

# The Historical-Critical Method and Its Function in Biblical Interpretation

WOLFGANG M. W. ROTH

Theological teachers in India as elsewhere face in their work the problem of the historical-critical method. It is bound to come to the fore in Biblical studies and the teacher of these disciplines must come to terms with the problem for his own sake as well as that of his students. The following article is based on a paper presented by the writer in March 1962 to a meeting of the Staff Literary Society of Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur. It does not deal with questions arising out of the Indian situation but aims at mapping out an approach in principle to this problem. It sets forth not so much assured conclusions as a basis for discussion. The original form of the paper has been retained in that short summaries (in italics) are followed by explanations.

*The historical-critical method is used in Biblical exegesis to interpret the Old and New Testaments according to the hermeneutic rules which evolved in the last three centuries for the interpretation of historical texts. The rudiments of these rules were formulated by Baruch Spinoza and first systematically applied by Richard Simon.*<sup>1</sup>

The historical-critical method has accompanied the course of Biblical Criticism during the last three centuries. It is noteworthy that in Britain and North America the developments of Biblical Criticism 'were telescoped into one generation', while on the European Continent these 'were worked out with thoroughness over a long period'.<sup>2</sup> The method itself has undergone numerous corrections and changes and has been enriched by new approaches, so that today a comprehensive description of this method has to characterize its different aspects.

*Today, exegesis guided by the historical-critical method aims at "The determination of the text ; . . . The literary form of the*

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Samuel Terrien, 'History of the Interpretation of the Bible. III. Modern Period', *Interpreter's Bible*, I, pp. 127-130; Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1948), pp. 127-129.

<sup>2</sup> James D. Smart, *The Interpretation of Scripture* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1961), p. 239.

*passage ; . . . The historical situation, the Sitz im Leben ; . . . The meaning which the words had for the original author and hearer or reader', but also ' . . . The understanding of the passage in the light of its total context and the background out of which it emerged'."*<sup>3</sup>

The different disciplines of the historical-critical method contribute to the understanding of a given passage, i.e. textual criticism tries to determine the text as it left the author's hands, literary criticism discusses the import of idiom, form, and historical background of the passage, form criticism attempts to determine the original life situation of the oral (or literary) pattern used, semantic studies trace the etymology of a given word within the family of languages to which the language of the text belongs and describe the history of that word, that is the changes in meaning and usage it underwent. To these aspects of the historical-critical method has now to be added tradition criticism which attempts a reconstruction of the impact a passage was designed to exercise and of the impacts it actually made during its transmission during the Biblical periods.

The historical-critical method is thus not a destructive procedure whereby Biblical texts are dissected and become merely illustration material for this or that literary or historical aspect of the text. Rather, it aims at analysis *and* synthesis, i.e. at an all-over and faithful description and interpretation of the given passage as a whole and of its impacts during the transmission within the Biblical periods.

*The historical-critical method originated as part of the Rationalistic and Pietistic protest against the docetic estimate of Holy Scripture as held in Protestant scholasticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and is as such a legacy of that legitimate protest.*

In opposing the Roman Catholic Church the Reformers put emphasis on Holy Scripture as ultimate authority in the Church. However, for them Holy Scripture was not in itself authority but only in as far as it 'drives Christ'; the actual interpretation was marked by considerable freedom.<sup>4</sup> In the following period Protestant scholasticism 'in its zeal to exalt the Scriptures so emphasized their divinity as to deny the actuality of the human

---

<sup>3</sup> From 'Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible, as Accepted by the Ecumenical Study Conference held in Oxford 1949', quoted by Terrien, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>4</sup> "This is the touchstone to judge Biblical books: to see whether they drive Christ . . . What does not teach Christ, is not apostolic, even if St. Peter and St. Paul had taught it, what preaches Christ is apostolic, even if it came from Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod.' M. Luther in his preface to the Letter of St. James. Cf. J. Calvin's affirmation that 'the Scriptures will . . . only be effectual to produce the saving knowledge of God, when the certainty of it shall be founded on the internal persuasion of the Holy Spirit'. Institutes I, viii. 13, quoted according to Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr., ed., *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1939), p. 17.

element in them'.<sup>5</sup> This amounted to a docetic understanding of Holy Scripture, that is to the assertion that Holy Scripture is of divine quality and power *in itself*, and that wholly and solely, its human element merely being its unimportant garb.

