

The What and Why of *Biblical Criticism*

Rodney J. Decker, 1995

Definitions

Criticism: “a general term that refers to analysis of the Scriptures.”

Biblical criticism: “A term used loosely to describe all the methodologies applied to the study of biblical texts.”

Varieties of biblical criticism

Methodologies: canonical, form, literary, redaction, rhetorical, source, tradition criticism

Subject matter: higher criticism (date, authorship, etc.); lower criticism (textual criticism)

Attitudes toward

- Ignore them all and “just study the Bible.”
- Employ them all as tools for studying the Bible.
- Evaluate each for strengths and weaknesses and use those methods or principles that are consistent with biblical presuppositions (such as theism, providence, inspiration, inerrancy).

Why is it necessary to study critical methods?

- You *will* encounter them in ministry.
 - Students who attend secular universities
 - People in your church who have attended secular universities
- Almost all the reference tools you use have been prepared by scholars using critical methods. Fundamental Baptists have never published a lexicon (Greek or Hebrew), a major systematic or biblical theology (only Bancroft), a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, and not very many commentaries.
 - Dare not use such tools without discrimination (but they must be used—there are no others).
- You will have to defend your beliefs in these areas someday (and it usually seems to happen without advance notice!). When you’re on the “hot seat” the last thing you want to do is look like a fool or an ignoramus.

Principles

- Not all such methods were developed with the same presuppositions.
- A critical methodology of some sort is unavoidable; denial of such is simply a refusal to define one's own method.
- It is not possible to declare absolutely that any one methodology is totally illegitimate (it depends more on the presuppositions than on the method per se).
- There is almost always a grain of truth that lies behind the impetus for a particular method. It may be embarrassing to conservatives that "liberals" recognized it first, but that does not invalidate the truthful aspect. The believer does not have a monopoly on truth—unbelievers may be (and often are) better grammarians than believers (as just one example).
- Devoting too much time to studying the work of the unbelieving, anti-supernatural critic is not wise stewardship of one's time. Knowing all the theories of such scholars but not knowing the views of conservative scholars is counter-productive.
- The church needs some who specialize in the "debunking business"—but all pastors and missionaries should not feel compelled to become an authority on all such "bunk." You need to know enough about the methods and presuppositions to evaluate them even if you do not keep up in all the technical details.

Select Bibliography

- Black, David A. and David S. Dockery, ed. *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *The New Testament and Criticism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977. (Contains essays on the history of interp., presuppositions, and critical analyses of several critical methods.)
- McKnight, Scot. *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels*. Guides to New Testament Exegesis, vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988.
- Noll, Mark. *Between Faith and Criticism*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.
- Smith, Barry D. "The Historical-Critical Method, Jesus Research, and the Christian Scholar." *TrinJ* n.s., 15 (1994): 201–20. (This is a good article; my only major disagreement is over his understanding of authorial intention and *sensus plenior*.)
- (Also see the essays in vol. 1 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*.)

Summary of Various Critical Methodologies

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Source Criticism

“An analytical methodology used in the study of biblical books to discover individual documents (or sources) that were used in the construction of a particular literary unit as we now have it” (Huey & Corley, *Student’s Dictionary*, 176).

The recognition of the literary relationship of the Synoptic Gospels was probably the primary factor in the inception of source criticism. It originated in the 18th C. with the work of Griesbach and Lessing. Methodology for use in the Gospels was established in the late 18th and early 19th C. by Holtzmann and Streeter (two- document and four-document hypotheses). It is primarily used in the Gospels, though it has also been applied to other parts of the NT (e.g., Acts, 2 Cor., Phil., 1 Pet.) that some critics argue have been compiled from other sources.

Potential dangers of some forms of source criticism include the following. 1. It emphasizes and practices the fragmentation of works which are meant to be literary units. 2. In its emphasis on the literary history of documents it creates literary documents which its practitioners hypothesize to be the sources of material found in biblical books (e.g., Q in the Synoptics). 3. It takes away from the equal authority that should be given each of the Synoptic Gospels and gives more authority to the earliest or “original” one. 4. Some of its practitioners are prone to come to unwarranted decisions in sympathy with their anti-supernatural, rationalistic, historical-critical presuppositions.

The value of source criticism is that it has increased our understanding of the literary relationship between the Synoptic Gospels—but note that we have explicit statement that sources were used in their composition (Luke 1:1–4). To extrapolate this to other parts of the NT is precarious.

Form Criticism

Form criticism is the study of the individual sayings and pericopae of the Bible in order to determine the original form of that material and to assign those forms to their respective *Sitz im Leben* which is determined by the function they served in the Christian community.

