
7

MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM

MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, HAS WEAKENED AND almost destroyed the high view of the Bible previously held throughout Christendom. Thus it is necessary to look at the main lines of this criticism as it has developed in the last two centuries and then reflect on it from an evangelical perspective.

The Roots of Higher Criticism

Higher criticism of the Old and New Testaments along literary lines is not in itself peculiar to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Theodore of Mopsuestia, one of the most noted theologians of the Antiochian school, relegated a number of the psalms (such as 51, 65 and 127) to the age of the Exile. During the Middle Ages, Ibn Ezra, a Jewish scholar, claimed to have discovered a number of anachronisms in the Pentateuch. Even Martin Luther applied a form of literary criticism in his occasional pronouncements about the authenticity and relative value of the biblical books. Nevertheless, it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century, 1753, to be exact, that higher criticism was introduced on a scale and with a purpose comparable to our use of the phrase today.

In that year a scientist and physician in the French court, Jean Astruc, published a work on the literary sources of Genesis and set forth a method of biblical study which was to find widespread acceptance, first in Germany, then throughout Europe and the United States. Astruc observed that

in the Hebrew text of Genesis, God is designated by two different names. The first is Elohim, for, while this name has other meanings in Hebrew, it is especially applied to the Supreme Being. The other is Jehovah . . . the

great name of God, expressing his essence. Now one might suppose that the two names were used indiscriminately as synonymous terms, merely to lend variety to the style. This, however, would be in error. The names are never intermixed; there are whole chapters, or large parts of chapters, in which God is always called Elohim, and others, at least as numerous, in which he is always named Jehovah. If Moses were the author of Genesis, we should have to ascribe this strange and harsh variation to himself. But can we conceive such negligence in the composition of so short a book as Genesis? Shall we impute to Moses a fault such as no other writer has committed? Is it not more natural to explain this variation by supposing that Genesis was composed of two or three memoirs, the authors of which gave different names to God, one using Elohim, another that of Jehovah or Jehovah Elohim?¹

Astruc's statement is a primitive expression of the critical spirit, exhibiting characteristics that were soon to become representative of literary criticism at large. First, it reveals a break with traditional views, according to which Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. Second, it discloses a shift in the object of study, from the simple meaning of the words themselves to questions of the authenticity and integrity of the biblical books. Third, it displays a new method of procedure. By laying aside the testimony of history and tradition, at least temporarily, this criticism focuses on the style, vocabulary, syntax, ideas and features of the documents as the sole basis on which questions concerning authenticity and integrity may be answered.

At first Astruc's work received little notice. Yet within a few years it was picked up by some German scholars and others and was expanded to include the whole Old Testament. Johann Eichhorn applied Astruc's approach to the entire Pentateuch. Wilhelm De Wette and Edward Reuss attempted to bring the results into line with Jewish history. Reuss concluded that in the correct historical sequence the prophets are earlier than the law and the psalms later than both. The most popular and, in some sense, the culminating work in this field was the *Prolegomena* of Julius Wellhausen published in 1878. This work widely disseminated the four-stage documentary hypothesis known as JEPD (*J* for the Jehovah source, *E* for the Elohim source, *P* for the priestly documents and code, and *D* for the later editorial work of the Deuteronomist or Deuteronomic school). Wellhausen dated the writing of the law after the Babylonian exile and placed only the Book of the Covenant and the most

¹*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 4, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 315.

ancient editing of the J and E narrative sections prior to the eighth century B.C.

The profound change this involved is clear in the words of E. C. Blackman, who hails Wellhausen's achievement as making possible "the understanding of the Old Testament in terms of progressive revelation . . . a real liberation."² Emil G. Kraeling notes that it also "marked the beginning of a completely secular and evolutionistic study of the Old Testament sources."³

The Jesus of History

In New Testament studies the energies of the higher critics have been directed in a slightly different direction; namely, to recover the "Jesus of history" through a study of the origins of the Gospel narratives and the development of New Testament theology as preserved in the Epistles of Paul, the pastorals, the Johannine literature and Revelation. But the same principles are involved, and they have been carried forward in New Testament studies in an even more radical way than in the nineteenth-century investigation of the Pentateuch.