Also against this one-sided view of Holy Scripture was directed the protest of Rationalism and Pietism. Both stressed in different ways the human element in Holy Scripture and, as a result, the need of human rules and methods of Biblical interpretation. The great merits of Rationalistic scholars in Biblical exegesis are well known and still form the basis of much of today's exegetical work. On the other hand, Ph. J. Spener and A. H. Francke strongly stressed the exegetical foundations of nascent Pietism; Francke for instance demanded a revision of the German Bible text and was the founder of the first Biblical exegetical periodical.<sup>6</sup> John Wesley's affirmation that he is 'a man of one book', namely the Bible, is well known.

For theologians standing in the Protestant tradition it is impossible to ignore the history of Protestant theology and exegesis. Standing on their fathers' shoulders they are to weigh carefully the contributions made by their predecessors. The Rationalistic and Pietistic protest against a docetic understanding of Holy Scripture, as found in Protestant scholasticism, was a legitimate one because it stressed, quite like the Reformers had done before in their own way, the human element in Holy Scripture. It was a needed corrective and as such it is relevant today.

*The fact that the problem of the historical-critical method is a pressing one only within the churches of the Protestant tradition and not in the Roman Catholic Church, indicates that it is a typically Protestant problem.*

The Roman Catholic Church is not unaware of the problem, as the encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* of 1943 shows. However, it is not a pressing problem and cannot become one because 'the "perfectum" of the revelation in Christ is swallowed up by the "praesens continuum" of the Roman Catholic Church.'<sup>7</sup> The continuing incarnation of Jesus Christ *exists* here and now as the

---

<sup>5</sup> Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 15, cf. p. 235. One illustration may suffice: David Hollatius (1648-1713), one of the outstanding representatives of Lutheran scholasticism, maintains that the Bible as the Word of God 'is not an *actio* but a *vis*, a *potentia*, which as such has *efficacia* even *extra usum*'. (Quoted according to Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Church Dogmatics I, 1, transl. by G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), p. 124. The Bible is understood by this Protestant scholastic in a way similar to the Roman Catholic understanding of the consecrated elements which are, even when not used, full of divine power. A telling analogy indeed!

<sup>6</sup> *Observationes biblicae*, first published 1695. E. Beyreuther, 'A. H. Francke', *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), col. 1319.

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, 'Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 47 (1950), p. 20.

mystical body of Christ, identical with the Roman Catholic Church.

The Protestant affirmation that Jesus Christ *becomes present* to the congregation in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit is the negation of the Roman Catholic position. It also sets forth the reading and preaching of the Word of God as the only bridge between the 'perfectum', that is the once-and-for-allness of the revelation of God in Christ two thousand years ago, and us as the believers of the twentieth century. Thus Holy Scripture moves into the centre of Church and theology. Holy Scripture is inextricably connected with Christ, the incarnate Word; in fact, Holy Scripture must be understood as one form of the Word of God.<sup>8</sup>

The Reformers had stressed this essential connection and had recognized that the Scriptures, so to speak, share both in Christ's divinity *and* humanity. Protestant scholasticism, on the other hand, had developed an understanding of Holy Scripture which offered a security on the basis of which the claims of the Gospel on faith and life could be accepted: 'It is a *divine* book, *therefore* you are safe in submitting to its claims.' Thus a false security was presented, a security which in principle did not differ from the security the Roman Catholic Church offers: 'The authority of the *Church* validates the Bible, *therefore* you may safely accept its claims.' Just as the Reformers destroyed this false security by inverting the relation between Church and Holy Scripture, so the Rationalistic and Pietistic protest of the seventeenth century destroyed the false security which Protestant scholasticism offered.

*The historical-critical method has on occasions made itself absolute and, as a result, become a theological position which claimed to disclose the ultimate meaning of the Biblical text through historical interpretation.*

General accepted validity had (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) only that which man as such could recognize, understand, explain, and control with his intellectual and experimental abilities.<sup>9</sup> This sentiment influenced and often dominated Biblical exegesis during that period. 'History was to be the instrument whereby man would at last get at the truth of things.'<sup>10</sup> Historical documents were considered like chemical compounds, historians like analysing scientists. As everything depends on the objectivity of the scientist, so everything in historical interpretation was thought to depend on the objectivity of the historian. And just as an objective chemical analysis will fully and sufficiently define and explain the compound, so an

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Barth's concept of the three forms of the one Word of God: Jesus Christ—the incarnate Word of God; Holy Scripture—the written Word of God; Preaching—the proclaimed Word of God. See Barth, *op. cit.*, section 4, especially pp. 111–124.