This is a pre-literary study that had its “hey day” between the two world wars. It seeks to go back behind the questions asked by source criticism to investigate unanswered questions regarding the development of the biblical material in the pre-written, oral period (i.e., from Jesus’ death to the record of his sayings in the biblical record). Its origins are in the work of Gunkel (an OT scholar) who employed two steps in his method: first, identify the various literary forms, and second, find the original *Sitz im Leben* where the form was used (i.e., find the life situation in which it was used or developed). (Other key scholars here include Karl Schmidt, Martin Diebelius, and Rudolph Bultmann.)

There are three main criteria used by form critics to determine the authenticity of biblical material—i.e., to determine which sayings are authentic sayings of Jesus and which have been added by the early church: 1. Dissimilarity (no one else could have said this, only

Jesus); 2. Coherence (Does this saying cohere with other material established as authentic on the basis of dissimilarity?); 3. Multiple attestation (occurrence in multiple strata is more like authentic). These criteria are based on skeptical assumptions concerning the authenticity of Scripture (it is false until proven to be true!) and are in many ways ridiculous when considered in light of normal literary patterns.¹

Problems with form criticism include the following. 1. There are no conclusive results, the form critics all disagree with each other. 2. It does not give any weight to the testimony and influence of the eyewitnesses of the life of Christ. 3. It assumes that the first generation of Christians was not as concerned about the truth as was the second generation. 4. It portrays the Gospel writers as non-thinking, paste-and-scissor compilers. 5. It ignores the fact that the Gospels have structure and their structural development makes sense.

The (limited) values include a reminder that there was an oral period in the transmission that is often forgotten, and negatively, the failure of form criticism has shown the bankruptcy and illegitimacy of separating the material in the Gospels which speaks of the Jesus of History from that which speaks of the Christ of faith. (There is no valid proof for labeling Gospel material a creation of the Hellenistic church.)

Redaction Criticism

There are a variety of approaches to redaction criticism, largely dependent on the presuppositions of the practitioner. They are united in the assertion that the books of the Bible are literary compositions that have been carefully edited to advocate a particular theological viewpoint.

Many (most?) redaction critics assume that this editing has resulted in skewing the historical accuracy of the content or even the outright fabrication of fictional material that is presented as historical to advance the theological agenda of the writer or his community (cf. Robert Gundry's *Matthew*). This assumes that what is theological is not historical—that someone who is greatly concerned with and involved in the message of a biblical book would not be totally truthful in their writing of said book. (Key names here include Gunther Bornkamm, Willi Marxsen, and Hans Conzelmann.)

It is a smaller group that assumes that such redaction may preserve the historical accuracy of the texts and sources. This “milder” form of redaction criticism focuses on the theological viewpoint/perspective of the author—e.g., of the Gospel writers and their divergent emphases. So long as inerrancy is maintained (in actuality, not just in assertion—Gundry, e.g., professes to accept inerrancy), parallel accounts are not seen as contradictory, and one's method does not hinge on the reconstruction of theoretical (but unknown, undocumented) source documents (e.g., Q), the basic method is acceptable (indeed, it dates to the early centuries, though it did not go by the modern name).

For a very helpful analysis of redaction criticism, including both critique and methodological cautions, see D. A. Carson, “Redaction Criticism: On the Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of a Literary Tool,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, 119–42 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983). Several select quotes from his conclusion follow:

The one point where redaction criticism may offer considerably more help, and where it may function with some legitimacy, is in aiding us to discern more closely the Evangelists' individual concerns and emphases. In one sense, of course, interpreters have always been interested in such questions. In the broadest sense, therefore, redaction criticism is nothing new....

It seems best, then, if redaction criticism as applied to discerning distinctive emphases is to produce work of lasting importance, that it should not take its pedigree too seriously and it should not speak too dogmatically, for instance, of Matthew's change of Mark but rather of the variations between the two.

... Redaction criticism devoted to such study can be of genuine service to the interpretation of the Scriptures, provided the reservations already expressed are not ignored.

If redaction criticism is applied with these kinds of reservations to the study of the Gospels, it will certainly help us discern more precisely the distinctive witness of each Evangelist to Jesus Christ and may legitimately take its place along side other literary tools. But precisely because "redaction criticism" is in the category of slippery words, qualifications and reservations are needed to keep us from worshipping before a shrine that has decidedly mixed credentials (140–41).

¹For detailed examinations and refutations of these criteria, see R. T. France, "The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus," in *History, Criticism, and Faith: Four Exploratory Studies*, ed. Colin Brown (Leicester, Eng.: IVP, 1977); and Darrell Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. M. Wilkens and J. P. Moreland, 73–100 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).