


An Evaluation of historical-critical methods

with special reference to Source Criticism, Tradition Criticism, Form Criticism and Redaction Criticism.

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Visitor # 

1. Introduction

The use of historical criticism and critical methods have dominated much of the Biblical research undertaken this century. The practitioners of these methods have arrived at some interesting, surprising and astounding conclusions about the Biblical authors and what they wrote. Many of these conclusions pose a serious problem to conservative evangelical Christians who hold that the Bible is the fully inspired, authoritative, inerrant word of God.

The purpose of this essay is to survey and evaluate the most important critical methods. Various weaknesses and dangers will be highlighted and suggestions given about how these methods may be used by evangelicals to aid in Biblical interpretation. Most the methods in question relate primarily to the New Testament, and in particular the Gospels. Although some principles may apply to all scripture, this essay will focus only on critical methods relating to interpretation of the synoptic gospels (ie. Matthew, Mark and Luke).

2. Historical-Critical Methods

2.1 History, Historical Criticism and Presuppositions

The Bible is an historical book. It records the history of Israel, the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the history of the early church (Krentz 1975, p. 1) in the words of humans who were inspired by God (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 76). Because the Bible is an historical work, it is subject to historical investigation and the results of historical research (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 73-74).

The overall purpose of historical-critical methods is to investigate what actually happened in the events described or alluded to (Marshall 1985, p. 126). Krentz (1975, p. 35-36) gives the following goals of historical investigation:

1. Present a body of facts that show what actually happened and why.
2. Illuminate the past, creating a comprehensive picture of a culture's own record of history.
3. Understand the significance of events and interpret them.
4. Understand motives as well as actions.

Marshall (1985, p. 128-130) points out that reading Biblical accounts raises the following historical problems or questions:

1. Discrepancies with parallel Biblical accounts.
2. Discrepancies with non-Biblical material.
3. Historical improbabilities.
4. Supernatural occurrences.
5. Creation/Modification by the early church
6. Literary genre.
7. Insufficient evidence.

These problems and questions may only be resolved by historical study (Marshall 1985, p. 131). Using critical methods it is possible to determine all relevant sources of historical data, the accuracy and credibility of these sources and the development of the material in these sources. Using this information it is possible to determine what is historically probable and form an historical hypothesis which successfully accounts for what the sources say and build a coherent picture of what probably happened (Marshall 1985, p. 127). It is not always possible to arrive at certainty. Complex events are difficult to record in detail and often the sources are missing or incomplete. History is limited - historians only produce a limited or reduced representation of the past (Krentz 1975, p. 37). There may be several possibilities available each of which is equally probable, so reasoned assessments and conjectures are often called for. However, this results in a problem with presuppositions because they will determine what may or may not be possible and probable (Marshall 1985, p. 127).

This is where historical criticism has been abused. Many practitioners take a "purely scientific" view which excludes any possibility of the supernatural and results in a purely naturalistic interpretation of Biblical events and people. Because of these presuppositions, this view is prevented from saying anything at all about God or the miracles and supernatural works of Jesus Christ (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 74). These scholars hold that all supernatural events described in the Bible are inventions of the early church. Therefore they attempt to get behind this mythology and get at the "real" historical Jesus. Schaeffer (1985, v. 1 p. 52) highlights the problem with this approach: "Naturalistic theology has begun by accepting the presupposition of the uniformity of natural causes in a closed system. Thus they rejected everything miraculous and supernatural including the life of Jesus Christ. they still hoped to find an historical Jesus in a rational, objective, scholarly way by separating the supernatural aspects of Jesus' life from the 'true history'. But they failed Their search for the historical Jesus was doomed to failure. The supernatural was so intertwined with the rest that if they ripped out all the supernatural, there was no Jesus left!"

Many liberal theologians have used critical methods to show the Bible is not historically accurate. The authors were primarily theologians not historians so the "Jesus of history" is nothing like the Jesus of the Bible. This means that if there is a discrepancy between the Bible and other historical material, it is the Bible that is most probably in error. A Biblical account must be 'proved' historically accurate rather than accepted as so (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 82). But this scepticism is unwarranted since the Bible has shown itself time and again to be historically accurate. Historical criticism should pursue without restriction the explanation that best explains the phenomena in question. This includes supernatural explanations (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 89).