<sup>9</sup> Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 28 (translation by the writer).

<sup>10</sup> Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

objective historical investigation will fully and sufficiently define and explain the issues of which historical texts speak. Any aspect which defied definition or explanation was ignored or declared irrelevant. For instance, the sagas of the Book of Genesis were considered solely under the aspect as to what historical kernel they might contain. This procedure has rightly been characterized as materialism in historical interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

*The recognition that historical documents as well as any of their interpreters do not have an absolute objectivity proves to be a safeguard against the false belief that historical-critical interpretation can disclose the ultimate meaning of a given text.*

As far as the Biblical documents are concerned, it would be fallacious to interpret them only or primarily as historical documents. Many of the Biblical traditions do not even pretend to be historical documents in the usual sense of the word, that is photographic records of what happened. Most New Testament traditions wish to be understood as reflections of the faith of the early Church, intended to call forth faith, compare John 20:30 f. On the other hand, no interpreter of historical documents can claim absolute objectivity for himself. 'No one is able to read any text except as the person that he is and his perception of its meaning is influenced by his personal point of view, his convictions on the subject with which the text deals, and the total philosophy and theology which forms the context of all his ventures in understanding.'<sup>12</sup> Certain dimensions of the interpreter's existence, such as unconscious prejudices, defy objective definition and so enter into the interpreter's work uncontrolled. Furthermore, many texts aim at influencing the reader and often succeed in doing so. In other words, the interpreter is related to his text not like an objective scientist to his chemical compound but more like one human being to another. Chemical substances will always react in the same way, provided all circumstances are the same, and the analysing reactions will always disclose 'the ultimate truth' concerning the chemical substance, i.e. qualitative and quantitative definition of its components. Rather, the relation between text and interpreter should be compared to that between two persons. It is an encounter, an interaction affecting different planes of life and relating to the various dimensions of human existence.

*In certain cases Biblical interpretation has been implicitly or explicitly guided by philosophical presuppositions which have influenced or determined the results of Biblical exegesis.*

It is now commonly recognized that F. C. Baur's interpretation of the history of the early Church and similarly W. Vatke's and J. Wellhausen's interpretation of the history of religion of Israel have been inspired by a Hegelian understanding of history

---

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis. A Commentary*, transl. by John H. Marks (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1961), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 22, cf. p. 29.

or, as they preferred to say, of the historical process.<sup>13</sup> The historical-critical method was harnessed to these philosophical presuppositions and, as a result, led to interpretations which undergirded and vindicated the philosophical categories employed. In our time R. Bultmann is known for his existential interpretation of the New Testament, that is a Biblical interpretation which employs the philosophical categories of Heidegger's existentialism. Bultmann does this with the intention to express the Biblical proclamation in thought-forms according to which man of the twentieth century analyses and understands his existence. It is widely debated whether or not Bultmann has succeeded in expressing fully and adequately the Biblical message in these thought-forms.

*The historical-critical method, employed by theologians who are conscious and critical of their own presuppositions, proves to be a mutual corrective in exegetical work.*

Every interpreter is necessarily bound by his philosophical (or theological) presuppositions. They are part and parcel of his life, faith and work. It is imperative that he be aware of them, that he be ready to analyse and to define them, and willing to correct or abandon them in the light of responsible criticism and in the light of his texts. Whatever presuppositions and thought-forms prove to be adequate to the text, if only for the present time and temporarily, may be safely adopted, provided they are kept open for future correction. Furthermore, a philosophically (or theologically) prejudiced interpretation sometimes may, though in the meantime abandoned or corrected, serve as a stimulus and provoke scholars to recognize and to bring out an aspect of the text which was formerly ignored. For instance, it has been observed with reference to Baur, Vatke, and Wellhausen that their interpretations, 'while they ultimately were to prove inadequate, provoked scholars to think in terms of historical development'.<sup>14</sup>

Christian theologians can understand their work only as participation in the theological work of the whole Church. Hence Christian theologians listen to each other not by choice but by necessity. Self-correction in the light of self-criticism or of responsible criticism of others belongs to the very essence of the historical-critical method. In this way one-sided or outright wrong developments not only in the work of an individual exegete but also in the doctrinal development of the Church can be

---

<sup>13</sup> According to Baur, Peter's Jewish Christianity as found in the Gospel according to St. Matthew formed the 'thesis', Paul's Gentile Christianity the 'antithesis', and the early Catholic Church the 'synthesis'. F. Pahlmann, 'F. C. Baur', *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* I, col. 342; Smart, op. cit., p. 242. For Vatke and Wellhausen cf. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart*. (Neukirchen: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1956), pp. 179-182 and 248 f.; Smart, op. cit., pp. 241 f.

