

Biblical Interpretation in the Modern Age

With the rise of modern science, confidence grew that we could discover the laws that govern all physical processes, from bacterial infection in the human body to the motion of the planets. Underlying these different investigations in chemistry, biology, physics, and astronomy is the common assumption that unalterable laws control these observable phenomena. If scientists could determine the precise nature of these laws, then outcomes could be reliably predicted in advance. The scientific method—investigating and collecting data, developing hypotheses, and testing those hypotheses through experimentation—became the standard of rationality in the western world.

In the field of theology, the scientific approach to the Bible investigated the biblical text with the same critical spirit that researchers in other areas brought to their studies. This resulted in three important shifts in biblical scholarship. First, scholars compared the biblical texts to other writings of equal antiquity from cultures with which the Israelites and early Christians would have had contact. The biblical creation story, for example, was compared with the Babylonian creation story that the Israelites would have heard during the time of the Babylonian exile. Second, just as Newton's physics replaced Aristotle's, new theories of biblical authorship supplanted traditional views. For example, scholars rejected traditional claims about Moses' authorship of the Torah, and began to assign different portions of the Torah to one of four sources (J, E, P, and D, discussed earlier). The Torah was viewed, therefore, not as a continuous narrative written by an individual author, but a composite work that resulted from the editing of several different sources of material. Unlike the earlier typological and allegorical approaches, this new scientific approach emphasized to a far greater degree the human involvement in the composition of the biblical texts. Third, the truth of the Bible became increasingly joined with the historical factuality of the stories. If evolution were

true, many reasoned, then the Bible must be wrong. Along with this, the historicity of the miracle stories was openly questioned by those both favoring and attacking the Gospel. The biblical texts seemed to suffer a crisis of credibility in the eyes of many scientifically minded modern readers:

Christian thinkers responded to this new scientific approach in one of three ways. The first was a complete rejection of the critical study of biblical works and vigorously reasserted divine authorship of biblical texts. This trend develops into modern fundamentalism, a movement committed to the historical inerrancy of the Bible. The second approach that emerged subjected all Christian teachings to the prevailing standards of rationality and rejected, or at the very least reinterpreted, any doctrine that seemed unscientific. This was the route pursued by the deists who believed that God created the world and then left it to run according to preestablished laws. In this view, the biblical moral code was commendable, but its miracle accounts were dubious. The third route, developed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant biblical scholars and eventually officially endorsed in Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, has become known as the historical-critical approach to the Bible. This method first situates biblical texts in their original historical context, and then makes a determination as to their proper categorization as, for example, an historical account, a satire, or a symbolic story meant to convey spiritual truths.

The Critical Tools of the Historical-Critical Method

The historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation employs a number of critical tools to examine the scriptures. We will focus on three: textual criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Textual criticism determines the original wording of a text. In the case of the New Testament, for example, we have no original

copies of the manuscripts. The earliest fragment of a New Testament writing is a small piece of papyrus called Rylands Greek Papyrus 457, containing verses from John 18, dated to about 125 to 135. The biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown estimates the number of manuscripts (whole or in part) of the Greek New Testament at approximately three thousand. In addition to that, Brown notes, there are approximately twenty-two hundred manuscripts containing sections of the New Testament for use in liturgy. These various manuscripts and fragments do not agree on the exact wording of the Gospels, or other biblical writings. Consequently, biblical scholars must reconstruct what they believe to be the original wording of the text. Lively scholarly debate, of course, exists over such matters.

Often such discussions can be discovered in the footnotes of Bibles. The most obvious example is probably the ending of Mark's Gospel. The earliest manuscripts we have end at Mark 16:8. That makes for an inconclusive ending in the minds of many readers; There is no appearance of the Risen Lord; the angel at the tomb speaks of Jesus meeting the disciples in Galilee, but no such event is described; and the final verse has the women fleeing the tomb, "saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). The majority of scholars believe that Mark intended to end his Gospel at 16:8; others are unconvinced, arguing instead that the original ending has most likely been lost. Most modern editions of the Bible discuss the textual issues in the footnotes to chapter sixteen. Contemporary commentaries on Mark's Gospel discuss the issue in even greater detail. A similar discussion can be found regarding the story of the woman being taken off to be stoned for adultery in John 7:53—8:11. In many ancient manuscripts of John, this famous story is not included; and in some manuscripts the story appears in Luke, not John. A close reading of John 7—8 will reveal that the story interrupts the flow of the narrative, and that the text flows more smoothly if the reader skips immediately from John 7:52 to John 8:12.

FORM CRITICISM

Once scholars agreed that the gospel writers incorporated pre-existing material into their Gospels, then the challenge became how to identify these sources that the gospel writers had at their disposal

and how they used them. In a popular introductory text on form criticism, Edgar V. McKnight explains, "The 'fundamental assumption,' and in some sense the assumption which makes form criticism both necessary and possible, is that tradition consists basically of individual sayings and narratives joined together in the Gospels by the work of the editors."²⁸ This approach can be illustrated by the modern treatment of Jesus' parables. In Mark 4:1–9 Jesus tells the parable of the sower, and in 4:13–20 he gives an allegorical interpretation in which the seeds represent various people's response to the gospel message. Joachim Jeremias, in one of the groundbreaking works in twentieth-century scholarship on the study of parables, writes, "Even in the very earliest period, during the first few decades after the death of Jesus, the parables underwent a certain amount of reinterpretation. At a very early stage the process had begun treating them as allegories—of attributing some special significance to every detail...and for centuries that kind of allegorical interpretation obscured their real meaning like a thick veil."²⁹