2.2 Source Criticism

2.2.1 Explanation of Source Criticism

The author of Luke states that "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." (Luke 1:1-2, NIV) This implies that in the early church period there were many different sources of material concerning the life of Christ. Luke also states that he "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" (v. 3), so it is reasonable to assume that Luke knew about these sources, read them and used them to compose his own account (v. 3). It is also reasonable to assume that the other gospel writers did the same (Marshall 1985, p. 139). Also,

internal evidence such as the similarity/dissimilarity of wording (for the same events), content and order suggests the gospel writers had common sources (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 139). To assume that the synoptic gospels were written completely independently is not a sensible option - there is just too much internal evidence indicating otherwise (Fee & Stuart 1993, p. 122).

The search for sources is much easier and less speculative when there are several parallel accounts, like those found in the synoptic gospels. By examining parallel accounts and noting the agreements and disagreements in wording, ordering of material, omissions, style, ideas and theology and taking into account statements made by church fathers, it is possible to derive hypothetical sources of the synoptic gospels (Marshall 1985, p. 140-144). If a story is unique to a particular gospel then searching for breaks and dislocations in narrative sequence, stylistic inconsistency, theological inconsistency and historical inconsistency may also be helpful in determining possible sources (Marshall 1985, p. 144-145).

It will not always be possible to identify the written or oral sources of a particular account. This does not mean that the account should not be trusted (Marshall 1985, p. 146). In any case, several gospel writers (Matthew, John and perhaps Mark) were actual eye-witnesses.

The Two-Source or Oxford hypothesis is the one accepted by the vast majority of scholars (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 144). This hypothesis states that Mark and a hypothetical document called Q, were the basis for Matthew and Luke. It is suggested that Q contains the verses common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark. Matthew and Luke were composed using a combination of Mark, Q and possibly other sources (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 143-144).

2.2.2 Evaluation of Source Criticism

If the sources of an account can be identified, it is possible to learn a great deal. The fact that Matthew and Luke usually agree with Mark on the actual words of Jesus indicates they both wanted to preserve Mark's tradition rather than just make up their own. Source criticism can reveal something about the author's method of writing and particular interests and ideas (Stein 1988, p. 144). For example, Matthew seems to focus on the Jews but to be sure of this we need to know what his sources were. If his source was Mark, then this is a reasonable conclusion but if it was the traditions of the Jerusalem church, then this Jewish focus would be inherent in the source rather than Matthew's interest (Marshall 1985, p. 147).

Hermeneutical insights may also be gained. If the earliest text form of an event can be recovered, then it will be possible to see how each gospel writer interpreted that event and how they modified it to emphasise that interpretation (Stein 1988, p. 151).

Many critics have viewed source modifications as corruptions or errors but these changes were made under the inspiration of the Spirit and are still authoritative. It should also be noted that the canonical text form is inspired. A hypothetical reconstruction of the text is not. It is unwise to make hypothetical sources the basis for theology.

The Two-Source hypothesis makes some questionable affirmations in regard to Q material and material unique to Matthew or Luke. Q is a purely hypothetical document and it is highly unlikely that it was a single written source. It is far more probable that it was a collection of documents. However, the possibility of the existence of Q-like documents is beyond doubt since the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas (Stein 1988, p. 109). Also, material that is unique to either Matthew or Luke is assumed to come from another source other than Mark or Q. But this may not be the case. It is possible that Matthew included a saying from Q that Luke did not and vice versa.

2.3 Tradition Criticism

2.3.1 Explanation of Tradition Criticism

Tradition criticism is used to determine the development of traditions from Jesus through the early church to the gospel writer and forms the basis for form and redaction criticism. It is an attempt to trace the evolution of the form and/or meaning of concepts, words or sayings. For example, tradition criticism is interested in how a parable developed into 2 or 3 different versions (Marshall 1985, p. 165-166). The basic axioms behind tradition criticism force the critic to be highly sceptical about the authenticity or historicity of the traditions as they are recorded in the gospels. The burden of proof lies with those who wish to take the traditions as historical (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 204).

The 3 basic axioms for determining authentic traditions, rather than those created and modified by the early church are listed in Black & Dockery (1991, p. 205) and are as follows:

1. **Dissimilarity:** they are not parallels of Jewish traditions and not reflections of the faith and practices of the early church.
2. **Multiple attestation:** whether or not a saying occurs in more than one gospel.
3. **Coherence:** if the saying in question has the same form of another saying that has already been shown to be authentic (using the above criteria), then this saying should also be regarded as authentic.

