

**THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD
- YES OR NO?**

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Abstract

The article takes issue with those who claim that historical criticism (HC) offers the only 'scientifically responsible' interpretation of the New Testament. The peculiar sense of the operative words 'historical' and 'critical' of the designation 'the historical critical method' is described. Then a historical overview is given of the rise and growth of HC. Some of the crucial critical presuppositions underlying HC are discussed. Since *Aufklärung* times the history of critical Biblical scholarship has been marked by an ever widening penetration of critical presuppositions on the one hand, and an unabated search for a more adequate critical methodology on the other hand.

It is argued that the position of conservative scholarship (using HC but endeavouring at the same time to retain a conservative Inspiration theory) is inherently contradictory. The conservative scholar is faced by various fundamental questions pertaining, for instance, to the divine Inspiration of the Bible, to Christology, to the

manner in which some New Testament writings are supposed to have attained their final form, and to methodology.

The article concludes by suggesting that the grammatico-historical approach to the Bible offers the best alternative to HC. That time-honoured method is scientific in its own right: it is in full accord with the self-testimony of the Bible; its presuppositions are in full harmony with the claims of Scripture; and its methodology cannot be faulted when judged in the light of its own presuppositions and goals.

1. Introduction

1.1 Ulrich Wilckens (cited in Krentz 1975:33) defines scientific investigation of the Bible as follows:

'The only scientifically responsible interpretation of the Bible is that investigation of the biblical texts that, with a methodologically consistent use of historical understanding in the present state of its art, seeks via reconstruction to recognize and describe the meaning these texts have had in the context of the tradition history of early Christianity.'

What impresses one in this definition is that historical criticism is considered as offering the 'only scientifically responsible' interpretation of the Bible. By implication, all other approaches resting upon different presuppositions and using different methods of investigation lack scientific credibility. This sweeping claim is all the more noteworthy if one bears in mind what widespread criticism is raised by advocates of historical critical research themselves on the results produced by this approach (cf Guttgemanns 1971; Hahn 1972: 1ff; Hengel 1973:86ff; Stuhlmacher 1975:107ff); and further, that after some two centuries of enormous scholarly exertion, historical criticism has failed even to approach a shadow of

consensus on any of a wide range of issues. Even a superficial reading of contemporary New Testament literature soon reveals the '... great diversity of opinion among scholars concerning nearly every detail of New Testament criticism and interpretation' (Gasque 1978:146).

This lack of consensus can, of course, be readily explained. Differences in **methodology** may, for instance, lead to radically different conclusions. Again, differences may arise from differing **presuppositions**. Finally, there is a distance of some nineteen centuries between us and the New Testament documents. As a collection of ancient documents, the New Testament is an object of historical interest. But, as Vorster (1984:106) points out, 'Historical investigation depends on theories of historical investigation.' Not only is there a diversity of theories, but these theories are in a state of constant flux. In addition, as **theories** of investigation, the conclusions derived from them are more often than not of an altogether transient nature. There is, thus, an element of uncertainty that often goes hand in hand even with the 'assured results' of critical research.

Yet, despite all plausible explanations, the disconcerting fact remains that historical criticism of the Bible is plagued by so many imponderables that the ideal of reaching unanimity on any of a variety of critical issues seems to be a chasing of the rainbow:

1.2 The designation 'the historical critical method' (HCM)

1.2.1 To speak of 'the historical critical method' is, at least, questionable, if not mistaken. Not only is there a variety of historical methods; there is also a plurality of views on what historical interpretation is and how it should be done. Strictly speaking, HCM does not refer to a uniform critical methodology. Rather, it refers to a specific set of assumptions, to a particular principle of reasoning, including a variety of critical presuppositions, beliefs, methods and techniques, which are taken to be operative in an historical investigation of the Bible.

1.2.2 Each of the two operative words, namely 'historical' and 'critical,' carries its own peculiar or, better, technical overtones.