The origin of higher critical principles in New Testament study is usually traced to Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), who tried to organize the material along historical lines. Hegel had developed the theory that historical development proceeds by thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Baur applied Hegelian principles to biblical history, citing the supposed conflict of Petrine and Pauline theology as evidence of a doctrinal thesis and antithesis within the early church. In Baur's view, this led to the synthesis of early Catholicism. Today Baur's general thesis is rejected. Still he succeeded in shaking the traditional views concerning the authorship and composition of the New Testament books and called the attention of the scholarly world to a rediscovery of the historical Christ as the primary New Testament problem.

The so-called quest for the historical Jesus dates from the death in 1768 of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, the historian with whom Albert Schweitzer begins his survey of nineteenth-century research. Reimarus was no New Testament scholar, but at his death he left behind a manuscript that was to have far-reaching implications. He argued that historians must distinguish between the "aim" of Jesus and the "aim" of his disciples, that is, between the Jesus of history and the Christ of early Christian preaching. Faced with

²E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), p. 141.

³Emil G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament since the Reformation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p. 94.

a choice between what he believed to be mutually exclusive aims, Reimarus opted for the former, positing a nonsupernatural Jesus. According to him, Jesus preached the coming of God's kingdom, but he died forsaken by God and disillusioned. Christianity was viewed as the product of early disciples who stole the corpse, proclaimed a bodily resurrection and gathered followers.

Reimarus was extreme and his work polemical. But his views of Christian origins set the pattern for a century of historical-Jesus research. Reacting against the supernatural element in the Gospels and casting about for a Jesus made in their own image, idealists found Christ to be the ideal man; rationalists saw him as the great teacher of morality; socialists viewed him as a friend of the poor and a revolutionary. The most popular "lives of Jesus," the two by David Friedrich Strauss, rejected most of the Gospel material as mythology; and Bruno Bauer ended his quest by denying that there ever was a historical Jesus. Bauer explained all the stories about Jesus as the products of the imagination of the primitive Christian community.

One can hardly fail to be impressed even today at the immense energy and talent that German scholars poured into the old quest for the "original" Jesus, but the results were meager and the conclusions wrong, as Schweitzer found in his study. Scholarship had attempted to modernize Jesus, but the Jesus they produced was neither the historical Jesus nor the Christ of Scripture.

Bultmann and Mythology

In more recent years, higher criticism of the New Testament has centered around the work of Rudolf Bultmann, former professor at the University of Marburg, Germany, the acknowledged father of form criticism. Much of Bultmann's energy was expended on stripping away what he felt to be the "mythology" of the New Testament writers: heaven, hell, miracles. But Bultmann's views are misunderstood if one imagines that the historically real Jesus lies beneath the mythological layer. According to Bultmann, what lies beneath the mythology is the church's deepest understanding of life created by its experience with the *risen* Lord. Consequently, nothing may be known about Jesus in terms of pure history except the fact that he existed. In Bultmann's work *Jesus and the Word*, he states, "We can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus."⁴

Operating under the assumption that a period of oral transmission inter-

⁴Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 8.

vened between the years of Christ's earthly ministry and the transcribing of the traditions about him in the Gospels, Bultmann envisions a creative church, one that gradually superimposed its own world picture upon what it had received of the times and teachings of Jesus. The church's creativity took place in an "oral stage" in the development of the tradition. During this period much of the Gospel material circulated in the form of separate oral units, which may today be classified and arranged in a time sequence on the basis of their form. It is believed, by Bultmann and others of his school, that much may be inferred about the situation in the church from these Gospel "units." But virtually nothing may be learned about the actual, historical Jesus. The expressions of faith of the early church, preserved for us in the New Testament, must be reinterpreted in existential terms if they are to have meaning for the modern era.