Tradition criticism may be applied to Peter's confession in Mark 8:29 and parallels. Luke adds the words "of God", Matthew adds "the Son of the Living God" and John has "the holy One of God". Therefore, since these 4 parallels each say something different, it is highly unlikely (or so it is claimed) that this saying is actually historical (Marshall 1985, p. 167).

Using tradition criticism some critics have shown that Matthew 18:17 is not authentic, because it goes against the parable of Wheat and Tares and the Dragnet (Matthew 13:47f). It also presupposes a Jewish audience which excludes Gentiles and tax collectors. This is unlike the "historical Jesus" who embraced such people, therefore it must be a later development of the church (Marshall 1985, p. 168).

2.3.2 Evaluation of Tradition Criticism

Tradition criticism has done much to undermine the integrity of the gospel accounts. It is far too sceptical and its conclusions are often devoid of supporting evidence. The axioms for determining authenticity leave much to be desired. The criteria of dissimilarity is far too narrow and therefore only identifies the unique Jesus. It is ridiculous to expect Jesus' teaching would not have overlapped with Jewish teaching, especially since both were rooted in the Old Testament. It is even more ridiculous to expect Jesus' teaching to have contributed nothing to the early church. Responding to the message of Jesus is the very essence of Christianity (Marshall 1985, p. 174). The criteria of multiple attestation ignores the purpose and inspired overall theological agenda of the gospel author (Marshall 1985, p. 176).

For Matthew 18:17, it seems that this verse has not been correctly understood. This verse is not a put-down of gentiles and tax collectors but simply stating that we should treat unrepentant Christians the same way we would treat non-Christians. How should we treat non-Christians? The same way Christ did (cf. Matthew 9:10-12, Matthew 15:22-28).

There are 4 gospels that do not oppose one another. Therefore it is best to assume everything is authentic unless there is concrete evidence to the contrary. Although the gospels may not record Jesus' actual words (he spoke in Aramaic and the New Testament was written in Greek) or forms, they do record His essential message for humanity. Any modification of traditions by the gospel authors were done under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

2.4 Form Criticism

2.4.1 Explanation of Form Criticism

Form criticism seeks to get behind the written sources by studying and analysing the "form" of individual gospel traditions. It describes the characteristics of the various forms and how they emerged in the period of oral transmission in the church (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 176).

The basic axioms of form criticism are as follows:

1. The gospels are "popular" or "folk" literature and are not the work of just one person but belong to a community. These communities shaped the stories they contain (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 178). Therefore the gospel authors were not authors in the true sense but collectors and editors (Marshall 1985, p. 153).
2. Most of the material circulated orally and as individual units for at least 20 years (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 178).
3. Units of tradition were used as the occasion required. Only useful traditions were retained. Only rarely are they recorded in chronological order (Marshall 1985, p. 154).
4. As units were used they took on a particular form according to their function in the community. The form reflects the thoughts of the early church (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 176). Therefore it is possible to deduce a unit's "life-setting" (German: *Sitz im Leben*) from its form. (Marshall 1985, p. 154). Life-setting denotes an area of church life such as worship, teaching and evangelism and only rarely does it indicate the actual historical situation that gave rise to the tradition (Marshall 1985, p. 154).
5. Form criticism assumes the results of source criticism and tradition criticism (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 179).

Rudolf Bultman and Martin Dibelius have identified the following forms:

1. ***Paradigms/Pronouncement Stories***: These are brief stories which culminate in an authoritative saying of Jesus or a saying about the reaction of on-lookers (Marshall 1985, p. 155).
2. ***Legends/Stories about Jesus***: These are stories told to exalt a great figure and present a person as an example to follow. The term legend does not necessarily mean they are unhistorical although this is often the assumption (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 184).
3. ***Tales/Miracle Stories***: These are self-contained highly descriptive stories that show pleasure in giving details (Marshall 1985, p. 156).
4. ***Sayings/Exhortations***: This is independent teaching material such as wisdom sayings, prophetic sayings, legal sayings and "I" sayings (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 184).
5. ***Myths***: These are narratives showing interactions between mythological characters and humans. The supernatural breaks into human domain (Marshall 1985, p. 157).

Form criticism has exegetical implications in passages like Mark 2:18-20. Mark 2:18-19a is a pronouncement story but vv. 19b-20 do not fit this form. Therefore they must be an addition by the early church (Marshall 1985, p. 159).