1.2.2.1 The term 'historical' refers to more than the predominant interest in history, which characterizes the various critical methods.¹ For, as Maier (1974:13) says, '... a determined use of a purely historical method would not have sparked a revolution in theological thought in the field of exegesis.'

'Historical' denotes, above all, that the historical method used by secular historians is the one which is also used in critical biblical research (Krentz 1975:33), and, further, that the method is ruthlessly applied to the Bible. HCM, or as is more common in biblical research, **Historical Criticism** (Krentz 1975:33) avows

'... that reality is uniform and universal, that it is accessible to human reason and investigation, that all events historical and natural occurring within it are in principle comparable by analogy, and that man's contemporary experience of reality can provide the objective criteria by which what could or could not have happened in the past is to be determined' (Soulen 1976:78).

1.2.2.2 The word 'critical' does not necessarily have a negative connotation. Not all biblical criticism is negative or destructive. In fact, the basic idea of criticism is rather positive, namely that of carefully examining the relevant data and passing judgement on them. Provided that such criticism is based on the right

1 This focus on history is reflected in the names under which the various critical methods are known, eg **Traditions-, Literatur-, Form-, Redaktions- Religions-, and Zeitgeschichte**. It should be remembered that the German word '-geschichte' is translated by both 'history' and 'criticism.' The latter term, however, tends to obscure the accent on history.

presuppositions, there is, in principle, nothing objectionable to it (cf Guthrie 1978:87; Ladd 1967:171ff).

In the name 'HCM,' however, the word 'critical' is used in an altogether different meaning. Here it carries the *Aufklärung* sense, namely, to put it crudely, that man's autonomous reason stands above the Bible (which is considered a strictly human book containing all kinds of errors), and that human reason alone is adequate for judging what Biblical details and truths can pass the test of credibility.² It is of '... decisive significance,' says Maier (1974:13)

'to recognize that the initial and constantly expanding revolution in theology was associated with the word "critical." The "critical" was the motor and the accelerator of the movement. On it rested the determining accent. In the field of the critical lay the numerous assumptions of the new method'

1.3 Here I wish to discuss historical criticism (as applied to the NT) from a conservative evangelical viewpoint. It is the thesis of this paper that historical criticism is altogether opposed to the claims of the Bible; that it is impossible to 'desecularize' these critical methods so as to make them compatible with conservative presuppositions; and that the grammatico-historical approach offers the only viable alternative.

2. Overview of the rise of historical criticism

2.1 We can do no more than give a brief and perhaps oversimplified sketch of some of the developments associated with the beginnings of historical criticism of the Bible. Our aim is to establish some crucial influences that contributed to the rise of

2 Cf Krentz 1975:34, 'Biblical scholarship is **critical** because it uses the powers of the mind on the sources with which it deals.'

critical Biblical research, to depict the main critical presuppositions that underlie its methodology, and to give some indication as to how categorically historical criticism is still controlled by *Aufklärung* presuppositions.

2.2 Pre-critical Biblical investigation

2.2.1 Critical questions concerning the New Testament writings were raised as early as the second (Marcion) and third (Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria) centuries AD. However, those early criticisms were incidental and almost exclusively concerned with questions of authorship.³ In the medieval period the Bible was accepted uncritically as part of the ecclesiastical tradition. Then, in the sixteenth century, the Reformers did question certain traditional views concerning a few canonical New Testament writings. But the tendency was still 'almost wholly subjective' (Guthrie 1978:86).

2.2.2 The views on revelation and reason that were held by Protestant Orthodoxy in the latter part of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, and which continued into the eighteenth century, were altogether uncritical: God Himself is the Author of the Bible. The human writers were often regarded as mere amanuenses who wrote down what the Holy Spirit dictated. As a result, the Bible was taken to be the very Word of God, divinely inspired and authoritative, not only in matters of faith and morals, but in every other field as well, for example in that of geology, history, geography, astronomy, chronology. No opposition or contradiction was conceived between human reason on the one hand, and religious and historical faith on the other hand. In addition, there was no interest in critical questions pertaining to such areas as the authorship, date, authenticity, sources, and literary aspects of New Testament writings.

