The Need for Biblical Criticism

by Alan C. Mitchell, Ph.D.

Much of what we know as biblical criticism today originated with modernity, but interest in understanding the meaning of biblical texts is much older than that. Even the Bible itself recognizes the need for the explanation and interpretation of its contents.

The simplest form of this is translation, taking the biblical tradition, which has been recorded in one language, and making it accessible to those whose language is different. Nehemiah 8:7-8 recounts that the scribe Ezra, accompanied by other scribes, read from the law of Moses and helped the people to understand it. What the Book of Nehemiah refers to as reading “from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation” is the act of translating the Hebrew tradition into the Aramaic language, which was the language of many postexilic Jews.

The Gospel writer Luke presents Jesus as an interpreter of Scripture in the story of his post-resurrection appearance to two disciples on their way to the village of Emmaus. He writes, “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures” (Lk 24:27).

Scripture eludes easy understanding and challenges its readers to seek ways to uncover the message it proclaims. The quest for understanding the sacred text takes many forms. The methods and goals of biblical criticism arise with the kinds of questions we have about the Bible's meaning, whether that be what it meant when it was being written, or what it may mean for us today.

A Place to Begin

The search for understanding the Bible's meaning originates with particular questions not only about the content of individual books, but also about when, why, how these books were produced. In order to provide reasonable answers to these questions, biblical scholars have employed scientific and quasiscientific methods. It must, however, be said that biblical criticism is as much an art as it is a science. Its objects are the interests we have in knowing as much as we can about the Bible, its world, its ideas, its teachings, indeed its very truth. The point of departure for any kind of biblical criticism, then, is the human desire to know whatever can be known about the Bible.

The questions that govern this search for knowledge are quite simply the stimuli for the various methods of biblical criticism that have sprung up over time. When scholars realized the Bible had been physically handed down in manuscripts that are not identical to one another, they set out to establish what the sources of the written form of the tradition were, in number and kind, and whether the process of transmission was reliable. At first this required that the known manuscripts be catalogued and compared. Then a critical edition could be prepared, which showed where the major variations in wording and placement of biblical texts occurred. The goal of this level of biblical study, called textual criticism, was to establish a trustworthy text. After all, without a text that one could feel was reliable, how could one have confidence in the words the text conveyed?
The desire to know the origin of biblical traditions went beyond the establishment of a reliable text and inquired into the sources of the stories and narratives included in the Bible. Often comparison of biblical texts with other ancient literatures, or with other texts in the Bible itself, was helpful in isolating subtle differences among these texts. The noted differences became important clues. They may indicate, for example, that some biblical stories did not originate only with their written transmission. It is very likely that these stories, or at least some parts of them were, at first, handed on by word of mouth. Or, the observed differences of style, vocabulary, and viewpoint may show that a given biblical story was passed on in more than one form.

A well-known example of this phenomenon is the creation story, told in two accounts, in the opening chapters of Genesis. It is generally accepted today that Genesis 1:1-2:4a tells one account of creation and Genesis 2:4b-25 tells yet another. Identifying the origins of different versions of an account, which may have arisen at separate times in the transmission of biblical tradition, is commonly known as source criticism.

Other scholars were prompted by an interest to know about the kinds of materials contained in the Bible and how they may have related to the real lives of those who were responsible for producing it. In view of the realization that the transmission of biblical tradition may be quite complex, these scholars set out to catalogue the various shapes that tradition, preserved in the Bible, took. With the help of comparison with other ancient literature, contemporaneous with the Bible, they were able to isolate narrative, poetic, cultic, legal, literary and historical materials, which had their own definite shapes or forms. These, they conjectured, functioned in relation to the various circumstances of life in the ancient biblical world. Such criticism came to be known as form criticism. So, for example, knowing that, in Philippians 2:5-11, St. Paul preserved a very early form of a Christian hymn, one might reasonably conclude that one way of handing on important tradition about the life, death and exaltation of Jesus was related to early Christian worship.

Once sources and composite elements of biblical texts were able to be identified, it was inevitable that interest would turn to the persons who collected and ordered these materials in continuous biblical books. Naturally scholars wanted to know if the process was merely one of collection, or whether it involved editing and composition as well. Out of this method of biblical criticism, called redaction criticism, emerged the identity of particular biblical authors, or editors, known largely from how they shaped the traditions they received into an ordered and continuous form.

One advantage of this type of biblical criticism was that it could study the history of given biblical traditions, by paying attention to the author’s writing style, the choice and use of vocabulary, and the ways the content of biblical tradition was modified over time.