2.4.2 Evaluation of Form Criticism

One of the problems with form criticism is the form categories are often based on content rather than actual form. Although form and content do influence each other, some categories are simply stylistic descriptions. Also, many sayings and stories have no "common" form and many have "mixed" form. Some may even fall into multiple categories (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 187). If forms have no or little distinction then they couldn't have been created and shaped by the early church, as claimed by many form critics (Marshall 1985, p. 158-159).

For Mark 2:18-20, it all depends on the definition of "pronouncement story". What if the definition is too rigid. Form critics talk about "law of tradition" as if they are well proven scientific laws of development of oral traditions. This is not the case. Except for Luke, the gospel writers were Jews and therefore it is reasonable to assume transmission of traditions would have occurred in a similar fashion to Rabbinic teachings. Rabbis were concerned with accurate transmission and so would the early church (Stein 1988, p. 187-192). The probability of eyewitnesses keeping checks on the integrity of the traditions is also disregarded by many form critics (Stein 1988, p. 193-203).

Form criticism does have some positive insights. It does help in understanding the period between AD 30 and AD 50. Searching for the *Sitz im Leben* aids exegesis because knowing how the tradition functioned in the early church indicates how it should speak today. However, this is not always possible. The early church preserved traditions because they were useful. This helps to understand that the gospels are practical references not just biographies of Jesus. Understanding the form is also very important for accurate exegesis (Marshall 1985, p. 161).

The descriptive features of form criticism provide the greatest aid to interpretation. They help to focus on the author's style and structure of argument (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 192).

2.5 Redaction Criticism

2.5.1 Explanation of Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism builds on the results of source and tradition criticism. It treasures and examines the editorial work of gospel authors in order to see their emphases and purposes (Stein 1988, p. 238). It seeks to uncover the theology and setting of the author by studying the way they modified traditions, arranged them and stitched them together. It asks why the author included, excluded or modified a particular tradition and tries to identify distinctive patterns, interests and theological ideas (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 199-200).

Redaction Criticism involves analysing individual traditions comparing it with parallels, in order to identify common and unique phrases and words. It also involves analysing the whole gospel in comparison with other gospels. The seams (introductions and conclusions) link traditions together, provide setting and often theological emphasis. Summaries and traditions structure give clues to major theological overtones. Unique elements indicate which way the story is going and repeated phrases show emphasis and special interests. As the gospel unfolds individual traditions interact to produce the intended message (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 208-211). Considering an author's vocabulary and style is also helpful (Marshall 1985, p. 185).

2.5.2 Evaluation of Redaction Criticism

Results of redaction criticism are highly subjective and should not be accepted uncritically. The huge variation in results shows this clearly (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 213). There is no doubt that gospel authors shaped and modified traditions to fit their gospel's purpose but presuppositions about the nature of traditions, their transmission and modification are suspect. "Redaction" does not mean unhistorical "theologising" (Marshall 1985, p. 187-188). Many critics are highly sceptical and assume every redaction is a creation and therefore unhistorical. However, omission and addition are not criteria for historicity but for style, emphasis and purpose. Not every jot and tittle carries theological weight (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 213). It should also be noted that meaning is found in the overall pericope not the redactions (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 215).

History and theology are not mutually exclusive. There is no reason why an author can not emphasise a theological concept using an historical event. Gospel authors were interpreters but there is no reason to assume they were misinterpreters.

Redaction criticism is still an important tool. It shows how inspiration took place when authors selected, arranged and highlighted various traditions in order to communicate a special message to their readers (Black & Dockery 1991, p. 216). This gives the gospels their individual character and is why we have four of them (Marshall 1985, p. 191).

3. Conclusion

The conclusions of historical criticism must not outweigh the evidence that supports them. This has been a major problem. Many critics have used huge leaps in logic to arrive at ridiculous and unsubstantiated conclusions.

Critical methods used with common sense and operating in a framework that does not exclude the supernatural are an important and necessary aid to Biblical interpretation. This results in a better grasp of the grammatical and historical sense of the Bible. The course of Biblical history is clarified and it is possible to see the gaps in our knowledge more clearly. The historical character of the Bible is emphasised. The great differences in culture and society between the Biblical world and the modern world are highlighted along with the proper purpose of a passage. This all leads to enhanced theological insight (Krentz 1975, p. 64-66).

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