Historical Criticism and the Bible

Historical criticism of the Bible often threatens believers' faith. Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains that it is often grounded in false assumptions.

What Is Historical Criticism?

Throughout the history of Christianity, students of the Bible have used many different methods of interpreting the text. But since the Enlightenment, one particular method (or rather, family of methods) has been quite influential, especially in the academy.{1} I'm speaking of what is often called *historical criticism*, or the *historical-critical method* of biblical interpretation.

So what is historical criticism, you ask? Although the term gets used in different ways, I will here be using it to refer to a method of biblical interpretation which attempts to read the Bible as a *purely* human document from the distant past. In other words, the historical-critical method does not typically regard the Bible as divinely inspired. It is *merely* a human book, like any other, and should thus be read like any other book."{2}

In the past (and to some extent even today) scholars liked to portray this method as "scientific" in character, able to obtain "assured" and "objective" interpretive results. But critics tell a different story. For example, Eta Linnemann, who before her conversion to Christianity was a well-respected scholarly advocate of historical-criticism, claims that in practice the so-called "scientific" character of this method

is grounded in a prior assumption of naturalism, perhaps even atheism. As Linnemann observes, “Research is conducted . . . if there were no God.'”{3}

Another critic of this method is the renowned Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. After rehearsing certain principles of historical investigation, which many historical critics would endorse, Plantinga notes that these principles are understood “to preclude” God’s direct involvement in the world.{4} Because of this, he notes, such principles “imply that God has not in fact specially inspired any human authors in such a way that what they write is really divine speech addressed to us; nor has he . . . performed miracles of any other sorts.”{5}

As I’m sure you can see, at least some of the results of this method come about simply because of assumptions the interpreter brings to the text. The problem, however, is that the assumptions are biased *against* Christianity in *favor* of naturalism. We must thus think rather critically about the historical-critical method. But first, we need a bit of background on how and when this method originated.

The Origins of Historical Criticism

Although many scholars helped develop the historical-critical method, Johann Salomo Semler, an eighteenth-century theologian, is widely regarded as its “father.”{6} Semler was primarily interested in “critical work” on the canon of biblical writings.{7} For our purposes, the “canon” can simply be thought of as the books of the Old and New Testaments. The Church regards these books as the divinely inspired Word of God and, hence, completely authoritative for Christian faith and practice.

Semler, however, considered these books (especially those of the Old Testament) to be largely of merely historical

interest. They might give us some interesting information about the religion of ancient Israel or (in the case of the New Testament) the beliefs of the early church, but they could not be regarded, at least in their entirety, as the divinely inspired Word of God.{8} Hence, Semler was led to make a distinction between "the Scriptures and the Word of God."{9} Although the Church had always considered the Scriptures to *be* the Word of God, Semler made a distinction between them. In his opinion, "some books belong in the Bible through historical decisions of past ages, but do not make wise unto salvation."{10} Books of this sort, he reasoned, can still be called "Scripture" (for they are part of the biblical canon), but they are *not* the Word of God (for in his view, they are not divinely inspired).

Although historical criticism continued to be developed after Semler, it's easy to see why many consider him to be this method's "father." In his own study of the Bible, Semler generally disregarded any claims that either it or the Church might make regarding its divine inspiration and authority and attempted instead to read the Bible like any other book. In the opinion of theologian Gerhard Maier, it's "the general acceptance" of Semler's view which "has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions."{11} Before we examine such difficulties, however, we must first consider why so many scholars see value in the historical-critical method.

