

## 1 **Biblical Criticism: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

- Module: Authority
- Lesson 33

## 2 **Some Recommended Sources**

- Norman Geisler, Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics
- Josh McDowell, The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict (Evidence and More Evidence updated and combined in one volume.)
- Charles L. Quarles, "Higher Criticism, What Has It Shown?" in In Defense of the Bible, ed. by Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder
- K. A. Kitchen, On the Reliability of the Old Testament

## 3 **What Is "Biblical Criticism"?**

- Biblical Criticism is a branch of a discipline known as literary criticism.
- "Biblical criticism is a form of literary criticism that seeks to analyze the Bible through asking certain questions about the text, such as who wrote it, when was it written, what was the historical and cultural setting of the text, how well preserved is the original text, how was the text transmitted over time, what is the text's literary genre, and how did it come to be accepted as part of the Bible?"  
-New World Encyclopedia-
- The term criticism in this context refers to a systematic and rational approach to the study of the biblical text. It does not necessarily imply a negative critique or skepticism about the text, though the practice has frequently been used in that way.

## 4 **What Is "Biblical Criticism"?**

- "Although some practitioners of critical methods may offer very negative critiques of the Bible, such criticism is not intrinsic to critical approaches. Those who practice the historical critical method do not necessarily 'criticize' the Bible in a pejorative sense."  
—Charles L. Quarles—
- Given this definition—
  - Biblical criticism is focused chiefly on the human aspect of authorship, as opposed to the divine.
    - (It neither necessarily includes or precludes consideration of the divine aspect of authorship.)
  - What we've been doing the past few weeks is actually classed as biblical criticism.

## 5 **Biblical Criticism and "Discrepancies"**

- Some of biblical criticism is directed at addressing issues of the credibility of the bible.

- Hence, some biblical criticism seeks to address problem passages such as variant readings, apparent or perceived “discrepancies” or “contradictions,” and other difficult aspects of the biblical text.

## 6 Presuppositions and Biblical Criticism

- All scholars and theologians operate with certain presuppositions and/or biases.
- Truth can still be discovered if such biases and presuppositions are recognized and accounted for.
- Many biblical scholars operate from a materialistic, anti-supernatural presupposition:
  - Hence, they dismiss out of hand the possibility that God acted in history or that miracles can or have occurred.
  - All supernatural accounts, or accounts of divine activity, are presumed false.
- John Warwick Montgomery: “...historical and literary scholarship continues to follow Aristotle’s dictum that the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself.”

## 7 Lower and Higher Criticism

- Lower Criticism  
Lower criticism is of a verbal and historical nature, and is confined to the words, or collation of words, as they stand in the manuscripts or printed texts, the ancient versions, and other legitimate sources of appeal.
- Higher Criticism  
The exercise of judgment in reference to the text, considering the nature, background source, form, method, subject, or arguments of the text; the nature and connection of the context; the relation of passages to each other; the known circumstances of the writers and those immediate persons for whom they wrote.
  - By definition, higher criticism need not be intrinsically skeptical of the credibility or authenticity of the biblical text.
  - However, very often higher critics employ highly dubious assumptions and methods in a hyper-skeptical or “radical” attack on the authenticity and truthfulness of the bible and on orthodox Christian belief.

## 8 Some Categories of Biblical Criticism

- Classical Criticism
- Textual Criticism
- Source Criticism
- Form Criticism
- Redaction Criticism

## 9 Classical Criticism

- Attempts to understand the origin and nature of the bible at the human level (not to the exclusion of its divine aspect). Examines the literary and historical nature of the text and seeks to understand apparent or perceived problems such as apparent discrepancies and contradictions, or differences in parallel accounts, etc.

- Gives the benefit of the doubt to the text and to the intelligence and integrity of the original authors. (Remember Montgomery's quote.)
- Some practitioners of Classical criticism in history: Eusebius (3rd-4th centuries), Augustine of Hippo (4th-5th centuries), John Calvin (16th century), J. B. Lightfoot (19th century), and many others.

## 10 Textual Criticism

- A scientific approach to discovering what was the original text of the various biblical writings and its preservation.
- An extremely helpful tool in confirming that we have a reliable representation of what the original autographs said.
- Textual criticism is a highly developed method of scientifically studying manuscripts of ancient texts.

## 11 Textual Criticism

- Textual criticism examines things like —
  - The material a manuscript is written on.
  - The dating of the manuscript.
  - The style of hand in which a manuscript is written.
  - The content of the manuscript.
  - The manuscript "family" of a particular manuscript. (Its "parentage")
  - How the manuscript compares to other manuscripts of the same text.
  - And many more factors.
- Given the sheer volume of New Testament manuscripts, textual criticism is remarkably effective in ascertaining with a high degree of confidence what the original autographs of the New Testament said.

## 12 Source Criticism

- Forms conclusions about a text based on what written source the author may have employed in writing his work.
  - What was the source (if any)?
  - What did the source say?
  - How did the author of the biblical text utilize his source(s) or depart from them?
- At least some of the biblical writers depended on sources for what they wrote:
  - They tell us so. (e. g. Luke 1:1-4, many accounts & eye witnesses; Numbers 21:14 Wars of Jehovah; 1 Chr. 29:29, chronicles of Samuel the Seer, Nathan the Prophet, and Gad the Seer; 2 Chr. 9:29, prophecy of Ahijah, visions of Iddo the Seer.)
  - Evidence of literary dependence (similarity of Jude/2 Peter; Paul's citation of creeds/hymns, the similarity of the Synoptic Gospels, etc.)