3 Kümmel 1973:13ff; cf Krentz 1975:6, '... more dogmatically than historically motivated.'

A more scientific study of the New Testament could only get under way when the New Testament '... became the object of investigation as independent body of literature with historical interest, as a collection of writings that could be considered apart from the Old Testament and without dogmatic and credal bias' (Kümmel 1973:13).

2.3 The Aufklärung

2.3.1 The *Aufklärung* (or Enlightenment Period, or Age of Reason), dated by R Anchor as extending from the English Revolution (1688) to the French Revolution (1789)⁴ marked the transition from an ecclesiastically oriented culture to a modern secularized one. This transition has had the most profound effects on the shaping of modern theological thinking.

2.3.1.1 Kant (1900:IV, 169), who has given the classical definition of the demands of the *Aufklärung*, describes it as

'... the emergence of man beyond the state of self-imposed immaturity (selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit). Immaturity means inability to use one's own understanding except under guidance of another ... **sapere aude!** Dare to use your own understanding. This is the motto of the Enlightenment.'

2.3.2 The Enlightenment movement in theology, this '... freedom to think without sanctions, without control external to man himself' (Kant), did not arise *de novo* on the stage of history. A variety of

4 1967:ix. It should be remembered, however, that the Enlightenment spirit persisted long after the latter date. Says Webber 1976:204, 'The spirit of rationalism ... began in the late seventeenth century, reached its climax in the German enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and reverberated into the nineteenth century into what has come to be known as modernism.'

earlier and contemporary influences contributed to its emergence and growth.

2.3.2.1 Its roots go at least as far back as fourteenth through sixteenth century **Renaissance**. Renaissance humanism resulted not only in a 'progressive secularization of learning' (Ergang 1967:41) and a secular world view, but also in a high view of man as, above all, a creature of reason.⁵

2.3.2.2 The Enlightenment also bears affinity to the **Socinian movement** of Italy. These sixteenth century rationalists insisted that revelation could not contain anything contrary to reason; that the veracity of the Bible should be '... attested by independent rational judgment rather than dogmatic authority' (Frei 1974:17); and that the Bible should be explained in harmony with the **sana ratio**. As a result, they rejected all so-called irrational mysteries in the Bible, like the Trinity, and the deity of Christ (cf Briggs 1970:274; Demarest 1984:12).

2.3.2.3 The seventeenth century saw the development of various critical movements whose basic tenets later dominated Enlightenment thought.

5 At its core the humanist movement of the Renaissance period was neither religious nor antireligious. It was a scholarly and literary approach concerned with the re-discovery, study, and limitation of the classics. Christian humanism made important contributions to the development of a new historical awareness and of the grammatical-historical study of the Bible (cf Anderson 1978:19ff). For its influence on Luther and Calvin, see Rogers and McKim 1979:82ff, 89ff. In many instances, however, Renaissance thought led to what in effect was a denial of the Christian faith. Renaissance humanists took joy in their critical faculties, and, especially in a later phase, brought reason to bear on questions of faith. They often ended in ruling out the supernatural element, for example God, the Incarnation, the need of redemption.

a) Perhaps the leading factor was the **scientific revolution** of the seventeenth (and eighteenth) century (Demarest 1984:13). At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Bible was by and large the universal authority in all fields of knowledge. The discoveries of Copernicus (d 1543), Kepler (d 1630), and Galileo (d 1642) led to the overthrow of the Old Aristotelian-Ptolemaic world view with an immovable earth at the centre of the universe. Newton's (d 1727) discovery of the law of gravitation made possible precise mathematical description of the motion of the heavenly bodies.