This method is especially helpful in studying how the first three Gospels tell the story of Jesus in strikingly similar ways, yet with individual variations. Once scholars felt reasonably sure that Mark wrote his Gospel first, and that both Matthew and Luke used some form of Mark in composing their own Gospels, they could point to the modifications of stories evident in all three and offer suggestions about the interest of each of the Gospel authors in any given tradition about Jesus.

Moving beyond the questions of the sources, shapes and styles of biblical tradition one comes to the question of history. Do the traditions of the Bible emerge under particular historical circumstances that influence their content? If so, what can they tell us about those historical circumstances? In addition to knowing about the authorship of biblical texts, historical methods of biblical criticism are interested in knowing why, for whom and to what end the Bible was written. With the aid of modern methods of historical study, some biblical critics try to depict the world of the Bible in terms of its culture, society and religion. Sometimes this amounts to representing the Bible in its day by describing the world out of which it emerged and comparing the communities that produced biblical books with their ancient contemporaries. At other times this type of biblical criticism is enhanced by methods employed in the social sciences. Sociology, anthropology and ethnography can be very useful in analyzing biblical texts and can help to situate the Bible in its own world.

Then and Now

Up to this point, we have been discussing biblical criticism as a way of understanding the origin and transmission of biblical tradition. Biblical criticism is, however, also helpful in relating the meaning of the Bible to the world today.
Often the methods employed to connect the Bible with our own experience are more literary and less historical in nature. Narrative, rhetorical and reader-response criticism fall under this heading. Appreciating these forms of biblical criticism helps us to understand how much biblical criticism is informed and influenced by the language and interests of the day.

Other methods that try to relate the Bible to our own experience use the feminist method and critique to produce other enriching ways to interpret the Bible meaningfully. So also does one find interest in relating the Bible to minority and non-Western cultures. Taking their lead from interpretive clues provided by these cultures, biblical scholars read the Bible in non-traditional ways, rendering its meaning in a manner that historical criticism is perhaps unable to do.

This brief survey of biblical criticism has shown that our interest in understanding the Bible takes many forms. For some, what the Bible meant in antiquity, while it was being produced or received among the ancient Jews and Christians, for whom it was written, is primary. For others, how subsequent generations have understood the Bible, and indeed what it means today, is more important. Each of these primary interests determines what kind of Bible critic one will be.

Each of the methods described contributes something particular to the complete picture of biblical interpretation. Often biblical criticism is itself eclectic, combining aspects and elements of more than one methodology, to accomplish its goal. Some even question whether any one method of criticism can be employed in isolation of the others.

If your interest is mainly in the origins of the Bible, what it meant at the time it was being written, you will follow a method of interpretation that looks at the time, place and circumstances under which a given biblical book originated. Knowledge of the language and idiom of the day, as well as awareness of cultural and historical circumstances, will be essential in such an endeavor. Familiarity with ancient religion, philosophy and literature is a valuable aid for understanding some of the riddles of biblical texts. Other helpful disciplines are archaeology and ancient history, which might supply a context and help to avoid anachronistic reading of biblical texts.

Frequently, methods that are primarily concerned with this kind of historical interpretation of the Bible are called diachronic. The literal meaning of this word is “through time,” that is, over a span of time. Diachronic methods of biblical interpretation are then interested in how the books of the Bible originated and how they changed down through the time of the biblical period. Traditional diachronic methods fit within approaches that are historical-critical, such as source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism and the study of the history of a tradition.

Biblical critics who are more interested in what the Bible meant to people after the biblical period, or what it means today, focus more on methodologies that look at biblical texts apart from their origins and history. These methods are sometimes classified as literary methods, and they attempt to study the Bible in itself, without looking for information about the people who wrote it, what they believed or how the Bible functioned for them.

Knowledge of literary theory is helpful in pursuing the goals of literary criticism in the Bible. Literary methods of Bible criticism sometimes have little or no interest in what biblical authors intended when they wrote biblical books. What is more important is how readers understand the Bible in their own time. Of interest to these methods may be how a reader responds to a given text, what effect the text has on a person, and how the meaning of the text emerges out of the engagement of the reader with the text. These kinds of questions can appear in any age, and whether there is a progression or continuity of interpretation over time is unimportant. Literary methods of biblical criticism are sometimes called synchronic, because their interests are governed by a desire to understand the Bible at a particular moment in time.

As long as people search for answers to their questions about the Bible, biblical criticism will flourish. Time has shown how biblical interpretation is always a product of its age, that accommodates itself to the questions and interests of the day. Methods of biblical criticism come in and out of fashion to the extent that they are useful in helping people to understand the origins of the Bible and to appropriate its meaning for their lives.

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