In rejecting the supposed New Testament mythology, Bultmann rejects a literal pre-existence of Christ, his virgin birth, his sinlessness and deity, the value of his atoning death, a literal resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the future judgment of all people. They speak rather of a new "possibility of existence," meaning the possibility of letting go of the past (dying with Christ) and opening oneself to the future (rising with Christ). To embrace this possibility brings inner release and overwhelming freedom (salvation).

Lutheran scholar Edgar Krentz writes of Bultmann's conclusions,

On the one hand the Scriptures are, like any other book, the object of historical inquiry, which seeks the facts. But no absolute meaning is to be found in the facts. Meaning is to be found only as man personally confronts history and finds meaning for his own existence (existential interpretations). Only as man is not subjected to a strange world view is he set free to believe. It is this self-understanding that determines the work of interpretation, for interpretation must give free play for faith, God's creation.⁵

To summarize, according to the Bultmannian school: (1) the earliest Christian sources show no interest in the actual history or personality of Jesus, (2) the biblical documents are fragmentary and legendary, (3) there are no other sources against which the data provided by the biblical writers may be checked, and (4) preoccupation with the historical Jesus is actually destructive of Christianity, for it leads, not to faith in Jesus as God, but to a Jesus-cult, the effects of which can be clearly seen in pietism.

⁵Edgar Krentz, *Biblical Studies Today: A Guide to Current Issues and Trends* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), p. 16.

The weaknesses of some of these perspectives are now being seen in some quarters. Consequently, theological leadership is passing into other hands.⁶

Major Characteristics

Brief as it has been, our review of higher criticism reveals great diversity. Viewpoints are constantly changing, and even in the same period, those working in similar areas often contradict each other. However, in spite of the diversity, there are certain characteristics that tie the various expressions of the higher criticism together.

First, there is its *humanism*. In most forms of the modern debate the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are handled as if they are *man's word about God, rather than God's Word to man*. But this, as J. I. Packer points out, is simply the Romantic philosophy of religion set out by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), "namely that the real subject matter of theology is not divinely revealed truths, but human religious experience."⁷ Within this framework the Bible is only a record of human reflection and action in the field of religion. The interpreter's task becomes the work of sifting that experience out and evaluating it for possible use in our age.

It must be recognized of course, as was pointed out in an earlier chapter, that the Bible does have a genuinely human element. On the other hand, we must object to any attempt to make it human at the expense of its being divine. Besides, as Packer adds,

If one factor must be stressed at the expense of the other, far less is lost by treating the Scriptures simply as the written oracles of God than simply as a collection of Jewish ideas about God. For we have no reason to regard merely human words as inerrant and authoritative; what will be authoritative for us, if we take the liberal view, is our own judgment as to how far they may be trusted and how far not. Thus, we land, willy-nilly, in subjectivism.⁸

A clear example of such subjectivism is the section on "Scripture" from *The Common Catechism*, a widely advertised modern statement of faith by an impressive team of contemporary Catholic and Protestant theologians. It states:

Everything we will have to discuss . . . is based on this now unquestioned

⁶Portions of the above material on the quest for the historical Jesus and on Bultmann have already appeared in an article by the author entitled "New Vistas in Historical Jesus Research," *Christianity Today*, 15 March 1968, pp. 3-6.

⁷J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 148.

⁸*Ibid.*

assumption that the evidence of the Bible may and must be examined as evidence of the faith of a number of men and a number of generations. . . . For the future we can no longer say, "The Bible is the word of God." Even saying "The word of God is in the Bible" would be wrong, if it were taken to mean that one set of statements in the Bible were purely human words and the rest God's word. We must say something like: "The Bible is not God's word, but *becomes* God's word for anyone who believes in it as God's word." That sounds dangerous. . . .⁹

At this point we must answer that indeed it does.