As a result, a new scientific world view emerged. The conviction grew steadily that nature is one vast uniform system governed by fixed laws. The universe came to be viewed as a predictable machine that could be understood and explained by the human mind, strictly according to the law of nature, and without any recourse to the 'prescientific' data of the Bible (cf Demarest 1984:13). It was inevitable that radical conclusions should be drawn in the field of theology in the course of time. The 'modern scientific revolution,' says Demarest (1984:13), 'precipitated the formation of a new religion of nature and reason.'

b) Another contributing movement was **English Deism**. 'In history they (i e the English deists) will always be known as the group which took the first steps to inaugurate radicalism into Christian theology' (Heick 1946:II, 53). The movement which had its beginnings with Lord Herbert of Cherbury (d 1648) reached its heyday from 1700 to 1750. It was popular among such scholars as John Locke (d 1704),⁶ John Toland (d 1722), Anthony Collins (d 1729), Thomas Woolston (d 1733), and Mathew Tindal (d 1733).⁷

6 Locke was strictly not a deist, but he reached many deistic conclusions on reason, revelation, and the Bible. He exerted a vast influence over other deists, eg Toland and Collins.

7 Tindal's principal work **Christianity as old as creation or the Gospel a republication of the religious nature** (1730) became a standard textbook of deism.

The deists insisted on the absolute autonomy of reason over revelation. Special revelation is unnecessary since it could not add anything to the absolutely perfect original religion of nature. On the principle that '... all the doctrines and precepts of the New Testament must agree with natural reason and our own ideas' (Toland, cited in Waring 1967:12), deism rejected as 'superstitions' and 'absurdities' all such doctrines as the Trinity, the Incarnation, deity of Christ, atonement, resurrection of Christ. Miracles are forgeries and lack historical reality (Woolston). Holy Spirit inspiration of the Bible is contrary to the order of nature.⁸

c) A third movement, **Rationalism**, received its impetus from René Descartes (d 1650), who was followed by the radical Jewish pantheist, Spinoza (d 1716) (Geisler 1981:16ff), and others like G W Leibniz (d 1716). The philosophy of Leibniz and his follower, Chr Wolff (d 1754), laid the foundation for eighteenth century **Aufklärung**. 'Under this influence,' declares McGiffert (1912:247), 'there developed toward the middle of the eighteenth century a rational supernaturalism similar to that of Locke and others in England There was the ... idea that natural religion is good as far as it goes, but needs supplementing by divine revelation, which imports truths above reason, but not in any way out of accord therewith.'

During the Neological period (ca 1740-1790) the concept of revelation, as such, was retained, but it came to be more closely identified with reason than in the Wolffian era. K Aner suggests that neological thought can best be described as reason plus the concept of revelation minus the content of revelation (De Moor 1967:70).

8 On the whole see discussion in Demarest 1984:15ff and references there.

Rationalism reached its full development at the end of the eighteenth century in Kant (d 1804) and Fichte (d 1814). In Kant the concept of revelation is given up altogether and the content of revelation is openly converted into truths of reason. All that was left of revelation is what is contained in reason itself. So, reason came to equal the content of revelation minus the concept of revelation (K Aner cited in De Moor 1967:71).

2.3.2.4 Thus, the intellectual climate prevalent in the latter part of the eighteenth century was '... a medley of Protestant Orthodoxy, Deism, the Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy, neology, and fully fledged Rationalism' (De Moor 1967:71).

This was the intellectual climate that moulded the thinking of men like H S Reimarus (d 1768), G E Lessing (d 1781), and J S Semler (d 1791), the so-called 'father of modern Bible criticism.'⁹

2.4 The search for an adequate **critical methodology** made great strides in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the **nineteenth century** the historical method was 'set free' (Krentz 1975:22). That century saw, for instance, the rise of the mythical approach of Strauss; the Tübingen School of Baur, the establishment of the two-source theory of synoptic interrelationships; the liberal 'Quest of the Historical Jesus' with its endless liberal 'Lives' of Jesus; Radical Historical Criticism of New Testament sources; and the History-of-Religions School (see Kümmel 1973).