<sup>14</sup> Smart, op. cit., p. 242.

overcome. For instance, it has been pointed out that the historical-critical method was one of the forces which corrected within the Church such wrong developments of the nineteenth century as Romanticism and Liberalism.<sup>15</sup>

*The rejection in principle of the historical-critical method denies the human element of Holy Scripture as well as the necessarily timebound character of all Biblical theology and interpretation.*

Only a docetic understanding of Holy Scripture can reject the historical-critical method in principle because for this understanding any humanly conditioned approach and interpretation of Holy Scripture is, by definition, a sacrilege. It is to be remembered that already 'the reformers insisted on an historical, literal, grammatical understanding of the Bible',<sup>16</sup> quite in accordance with their unwillingness to set up Holy Scripture as such as a new authority in the Church.

Biblical exegesis, on the other hand, is necessarily timebound because interpretation is by definition interpretation aimed at the generation of today and is therefore compelled to take seriously present-day speech- and thought-forms.<sup>17</sup> An archaizing repetition of 'the pure doctrine', formulated in the sixteenth century and for that century, ignores the fact that human life and existence in 1962 move along different lines. Since the Church is commissioned to speak for her Lord in 1962, she cannot reject the task, of speaking the Gospel in the speech- and thought-forms of her own day. If she rejects this her commission, she has abandoned the very reason of her existence.

*The historical-critical method proves to be, through its critical and self-critical character, a safeguard against false securities of faith in that it upholds the Reformers' insistence on the centrality of justification by grace through faith.*

It has by now become clear that the historical-critical method must not become an absolute theological position nor the instrument of philosophical presuppositions. In turn, the historical-critical method must be critical to the text in the basic and original sense of the word, that is discerning its original text form, literary form, and its context, and self-critical, that is ready to stand challenged and corrected. Through its critical function thus defined it can and ought to become a safeguard against false securities which readily offer themselves in many and various disguises but on which faith cannot base itself.

Such a false security is for example the insistence on the literal infallibility of the Bible as the foundation of faith. This infallibility then becomes the guarantee of the absolute claim on man's faith and life made in the Holy Scriptures through the Gospel. The Christian decision becomes primarily the decision

---

<sup>15</sup> Ebeling, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Grant, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> Smart, op. cit., p. 56.

to believe the literal infallibility of the Bible.<sup>18</sup> This belief, however, is a sacrifice of intellect because men of today do not hold the Ptolemaic view of the universe, to quote only one example. If such a sacrifice of intellect be insisted upon, it will be, if rendered, a 'work' in the Pauline sense of the word, that is an act of man through which he earns his rightness with God. Hence the doctrine of justification by grace through faith *alone* is ignored on a different plane.

On the other hand, the insistence that the preaching of Jesus is 'reasonable' as a guarantee for the safe acceptance of Jesus' claims; is equally basing faith on a false security. In this case, faith is based not on the free response to the Gospel of Christ but on the assurance that the Gospel is reasonable according to some generally held and accepted canon of what is or is not reasonable.

The decision to adopt the historical-critical method is a truly Protestant decision. It re-affirms, under the changed circumstances of today, the Reformers' protest against any concept of justification by faith *and* works.<sup>19</sup> As the Reformers' protest cut away the false security of the 'work', so today the historical-critical method can cut away false securities to which men wish to cling in order to evade the ultimate decision of faith. The historical-critical method can also succeed in removing those seeming obstacles which prevent today's generation from encountering the actual Christian proclamation. One does not have to believe the Ptolemaic view of universe in order to be a Christian! False securities and false obstacles must be removed to lay bare the challenge of the Gospel: 'But who do you say that I am?'

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Smart's pungent remarks, *op. cit.*, pp. 214 f.

<sup>19</sup> Ebeling, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-43.