The second common characteristic of higher criticism is its *naturalism*, expressed in the belief that *the Bible is the result of an evolutionary process*. Evidence of this belief can be seen in Old Testament studies in the way the documentary theory of the Pentateuch developed. The belief is also evident in Bultmann's form criticism, for everything depends on the early church's gradually developing its understanding of reality and preserving it at various stages through the written traditions. Early and primitive understandings of God and reality are presumed to have given way to later, more developed conceptions. So-called primitive ideas may be rejected in favor of more modern ones. Thus, reports of miracles may be discounted. Also, according to this view, crude notions such as the wrath of God, sacrifice and a visible Second Coming of the Lord may be excluded from the religion of the New Testament.

The third major characteristic of the higher criticism is based on the first two. If people and their ideas change as the evolutionary hypothesis speculates, then they will continue to change; they have changed since the last books of the Bible were written; consequently, *we must go beyond the Scriptures to understand both humanity and true religion*. There are many examples of this attitude, particularly in popular sermons in which the viewpoints of secular thinkers are often widely aired while the contrary views of the biblical writers are forgotten.

A Response to Higher Criticism

What is to be said in reply to this widespread and popular approach? There are two perspectives. On the one hand, there is a neutral area in which anyone may properly use at least some parts of the critical method. It may be used to illuminate the human element in the biblical writings. Attention

⁹*The Common Catechism: A Book of Christian Faith*, eds. Johannes Feiner and Lukas Vischer (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 101.

may be given to words and their varying uses, the historical situation out of which the writings came and the unique features of the various biblical books. Besides, there are matters of archaeology and parallel secular history, both of which shed light on the texts. Use of the method in these areas and in this way is valuable. On the other hand the best-known exponents of the critical method have proceeded on assumptions unacceptable to true biblical theologians, and the method may therefore be judged a failure in their hands.

First, users of the critical method demand the right to be scientific in their examination of the biblical data. But they are vulnerable, not when they are scientific but rather when *they fail to be scientific enough*. The negative literary critics presuppose the right to examine the Bible in a manner identical to that which they would use in studying any secular literature. But is it valid to approach Scripture as nothing more than a collection of secular writings? Is it scientific or wise to neglect the fact that the books claim to be the result of the "breathing-out" of God? Can a decision on this matter really be postponed while an examination of the books goes forward? If the books really are from God, doesn't their nature in itself limit the critical options?

It is futile as well as erroneous to deny the critics the right to examine the biblical texts. They will do it whether they are asked to or not. Besides, if the Scriptures are truth, they must stand up beneath the barrage of any valid critical method; we must not make the mistake of the fundamentalists of the nineteenth century in claiming a special exemption for the Bible. On the other hand, it must be maintained that any critical method must also take into consideration the nature of the material at its disposal. In the case of the Bible, criticism must either accept its claims to be the Word of God or else offer satisfactory reasons for rejecting them. If the Bible is the Word of God, as it claims to be, then criticism must include an understanding of revelation in its methodological procedure.

The failure of criticism to do this is nowhere more apparent than in its efforts to divorce the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. If Jesus were no more than a human being and the Bible no more than a human book, this could be done. But if Christ is divine and if the Bible is the Word of the Father about him, then it is the obligation of criticism to recognize the nature of the Gospels as a divine and binding interpretation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. With a firm appreciation of the Bible as revelation, literary criticism would be free, on the one hand, from all charges of irreverence and abuse and, on the other, from an easy and unfounded optimism that would place the solution to all biblical problems within easy grasp.

The same failure is evident in the critics' treatment of the Bible as the result of a human evolutionary process, according to which one part of Scripture may easily contradict another. If the Bible is really from God, these will not be contradictions but rather complementary or progressive disclosures of one truth.

Second, having failed to accept the Bible for what it truly is, negative critics inevitably fall into error as they proceed on other premises. Thus, they eventually display *their own inherent weaknesses*. One clear example of this is the old quest for the historical Jesus which, as was pointed out earlier, simply molded the historical Christ into the interpreter's own image. Another example is Bultmann who, although he once enjoyed almost legendary renown, is today increasingly deserted by his followers.