9 Cf Liebing 1960:1533, 'Er vereinte deistische Anregungen mit den kritischen Vorarbeiten von Wettstein, Simon, Bengel.' With him originated the Historical School of Biblical interpretation. He places the text '... quite deliberately into its ancient setting and explains it as witness to its own time, and not primarily as intended for today's reader' (Kümmel 1973:65).

Krentz (1975:29, 30) says:

'Historical criticism reigned supreme in Protestantism on the continent at the end of the nineteenth century. It had been radicalized, to a strictly historical discipline, free, independent, and in no way responsible to the church. ... It is difficult to overestimate the significance the nineteenth century has for biblical interpretation. It made historical criticism **the** approved method of interpretation. The result was a revolution of viewpoint in evaluating the Bible.'

The **twentieth** century saw a surge of new critical methods and approaches. Form Criticism came on the scene in the first decades of our century; then came Redaction Criticism; and of late, Structuralism. Our century saw the rise and decline of the Dialectic School, the Demythologizing School, the New Quest of the Historical Jesus; New Hermeneutic, and numerous other achievements in the field of critical scholarship.

2.5 Presuppositions and methodological presumptions of historical criticism

2.5.1 The **Aufklärung** saw the acceptance of a complex of presuppositions which constituted a radical departure from Orthodox views. The history of critical Biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment era has been marked by an ever widening penetration of Enlightenment presuppositions on the one hand, and an unabated search for a more adequate critical methodology on the other hand.

2.5.1.1 As to presuppositions.

a) The **Aufklärung** abandoned altogether the Biblical **view of nature** as a created world in subjection to its Creator. In deistic fashion it was considered that nature is a uniform system governed by fixed laws, and that '... there is no supernatural power that

intrudes in the realm of nature and history' (Demarest 1984:33; cf Conn 1973:2ff).

The principle came to be applied in a consistent and radical manner to the Bible in the nineteenth century. It made havoc of the credibility of Scripture.

b) **Man's autonomous reason** came to replace the Reformation principle of an autonomous divine revelation. The insistence on the autonomy of reason includes various radical features that are still basic to historical critical thinking, for instance:

(i) Kant's distinction between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world¹⁰ has remained a pillar of radical Biblical research. God, immortality, and matters of faith are, in Kantian categories, noumenal realities. All that we can know about such realities is that they are. Nothing more. Thus Kant's God is indeed 'both the unknown and unknowable' (Nash 1982:27). 'The door is not closed altogether on God,' says Conn (1973:6), 'but it is so small that there is no room for the sovereign God ... to squeeze through. Similarly ... man ... cannot squeeze through that door to know God.' The **a priori** isolation of God into Kant's noumenal world is reflected in Barth's dialectic speaking of God as the 'Wholly Other,' as the one who 'cannot be explained, as an object can'; in Bultmann's distinction between the 'historical Jesus' and the 'kerygmatic Christ'; in the neo-Orthodox distinction between 'historie' and 'Geschichte' (cf Conn 1973:6). Wells remarks that '... all neo-Orthodox thinkers shared the Kantian presupposition that

10 For Kant, broadly speaking, the phenomenal world is the world as we experience it through our senses; the noumenal world is the world of realities which exists independently of us, but which we cannot perceive by our senses. We can have no knowledge of noumena, things as they are in themselves, whether in the phenomenal or the noumenal world.

revelation is opposed to reason, so God is essentially beyond the reach of the mind' (cited in Nicole 1984:121 n 1.1).