Some Proposed Benefits of Historical Criticism

To begin, virtually everyone agrees that when you're attempting to understand a book of the Bible, it can be helpful to know something about the origin of the book. Who was the author? When did he live? What sorts of things were happening at the time the book was written? Was the author

influenced by any of these things, or attempting to respond to them in some way? Who was he writing for? How might they have understood him? Answering such questions can often clarify what the author may have been trying to communicate in his book. Historical critics are right to see this as an important part of understanding the books of the Bible. And most everyone agrees on this point.{12}

More controversial would be the principles of historical investigation originally proposed by Ernst Troeltsch in an essay written in 1898.{13} These principles are still generally embraced (though with some modifications) by historical critics today.{14} Briefly stated, Troeltsch proposed three principles that can simply be called the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation.{15} Although there's no universal agreement about how these principles should be used in actually doing historical research, historical-critical scholars have generally regarded these principles as helpful guides in critically evaluating what is written in the Bible in their effort to determine what *really* happened. This is considered a great benefit of historical criticism. For, rather than simply accepting the claims of a biblical author uncritically, Troeltsch's principles provide some help in critically evaluating such reports in order to assess their believability.{16}

Now in one sense this is commendable, for it is good to search for truth about what the Bible is trying to teach us. But there's a problem with how these principles are typically understood by historical-critical scholars. As the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga reminds us, such scholars generally take these principles to exclude any "*direct divine action* in the world."{17} That is, such principles forbid us to believe that God has ever directly intervened in the world which He has made. And for Christians, this presents a real difficulty with historical criticism.

Some Problems with Historical Criticism

According to Christian scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix, a fundamental problem with historical criticism is that "it is based on an unjustified antisupernatural bias which it superimposes on the biblical documents."{18} This can easily be seen by examining some of the things which have been written by proponents and advocates of this method.

For example, Rudolf Bultmann, who was interested in "demythologizing" the New Testament, famously wrote, "It is impossible to use electric light . . . and to avail ourselves of modern medical . . . discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."{19} Similarly, another theologian has written that whatever the biblical authors may have believed about such things, "*we* believe that the biblical people lived in the same" world we do, that is "one in which no divine wonders transpired and no divine voices were heard."{20}

Now if we ask such scholars why it is that we're to think that miracles are either unbelievable or impossible, we'll usually notice rather quickly that the responses are generally short on arguments and long on assumptions. That is, such scholars typically just *assume* that God is not directly involved in the world and that miracles never occur. But if a personal Creator of the universe exists (and there are good reasons to think that one does), then why should we simply *assume* that He would never directly intervene in the world which He has made? Such intervention would hardly seem *impossible*. And if it produced an effect which would not have come about had nature been left to itself, then this could quite properly be regarded as a miracle.

So it seems to me that if a personal God exists, then miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then it is nothing more than "an unjustified antisupernatural bias" (as Geisler and Nix assert) to simply *assume* that the Bible's reports of

miracles are all false and unbelievable. And since historical criticism of the Bible often begins with just such an assumption, it appears to offer us an inadequate method for correctly reading the Bible.

An Alternative to Historical Criticism

Having looked at some problems with historical criticism, we can now consider a preferable alternative, namely, theological interpretation.{21}

So what is theological interpretation? As I'm using the terminology here, it's a method of reading the Bible like a Christian, with the aim "of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness."{22} Theological interpretation takes a sober and serious account of what Christianity is, believes, and teaches. It then attempts to read and interpret the Bible as "a word from God about God."{23}

It's a radically different way of reading the Bible from that practiced by historical critics. Of course, as theologian Russell Reno reminds us, "There is obviously a historical dimension" to the truth found in the Bible. "Nevertheless," he continues, "to be a Christian is to believe that the truth found in the Bible is the very same truth we enter into by way of baptism, the same truth we confess in our creeds, the same truth we receive in the bread and wine of the Eucharist."{24}

But historical criticism attempts to read the Bible in the same way one would read any other book from the ancient world. It assumes that the Bible is merely a human book. The only way to really understand a book of the Bible, then, is to try to understand how it originated and what the original author was trying to say.

Theological interpretation, on the other hand, does not view the Bible as a merely human book. Of course, it realizes that each of the biblical books has a human author. But it also

insists, along with the consensual teaching of the Christian community, that each of these books also has a Divine author.{25} It thus views the Bible as a divinely-inspired document.

