceived problem in the text when alternative explanations are readily available.¹¹

We will address the issue of the resistance from theological conservatism to critical methods below, but for now a brief review of Alexander’s representative words will suffice. Due to the lack of comparative material (especially in centuries past), source critics were correct to speculate and conjecture regarding the state of the original text. Without earlier copies to draw upon, all historians are left in a permanent state of uncertainty regarding what a text’s original form looked like. Additionally, Alexander is keen to overstate the divergence of these authors without mentioning what they were unified on: the setting of the early Israelite cults and the forms of worship in both family units and in corporate worship life were areas that found near unilateral agreement.¹²

Despite worthwhile critiques of the academic frameworks that have brought about higher criticism, Alexander’s traditionalist tendencies appear to have warped his perspective.

⁹ Alexander, Gertz, “Source Criticism,” 171-178; see for alternative positions on the flood narrative’s source divisions Gordon J. Wenham, “The Coherence of the Flood Narrative” in Richard S. Hess and David T. Tsumura (eds.), *I Studies Inscriptions From Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study Vol. 4 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 436-447.

¹⁰ Moyise, *Introduction*, 40.

¹¹ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 42.

¹² Thomas B. Dozeman, “Form and Tradition Criticism” in Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the Pentateuch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 204.

The alternative to the above, that Moses was an “inspired”¹³ author who wrote the entirety of the Pentateuch down on Sinai, is just as speculative and is wrought by demonstrable errors. Take for example Deuteronomy 34 in which the author outlines Moses’ passing. Are we to take the ultra-conservative view of earlier writers like Philo¹⁴ or Josephus¹⁵ that Moses was prophesying about his death?¹⁶ By conceding that some of the Pentateuch is a result of later editing and revision during Exilic or Post-Exilic times (a position begrudgingly accepted by many traditionalist scholars today¹⁷), this opens the door as to what extent the text has been revised. Due to the paucity of evidence that so often creates baggage for biblical studies, source critics, in their own context, were entitled to speculate about the original sources. Alexander’s critiques, therefore, rest on problematic assumptions themselves.

Form Criticism

The next type of criticism of the Hebrew Bible, known as form criticism (*formgeschichte*) looked at the oral origins of the material that would later be incorporated into its pages. As Alexander says, “By identifying the form of a particular passage, it was thought possible to recover the historical context in which the material was composed.”¹⁸ In doing this, the form critics sought to go back even further than the source critics, unveiling an earlier stage of Israelite religion through the orally transmitted narratives that were later codified in the Pentateuch.¹⁹

¹³ For a critique of such a view of inspiration, see John C. Poirier, *The Invention of the Inspired Text: Philological Windows on the Theopneustia of Scripture*, Library of New Testament Studies Vol. 640 (New York: T&T Clark, 2021).

¹⁴ On the Life of Moses 2.51.

¹⁵ Jewish Antiquities 4.8.37-38.

¹⁶ Other problematic verses include Numbers 12:3 which says that Moses the humblest man on earth; this would seem hilariously contradictory if this was Moses writing about himself. We also see in Deuteronomy 2:12 where the text says that the Edomites “...destroyed them [the Horites] from before them and settled in their place, as Israel did to the land of their possession, which the LORD gave to them.” There can be little doubt that this line was written after the Conquest of Canaan

¹⁷ See for example Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); Longman and Dillard, *Introduction*, 51.

¹⁸ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 4; see also Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, *The Old Testament and Folklore Study*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series Vol. 62 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 24.

¹⁹ Dozeman, “Form and Tradition Criticism,” 188; Longman and Dillard, *Introduction*, 46-47.

Form critics began by comparing the creation narrative in Genesis with those of surrounding cultures like the Babylonian Enuma Elish. The parallels between the narratives suggested that there was a common story underlying both works and that the Israelite version represented an “echo” of the previous tales.²⁰ This early comparative mythology was evidenced by the chaotic sea dragon imagery found in both Genesis, in later retellings of the Israelite myth in the Psalms (74:14, 104:26) and Job (3:8, 41:1), and was founded upon early folklore studies advanced by the Brothers Grimm.²¹

Like with source criticism, however, Moyise recognises that form criticism is “fraught with difficulty,” citing Rudolf Bultmann’s assumption of the existence of a “pure” form prior to revision.²² At what point does one demarcate a “pure” text and where in its stage of development does it originate? Indeed, this is a common critique of the form critics, with Buss critiquing one of the main progenitors of the method, Hermann Gunkel, by observing that both Gunkel and his ideological successors rarely provided evidence for the assumptions that undergirded their work.