(ii) There is a rejection of the conception of a **Holy Spirit inspiration of the Bible**. 'The rise of Biblical scholarship,' says Richardson (1943:33), 'made necessary a new doctrine of the inspiration of Holy Scripture.' For 'The Scientific development of the last century has rendered untenable the whole conception of the Bible as a verbally inspired book' (Knox 1931:99). Attempts varied, for instance, from complete rejection of all inspiration (Semler), to acceptance of a partial inspiration (Michaelis; Leclerc), to identifying it with the spiritual illumination of all Christians (Schleiermacher), to the reduction of it to the power which all men possess simply by virtue of the light of nature (Wegschneider) (cf Gausson 1971:143ff; Pache 1969:57ff).

b (iii) A radical disjunction between 'Bible' and 'Word of God' is envisaged. 'The root of all evil in theology,' says Semler, 'is the interchangeable use of the terms "Scripture" and "Word of God."¹¹ Like Spinoza, *Aufklärung* thinkers insisted that the Bible merely **contains** the Word of God, but denied that it is the very Word of God.¹² It is the task of historical criticism to establish a canon in the canon. But the search has not been successful. 'None of them (the exegetes),' concludes Maier (1974:40), 'was able to delimit or even to discover a convincing canon in the canon.'

11 Cited in Maier 1974:15. Semler, cited in Kümmel 1973:63, 'Holy Scripture and the Word of God are clearly to be distinguished.'

12 Cf K Barth 1975:123, 'The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it'; J D Smart 1970:149 maintains that we should desist from calling the Bible the Word of God; there is 'so much in Scripture,' he says, 'in which men can hear no word of God, or which seems to contradict the gospel as we hear it from Jesus.'

2.5.1.2 As to methodological presumptions.

The **Aufklärung** called for a critical methodology that would be in accord with its critical presuppositions. The search for an adequate methodology is still going on. The critical methodology advocated by Semler, and which became known as 'the historical critical method' in the nineteenth century, goes out from certain methodological presumptions which are still tenaciously adhered to by advocates of the approach. These include, first, **the methodological presumption that the Bible is a strictly human book containing all sorts of errors.**

As far back as Spinoza's **Tractatus theologico-politicus** (1670) it was argued that the Bible contains contradictions and errors. It is insisted that as an historical document the Bible must be subjected to radical literary criticism. Thus,

(i) **Source criticism** assumes that various authors and sources stand behind many New Testament books. Its major achievement has been the Two Source Theory of Synoptic origins.

(ii) Schleiermacher began to apply **literary criticism** in a systematic way and denied the authenticity of First Timothy (1807). F C Baur reduced the number of genuine Pauline letters to four only. Van Manen and others ended up in complete scepticism, rejecting the authenticity of all Pauline letters. Endless hypotheses of 'fragments,' interpolations, limitations, forgeries, late datings, alleged creations by the **Urgemeinde**, redactions, and so forth, have since been advocated, weighed, often been found wanting, discarded or revived.

(iii) It is argued that, as an historical document, the meaning of the Biblical text must also be in accord with the **sana ratio** of the critic. As a result, much of what the Bible offers as pure historical events and personages, or as simple teachings, were and are explained away as 'unhistorical,' 'myths,' 'accommodations,' 'creations of Christian communities.' 'An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable.'

claims Bultmann (Bartsch 1972:39). The Bible is '... full of errors, contradictions, and misleading views of circumstances relating to man, nature, and history' insists Brunner (1958:155). "There are "events,"" contends James Barr (1973:82), 'which were not events at all There was no flood ... there was no ark; there was no Jonah No one who is a serious participant in the discussion supposes that there were real "events" behind these stories.'

Secondly, there is a radical depreciation of the role of history in mediating divine revelation, or providing a basis for spiritual truth.