Is this a legitimate way to read the Bible? Alvin Plantinga has written extensively on the theory of knowledge.{26} According to him, the biblical scholar who is also a Christian "has a perfect right to assume Christian belief in pursuing her inquiries." Doing so, he says, is just as legitimate as assuming the principles of historical criticism.{27} Indeed, for the Christian it is arguably better—for it allows us to read the Bible in continuity with the tradition and faith we profess and believe.

Notes

1. Gregory Dawes, for example, notes that both form criticism and redaction criticism would fall under the umbrella of historical criticism. See Gregory Dawes, "'A Certain Similarity to the Devil': Historical Criticism and Christian Faith," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 354.
2. Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. n.p.: Routledge, 1998. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed February 9, 2013), 295.
3. See Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* trans., Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 84.
4. Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephan Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 33.
5. Ibid.
6. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The*

Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 29.
7. Ibid.
8. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 38-40.
9. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 19.
10. Ibid.
11. The first sentence of Maier's book declares, "The general acceptance of Semler's basic concept that the Bible must be treated like any other book has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions." See Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans., Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 11.
12. Plantinga, echoing the language of Robert Gordon, grants that we might refer to the attempt to answer such questions as a "warranted" form of historical biblical criticism. See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew," in *"Behind" the Text*, 94.
13. For those interested in this essay, see Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology (1898)," trans. E. Fischoff, rev. W. Bense in *Religion in History-Ernst Troeltsch: Essays*, trans. J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).
14. Edgar Krentz states, "Contemporary historians use Troeltsch's three principles, but with significant modifications" (*The Historical-Critical Method*, 56). However, it does not seem necessary to qualify the modifications of Troeltsch's principles by practicing historical-critical scholars with the adjective "significant," for (in my opinion, at any rate) they are generally more severe in critically evaluating the sources with which they are dealing than the average historian is with his.
15. For two very helpful discussions of Troeltsch's

principles, see Alvin Plantinga's discussion of "Troeltschian HBC" in "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 31-35, as well as Gregory Dawes discussion in "'A Certain Similarity to the Devil': Historical Criticism and Christian Faith," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture,* 358-70. Although Plantinga and Dawes reach different conclusions about if and how Troeltsch's principles can be legitimately employed, both discussions are well worth reading.

16. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture,* 45.

17. Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text,* 33.

18. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 440.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 5.

20. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," reprinted in Owen C. Thomas, ed., *God's Activity in the World: the Contemporary Problem* (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1983), 31; cited in Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 34.

21. Kevin Vanhoozer defines "theological interpretation" as "the process of keeping the canonical practices alive and well in the believing community." A bit later he describes a "canonical practice" as "divinely authorized use of language and literature, which, when learned, presents and forms Christ." As examples of "canonical practice," he discusses, first, the typological, or Christological, interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ and, second, prayer. He concludes his discussion by noting, "Christians learn to speak about, to think about, and to live for God by indwelling the diverse canonical practices that comprise the Scriptures. By participating in such

practices-interpreting figurally, praying to the Father, and the like-Christians grow in faith toward understanding." This, it seems to me, is a helpful way of fleshing out, in greater detail, all that is involved in the concept and practice of the "theological interpretation" of Scripture. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 219-226. The citations in this note are from pp. 219 and 226.

22. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible,* edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 25.

23. Ibid., 23.

24. R. R. Reno, "A Richer Bible," *First Things* (August/September, 2010), 44.

25. I adopt this language from Thomas Oden who, in his book on *Classic Christianity*, states as his intention the setting forth of the "classic consensual ecumenical teaching" of the church throughout history. See Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xiii.

26. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford, 1993), Warrant: The Current Debate (Oxford, 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000).

27. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew," in *"Behind" the Text*, 99.

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