They ask: If, as Bultmann says, virtually all we need to know of the historicity of the Christian faith is the mere "thatness" of Jesus Christ, his existence, then why even that? Why was the Incarnation necessary? And if it was *not* really necessary or if it is impossible to show *why* it was necessary, what is to keep the Christian faith from degenerating into the realm of abstract ideas? And what in that case is to distinguish its view of the Incarnation from Docetism or from a Gnostic redeemer-myth?

Ernst Kaesemann of Marburg, Bultmann's old stomping ground, raised these questions in a now famous address to the reunion of old Marburg students in 1953. He argued, "We cannot do away with the identity between the exalted and the earthly Lord without falling into Docetism and depriving ourselves of the possibility of drawing a line between the Easter faith of the community and myth."¹⁰ A few years later Joachim Jeremias voiced a similar warning. "We are in danger of surrendering the affirmation 'the Word became flesh' and of abandoning the salvation-history, God's activity in the Man Jesus of Nazareth and in His message; we are in danger of approaching Docetism, where Christ becomes an idea."¹¹

Even Bultmann's supporters must find it a bit incongruous that his *Theology of the New Testament* gives only thirty pages to the teachings of Jesus while devoting more than one hundred pages to an imaginary account of the theology of the so-called Hellenistic communities, of which we know nothing.

Bultmann has minimized both the early church's concern for the facts of Jesus' life and its dependence on him as teacher. While it is true, as Bultmann

¹⁰Ernst Kaesemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 34.

¹¹Joachim Jeremias, "The Present Position in the Controversy concerning the Problem of the Historical Jesus," *The Expository Times*, vol. 69, 1957-58, p. 335.

argues, that the biblical documents are concerned primarily with Jesus' identity as the Messiah and with the revelation he brings of the Father, it is no less significant that their understanding of him is embodied, not in theological tracts or cosmic mythologies (as in Gnosticism), but in Gospels. Their structure is historical. Moreover, every verse of the Gospels seems to cry out that the origin of the Christian faith lies, not in the sudden enlightenment of the early Christians or in an evolving religious experience, but in the facts concerning Jesus Christ: his life, death and particularly his resurrection. Even the kerygma proclaims the historical event, for it was Jesus of Nazareth who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried and who rose again on the third day, according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4).¹²

A third objection to this type of higher criticism is the most important one. Such critics have a *very small god*. They don't deny the existence of God entirely, but they do minimize his ability and his presence. He can speak to the individual, but he cannot guarantee the content of that revelation or preserve it in a reliable, written form. He can act in history, but he cannot act miraculously. Can miracles occur? If they can, then much of what the higher critics dismiss as mythological has a very good claim to being historical. If they can, the God of miracles is capable of giving us an authoritative and infallible revelation.

For all its alleged objectivity, in the ultimate analysis modern criticism is unable to escape the great questions: Is there a God? Is the God of the Bible the true God? Has God revealed himself in the Bible and in Jesus of Nazareth as the focal point of the written revelation? If, as has been suggested, it is necessary for criticism to deal with the full nature of the material, in particular with the claims of the Bible to be the Word of God as well as words written by particular people, then it must deal with a question that involves either denial or the response of faith.

When criticism faces the fact that the portrait of Jesus appearing in the Gospels makes the humble man from Nazareth the Son of God, then it must ask whether or not this interpretation is the right one, and if so, it must accept his teachings. When it confronts the Bible's claims regarding its own nature, it must ask and answer whether the Bible is indeed God's express revelation. If the answer to these questions is Yes, then a new kind of criticism will emerge. This new criticism will treat the biblical statements as being true rather than errant, it will look for complementary statements

¹²Parts of this critique of Bultmann also appeared in "New Vistas in Historical Jesus Research," pp. 3-6.

rather than contradictions, and it will perceive the voice of God (as well as the voices of people) throughout. Such a criticism will be judged by the Scriptures rather than the other way around.