- A biblical author's reliance on a non-canonical source does not preclude the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the author in his use of that source, or of the source's authoritative nature when it is used within the biblical text. (e.g. Titus 1:12, 13, Paul's citation of a pagan Cretan prophet.)

### 13 Source Criticism

- If the content of a source is known with a justified degree of confidence, then it may be possible to gain some illumination of the biblical text from how the biblical author employed his source.
- Source criticism is often employed with a radical skeptical a priori anti-supernaturalism which seeks to separate the miraculous and divine claims from the "truly historical."
- Limits of source criticism:
  - We do not possess any manuscripts or manuscript evidence of earlier sources.
  - In many cases the very existence of a prior source is a matter of speculation.
  - Since we do not possess any actual sources, the content of any possible earlier source (if one existed) can only be reconstructed from our existing texts, and beyond that is therefore speculative to one degree or another.

### 14 Form Criticism

- Forges conclusions about a text based on what oral traditions ("forms") the critic believes the author may have employed in writing his work.
- Pioneered by Rudolph Bultmann (1920s).
- Defining characteristics:
  - Considers the Gospels to be folk literature.
  - Prior to their being written down various parts of the text were passed down as folklore with no particular interest in history.
  - The various parts were formed and transmitted by the "folk", not by individuals. (An emphasis on community as opposed to individuals.)
  - Seeks to discover the "tradition history" (the history of the oral tradition), rather than the history of the events it purportedly represents.
  - Radically disassociates the Gospels from the eyewitnesses.

### 15 Form Criticism

- Its impact on biblical scholarship has been profound.
  - e.g. the Jesus Seminar, the Quest for the Historical Jesus
  - Influences popular impressions of the Gospels and other parts of Scripture, such as the Pentateuch.

### 16 Form Criticism

- Some fatal flaws:
  - It uses a model of transmission that applies to a process over many generations, and applies it to a situation that covered no more than one lifetime.
  - It ignores that the apostles stood as the primary institution by which the accuracy of the accounts were safeguarded.
  - It ignores that the apostles themselves also called other eyewitnesses to bear testimony.
  - It fails to appreciate the nature of oral societies and how they safeguard important information.
  - Fails to distinguish between oral traditions and oral history.
    - Oral traditions did not necessarily call for historical precision.
    - Oral histories, on the other hand, were safeguarded by mechanisms designed to preserve the actual history intact.

## 17 Redaction Criticism

- Redact: to edit for publication.
  - e.g. Redaction of a classified government document so that it can be released for public viewing.
  - All authors employ redaction when they write.
    - They make decisions to include certain things.
    - They make decisions on what they will exclude.
- Authors' use of redaction—
  - The necessity of space and time limitations.
  - To emphasize a theme or a point.
  - Sometimes it can be used to unduly limit a reader's knowledge or information.

## 18 Redaction Criticism

- Redaction criticism seeks to explore what and why an author included and/or excluded certain information or material.
  - This is a common tool of biblical studies and has been since the earliest days of Christianity.
  - More recently it has been often employed with a materialist anti-supernatural bias to undermine faith in the truthfulness and divine origin of Scripture.
- Radical redaction criticism rests upon and is merged with source and form criticism.
- Radical redaction criticism presumes—
  - The falsehood of all supernatural accounts or the belief that God acted either in the events recorded or in the composition of the text.

- That any teaching expressed in the Gospels which corresponds to one in the early church must, of necessity, be inauthentic—that it is “folk literature” added to the text later by the church. (e. g. The view that the resurrection accounts were fabricated over time as an apologetic to counter competing theologies in the early church.)

## 19 Redaction Criticism

- Some fundamental problems with radical redaction criticism.
  - It fails to recognize the eyewitness aspect of the Gospel accounts.
  - It employs the faulty presuppositions of form criticism.
  - Fraught with speculation as to the background sources (whether oral or written).
  - Improperly employs the authenticity criteria (e. g. multiple attestation, embarrassing material, etc.). When valid, they can only be used as sufficient criteria of authenticity, not as a necessary criteria.

## 20 Criteria of Authenticity

- Certain aspects within an historical text serve to reinforce our confidence that the text is accurately reporting historical facts.
  - In the New Testament, things like embarrassing material, multiple attestation, coherence with other sources, linguistic Semitisms, traces of Palestinian milieu, etc.
  - These criteria can only be used “positively,” as evidence of historical authenticity. The absence of one or more criteria does not constitute an indication of inauthenticity.
    - It is possible for a text to be historically accurate and yet not possess any of the criteria.
    - As such the criteria are each sufficient to indicate authenticity, but they are not each necessary to warrant believability.

## 21 Next Week:

- How do these methods play out in two significant movements of biblical scholarship?
  - The Documentary Hypothesis (the Pentateuch)
  - The Quest(s) for the Historical Jesus
- The Bible and myth.
- Evidences for the historicity of the Bible.