Lessing's famous axiom that 'Accidental truths of history can never be proof of the necessary truths of reason' still lies at the root of all modern historical criticism of the Bible (but see Lategan 1979:144ff). What he meant was the following: truths of reason are capable of logical or rational demonstration and, therefore, are eternal. Historical facts do not fall within this category for they are accidental, contingent (Runia 1966:42). Consequently, in Lessing's opinion, it is a mistake

'... to seek to ground these rational truths upon the contingent happenings of the world history, whether the experiences of the Hebrew people, the alleged miraculous events of Bible days, prophecies, or the historical facts attested in the New Testament and the Creed' (Bromiley 1946:192).

The fact that the Bible authors were inspired, argues Lessing, cannot bridge the 'ugly broad ditch' that separates those historical events from faith.¹³ At the same time, however, the Christian

13 For, says Lessing (cited in De Moor 1967:141), '...even that is only historically sure - that these authors were inspired and could not err. That is the horrid broad ditch that I cannot get across as often and as earnestly I have attempted to jump.'

needs not to be embarrassed by this radical separation of history from faith. For, as truths of reason, religious truths need no historical attestation. Lessing maintains that Christian Orthodoxy, then, is wrong in believing that historical Biblical events from the past can serve as attestation of religious truths (Bromiley 1946:192; De Moor 1967:141f).

Historical criticism has been in the strait-jacket of Lessing's 'ugly, broad ditch' ever since **Aufklärung** times. The fundamental presupposition which underlies Lessing's axiom, is the one stated earlier, namely that the reality of divine interventions should be excluded altogether in scientific historical investigation. Bultmann (1960:345) who stands in this tradition, insists bluntly that

'The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word.' (Cf also Carr 1973:75; Harvey 1966:107ff).

Granted then that '... there are constant shifts in theory of history, historical interpretation and historiography' (Vorster 1948:107), it should be emphasized that Lessing's conception of history with its attending anti-supernatural, anti-divine-intervention presuppositions has remained a constant constituent of historical critical methods. Notwithstanding shifts in theory of history, historical criticism remains as categorically committed as ever to the critical presuppositions involved. For instance, despite shifts and changes in critical theories and methods over the past two centuries, historical criticism has remained adamant in its rejection, on rational grounds, of the New Testament's description of

the resurrection of Jesus Christ as factual history (*Historie*).¹⁴ When Bultmann and his followers, rejecting the historicity of the resurrection,¹⁵ nevertheless try to save something of its theological significance by demythologizing the event (Bartsch 1972:1ff); De Young 1970:134ff; Hughes 1976), Lessing's shadow is unmistakable.

3. Inseparability of presuppositions and methodology

Two observations are in order.

3.1 Anyone who is acquainted with the different historical critical methods would soon enough discover that an inseparable connection exists between these critical methods and the critical presuppositions that underlie them. For instance, whether it is the Tübingen School, or the Old Liberal School, or the History-of-Religions School, or the Dialectic School, or the Existentialist School; whether it is Source Criticism, or Form Criticism, or Redaction Criticism, or the New Hermeneutic, all critical approaches and methods were, and are, simply diverse branches on the tree of historical criticism; a tree whose roots are solidly embedded in Enlightenment presuppositions. Some branches may blossom luxuriantly for a time; others have withered and died; new ones may sprout, but the trunk and the roots have ever remained the same. It is from the roots, i.e. the critical Enlightenment presuppositions, that the tree has ever derived its vitality and peculiar identity. But this has ever been alien to the Bible itself.

3.1.1 It is in this light that we should judge the reactions to the dissatisfaction that were, and are, felt by proponents of historical

14 For survey see De Young 1970:129ff.

15 Cf R Bultmann, in Bartsch 1972: 'Obviously it (the resurrection) is not an event of past history with a self-evident meaning' (p 38); 'An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable' (p 39).

criticism. At the beginning of our century there was a deeply felt disenchantment with the restricted results of historical criticism. It has led to the rise of new developments in the area of critical methodology in our century. But since some two decades ago new voices of dissatisfaction have been raised among advocates of the historical critical method themselves. The search for a more adequate critical methodology is a still on-going one.