Firstly, the form critics assumed that early literature existed only in short, self-contained units, via their particular *sitz im leben*,²³ which were then later collated by editors.²⁴ Buss critiques this view by noting that the form critic’s evidence (e.g., the short and early Psalms) are often quotations and not necessarily full reports.²⁵ These passages could very easily have been condensed instead of necessarily being the final form of a document. Secondly, the presupposition that ancient sayings and prayers were short and rigid derives from a modern individualist interpretation, and that sayings from Psalm 89 as well as those of Confucious demonstrate that there was no conscious literary category that these ancient writers could be

²⁰ Dozeman, “Form and Tradition Criticism,” 189-90.

²¹ See Kirkpatrick, *Folklore Study*, 23.

²² Moyise, *Introduction*, 58.

²³ On the *sitz im leben*, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Early Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 151.

²⁴ Martin J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in its Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 358-59.

²⁵ Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism*, 359.

neatly pigeonholed into.²⁶ And thirdly, the assumption that oral units were transmitted separately is countered by Mesopotamian evidence and genre mixing in the Song of Songs: praise and lament existed side-by-side, and so the form critical assumption was incorrect.²⁷

Additional assumptions from Gunkel's successors such as Gerhard von Rad were met with rejection, such as the suggestion of a hiatus between cultic and non-cultic life in ancient Israel as they made the transition between Jahwist and Priestly material, an assumption that Buss describes as "hardly warranted."²⁸ As more and more evidence has been uncovered from the geographical cousins of the biblical texts from locations such as Ugarit, the assumptions of the form critics become outdated.²⁹ Without evidence to support these presuppositions, the grounds for original form criticism fell from under their feet.

Historical Criticism and the Modern Day

In the academic realm, the historical-critical methods in application to the Bible outlined above have expressed themselves with large variety. The *religionsgeschichtliche* (history of religions) school that brought about higher criticism utilised them in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were largely influenced by Hegelian dialecticism and evolutionary theory.³⁰ For the rest of the twentieth century, were most acutely expressed in two divergent yet ever-evolving positions, colloquially known as minimalism and maximalism. The former expressed scepticism over the historical trustworthiness of the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, namely Joshua, Kings, Chronicles, and some parts of the Torah. It engaged in a "synthesis of

²⁶ Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism*, 360.

²⁷ Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism*, 362-63; Walton similarly notes that form critic conclusions were based more on the Mesopotamian parallels than the biblical material itself (*Ancient Israelite Literature*, 151). See also Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p. 59-61 for a similar assessment of Gunkel.

²⁸ Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism*, 364.

²⁹ See the comparative study in John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Early Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

³⁰ See Ascough, "Historical Approaches," 157 who outlines how Wellhausen saw early Hebrew religion as "primitive" and on a path of development throughout the text.

archaeology and literary analysis, ‘fictionalizing’ and late dating”³¹ and, although was never totally accepted into “mainstream” scholarship, the general sentiment that the Biblical texts should be scrutinised and, if necessary, abandoned for the sake of historical knowledge, is one that has become somewhat widespread.

The latter, maximalism, insists that the Bible is a reliable and competent record of the history of early Israel.³² It is important to note that minimalism and maximalism are not categories to place every biblical scholar in, but rather the extremes of the scholarly spectrum. Here we return to Alexander’s above point about alternative explanations, which is a thought-provoking challenge. It is very tempting to choose one’s preferred explanation when other options are available. It is a natural human response to challenge and there are examples of the neglecting of historical-critical methodologies by ideologically driven authors.³³ Nevertheless, does Alexander apply that same criticism to himself and others who may come under the umbrella of “theological conservatism”? Indeed, resistance to the historical criticism championed by the minimalists, as Collins says “are reflections of theological conservatism, but not all.”³⁴ For example, John Bright’s *History of Israel* provides many details but does not raise the issues of whether the Hebrew Bible is incorrect on any details. A traditionalist like Alexander, Bright’s work is thus not critical in the sense it does not have the same critical spirit and there are obvious tendencies by the author to present simply an expanded version of the Old Testament.³⁵

These positions have evolved over the decades. For example, minimalist positions at the height of the movement in the 1990s would have denied the existence of a historical King David and would have often denied the historicity of most or all of the Hebrew Bible.³⁶

³¹ Phillip R. Davies, “Biblical Studies: Fifty Years of a Multi-Discipline,” *Currents in Biblical Research*, Vol. 13, Issue 1 (2014), 57.

³² See an overview of the Albrightian Maximalism in Collins, “Historical Critical Methods,” 133.

³³ See Collins, “Historical Critical Methods,” 134 who discusses feminist and post-colonial authors who deliberately shun historical study for the sake of modern interpretation.

³⁴ Collins, “Historical Critical Methods,” 143.

³⁵ See John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 36.

³⁶ See Longman and Dillard, *Introduction*, 21.