This thick veil found its way into the final edition of Mark's Gospel in which Jesus utters both the parable and its allegorical interpretation. Form critics, however, differentiate between the original parable that reflects the Palestinian farming practices common in Jesus' day, and the allegorical interpretation that reflects the successes and failures experienced by early Christian missionaries. Jeremias writes,

As they come down to us, Jesus' parables have a double historical setting. (1) The original setting of the parables, as of all his utterances, is some specific situation in the course of his activity. Many of the parables are so vividly told that it is natural to assume that they arise out of some occurrence. (2) But subsequently, before they assumed a written form, they "lived" in the primitive Church, which proclaimed, preached, and taught the words of Jesus in its missionary activities, its assemblies, and in its catechetical instruction. It collected and arranged his sayings under specific headings, and created settings for them, sometimes modifying their form, expanding here, allegorizing

there, always in relation to its own situation between the cross and the second coming of Christ.³⁰

The task assumed by the form critic, therefore, is to identify the original “setting in life” in which the parable was first uttered, and then speculate how the church may have adapted the parable to speak to its own situation. By extension, the gospel writers were not simply compiling information, but in fact editing the received material and shaping their Gospels in ways that would be responsive to the questions and concerns of their communities. This leads us into a discussion of redaction criticism.

REDACTION CRITICISM

Redaction criticism investigates the changes the gospel writers made to the received material. Most scholars maintain that Mark was the first Gospel written, and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources. If this is accurate, we can compare the stories in Mark with their parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke, and note the changes made by Matthew and Luke. The easiest way to do this is by consulting *Gospel Parallels*, a standard reference text that presents the stories of Mark alongside their parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke.³¹

The account of Jesus’ baptism serves as a helpful illustration. In Mark 1:9–11, John baptizes Jesus. Two questions arise in the minds of many readers. First, if John’s baptism is “a baptism for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4), then is Mark suggesting that Jesus had sinned? Second, does the fact that Jesus submits to John’s baptism in any way suggest that John had a superior role? Matthew and Luke offer their own distinctive editorial touches to address these issues. In Matthew, we find a dialogue inserted between John and Jesus (Matt 3:13–15), with John expressing astonishment that Jesus should come to him for baptism. In Luke, John the Baptist is imprisoned in the verses preceding the baptism story (Luke 3:19–20). As the scripture scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes,

Luke's version of the baptism deviates from the other Synoptists in several respects. We can note first his distinctive way of dealing with the possible misunderstanding that could be caused by having Jesus baptized by John. Mark appears unaware of the problem. But Matthew's dialogue between Jesus and John concerning who is greater and the need for righteousness (Matt 3:13–15) tells us the two possible implications to be drawn from Jesus being baptized by John: that John was greater than Jesus, and that Jesus was a sinner who required repentance. Luke has no dialogue of this sort. Instead, he virtually removes John from the scene. He notes his imprisonment in 3:19, and then extends the distance between him and Jesus by means of a series of adverbial clauses. As a result, the reader does not see Jesus acted on by John, but John in prison and Jesus baptized amid a crowd of people.³²

Within each Gospel are similar instances of redaction—of individual sayings of Jesus, the content of miracle stories, and Jesus' last words on the cross. The textual, formal, and redactional analysis of the Gospel, however, is only the first step in the process of biblical interpretation.

Hermeneutics

The task of biblical interpretation involves two sets of questions. The first set of questions examines what the text meant to those who first heard it; historical setting, literary devices, and cultural assumptions are identified in order to shed light on the original meaning of the text. In formal theological language, this is the task of *exegesis*. The second set of questions focuses on the meaning of the text for contemporary readers and the application of those biblical teachings to the lives of ordinary Christians. In formal theological language, this is the task of *hermeneutics* that we discussed in the previous chapter.

This two-step process of biblical interpretation would most likely be the route we would take if we were called upon to offer a

scriptural reflection in a liturgical setting, something like a priest's homily. We would need to gather historical information about the text, but we would also want to connect that passage with the lives of those present at the liturgy. For example, Peter's walking on water may be a lesson in faith for us today. The demons expelled by Jesus might be understood as the destructive forces at work in our lives. The miracle of the loaves and fishes may be a mandate to feed the hungry of our own day.

The following historical piece serves as a useful illustration of the need for both steps in the process of interpretation.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met here on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government

of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.³³

The Gettysburg Address does not mention the name of the person delivering the address, the location at which the address is given, or the date. There is also an interesting textual question—there are different versions of the Address in existence, and there is some debate over which version Lincoln actually delivered at Gettysburg. In order to understand the content of the Address, the reader needs to know the meaning of a “score,” and what occurred “four score and seven years ago” in American history, and why 1776 is significant to Americans. Allusions are made to foundational texts, such as the Declaration of Independence. As Americans we understand the Gettysburg Address because we know the history that is needed in order for the text to make sense. Without that knowledge, the address would be virtually unintelligible to the reader. Its power, however, is not confined to its status as an important historical work in American history. On the one-year anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, several dignitaries joined the families who lost loved ones for a memorial service at Ground Zero. Included in that memorial was a reading of the Gettysburg Address by Governor George Pataki of New York. Lincoln’s speech, originally delivered on November 19, 1863, which the president himself believed “the world will little note, nor long remember,” was reinterpreted in light of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Texts take on a life of their own; they are preserved in the life of a community who treasures them. Likewise, scriptural texts are remembered and reinterpreted by a living body of believers whose very lives are shaped by its teachings, images, and dreams.

Discussion Questions

1. Why would the church want a canon of scripture? What criteria should be applied when making that selection?
2. How would you respond to Marcion? What role should the Old Testament play in Christian belief and practice?