Nowadays, minimalism has become a minority view where most scholars now agree that a King David existed and that there is at least some value to the Hebrew Bible as a witness to the development of Israel and its religion.

Likewise, many maximalists in the middle of the 20th century would have argued against the documentary hypothesis altogether and would have taken the creation account in Genesis at face value. Today, these positions have shifted to allow for more flexible ideas on Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch³⁷ and less literalistic interpretations of Genesis.³⁸

Is the historical-critical perspective outdated? Collins argues against the accusations of antiquarianism within historical criticism which allegedly lock the text in the past: “this criticism is superficial” he opines.³⁹ There are, however, genuine concerns that have led to where we are now. The divergence between form and source criticism is one of the major issues that has led to their own critical revaluations: form critics such as Gunkel presupposed the gradual expansion and growth of what would eventually become the Pentateuchal tradition whilst source critics like Wellhausen used the final form of the text to look back and identify out of place material that could be used to isolate the original sources.⁴⁰ Kirkpatrick even observes that “it seems strange that Wellhausen should have remained so adamantly opposed to asking questions about a possible pre-literary stage of the pentateuchal narratives.”⁴¹ Form criticism thus insists the literary ability of the editors to seamlessly weave an oral piece into a

³⁷ See in particular Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, who combines a moderately conservative approach with an acceptance that the Torah has undergone significant revision since the time of Moses.

³⁸ An admirable example of this is Bill T. Arnold, “The Genesis Narratives” in Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (eds.), *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 31-32 who embraces the concept of “mytho-history” when speaking of the primeval history in Genesis, a perspective that many traditionalist scholars (of whom Arnold is among) are afraid of considering.

³⁹ Collins, “Historical Critical Methods,” 143.

⁴⁰ Bozeman, “Form and Tradition Criticism,” 205.

⁴¹ Kirkpatrick, *Folklore Study*, 24.

narrative, whilst source critics searched for the errors the editors made for the sake of identifying antecedent documents.⁴²

What unites source and form critics are their perspectives regarding the state of the “original text.” Form critics like Bultmann could not demonstrate when a presupposed “pure” text began whilst source critics assumed that a series of documents were gradually conglomerated into what has become the current document. Both parties appear to take issue with the idea that an “original text” existed or is even relevant to modern study.

We must recognise more problems with historical criticism, however. John Barton’s observations are acute: “historical” study can be critical or non-critical and “critical” study can be historical or non-historical.⁴³ This requires us to refine our understanding of the word “critical” in the world of biblical studies. If source and form criticisms are unable to deliver consistent historical results, they are perceived as useless by those who seek to either undermine or promote the historicity of the Hebrew Bible. This goes beyond theological precommitments (or lack thereof), but rather a fear of pushing the boundaries of scholarship. Such a perspective stands in favour of source and form criticism at their fledgling stages, but not today as their efficacy has waned in the face of postmodern criticism.

The Way Forward

Source and form criticism, as offshoots of historical criticism, have all made their mark on the world of biblical studies and their legacies can be strongly felt today. Even if the assumptions and conclusions of their original advocates no longer stand, it is apparent that many tenets of source and form criticism are alive and well: the “critical spirit” to dig deeper than what the texts plainly say and to find what is beneath the surface. This is an admirable sentiment that helps circumvent the irritation of theological biases.

⁴² See also Hess, *Israelite Religions*, p. 52, n. 20 who outlines how source critics began with the text in its “final form,” whilst form critics attempted to dig behind the scenes.

⁴³ Barton, *Nature*, 39.

What are we to make of all this? It seems to me that as historical-critical methodologies have waned in their popularity in the academic realm, interest in their conclusions and ramifications have exploded among popular audiences. For example, the popular YouTube channel the MythVision Podcast has gained a massive following, with many academics from a variety of convictions giving their perspectives on the history and origins of the Bible and Christianity. The increasing popularity of such online commentators does not seem to be in line with the view that historical-critical methods are waning in usefulness or validity.

The natural inclination of laypeople outside of academic debates is whether these vastly influential documents contain “truth.” When they make grandiose claims such as men rising from the dead or wars that seem to have been too large to be historically plausible, people want to know if there is any truth to these claims. How else does one explain the popularity of popular books like Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*? Or academic popularisations of biblical studies like those of Bart Ehrman? Individuals with partisan positions as to the veracity of these texts presuppose (rightly or wrongly) that if a religious text like the Bible has been “historically falsified” then the entire belief system crumbles with it. There are further debates as to whether this is a correct way of thinking about things (how does one classify “disproven” and what kind of faith would be jeopardised by such a conclusion?) but this is typically how laypeople think about these matters. The attitudes of such laypersons must be taken into account if the role of historical-critical methodologies is to be accurately represented and relayed to non-academic audiences.

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