The fault does not necessarily lie with the critical methods as such. As critical methods, they seem to be excellent enough. The real crux lies with the Bible, the lock which they are supposed to unlock. The Bible simply does not lend itself to the type of purely rational investigation demanded by historical criticism. The Bible simply cannot be forced into the strait-jacket of either the critical presuppositions or the critical methodology of historical criticism. The **a priori** rejection of the divine inspiration of the Bible, and of divine interventions in the realms of nature and history; the one-sided emphasis on the 'human' side of Scripture; the methodological assumption that the Bible contains all sorts of errors; the exaltation of human reason over divine revelation - all this is entirely foreign to the Bible itself. The outcome of the application of this critical methodology to the Bible is critical results that may be intellectually very gratifying, but are spiritually disappointingly barren, and often as dry as the dead bones of the prophet Ezekiel's valley (Ezk 37).

3.2 The question of presuppositions, then, is inescapable. It is commonly recognized that a presuppositionless investigation of the Bible is impossible (Bultmann 1973:342ff; Grosheide 1912:6; Stanton 1977:66). The investigator's **a priori** position with regard to the inspiration and authority of the Bible plays a crucial role in all his scholarly work. Here '... a choice is involved which is both deliberate and subjective, and far-reaching in its effect (Fryer 1984:266). **If the Biblical scholar's claim to scientific legitimacy is to be taken seriously, his presuppositions concerning the Bible should give evidence that they are in accord with the claims of the object of his study, namely, the Bible. In addition, his methodology should give evidence that it is in harmony**

with his presuppositions. For a methodology which ensues logically and legitimately from one set of presuppositions might be totally incompatible with another set of presuppositions (cf Fryer 1984:267).

As long as an advocate of historical criticism applies critical methods in a manner consistent with his critical presuppositions, he cannot be faulted - on at least two scores: one, that his methodology is in accord with his presuppositions; and two, that the (critical) results achieved are in harmony with both his (critical) goals and the (critical) methods he employed to attain them. Serious questions arise, however, where conservative scholars take over historical critical methods and apply them to an altogether different and incompatible (conservative) set of presuppositions.

4. Objections to contemporary methodological practices of (conservative) New Testament scholarship

4.1 It is common knowledge that historical criticism has established itself in New Testament research. 'At least in Western Christianity ... the battle for the acceptance of historical criticism as applied to the Bible has been won.'¹⁶ Stephen Neill (1964:339) points out that the use of these methods is equally firmly established among conservatives: 'The so-called "liberal" and the so-called "conservative" of today differ in their results; in the definition of methods to be employed there is hardly the shadow of a difference between them.' My own observations over a number of years have convinced me that Neill's evaluation is correct. At the same time there is, among conservatives, a serious dichotomy of critical methodology and conservative results. Conservative scholars are

16 Hanson 1970:12f; cf Neill 1964:339, '... the liberty of the scientific and critical approach has established itself almost beyond the possibility of cavil'; Krentz 1975:33, 'Today historical criticism is taken for granted; we cannot go back to the precritical age.'

inclined to resort to all kinds of, say, intellectual gymnastics to justify their use of historical criticism.

4.2 A few typical stances may illustrate the point.

4.2.1 There is a lamentable disregard for, not to say ignorance of, the nature, significance, and effect of the respective sets of presuppositions involved in an historical critical and a conservative evangelical approach to the Bible. One gets the impression that somewhere along the road many have 'phased-in' on the band-wagon of historical criticism for any of a number of questionable reasons: because it is the 'in-thing'; or because of historical criticism's insistence to be the only legitimately scientific approach to the Bible; or because there is (the even outspoken) fear of being labelled 'unscientific,' 'uncritical,' 'fundamentalistic,' or 'having an ostrich mentality,' or 'ignoring the real critical issues involved in biblical research.' Says one: 'I accept that the NT is the Word of God, but also that it was given through men. I prefer to take the human aspect very seriously. Any method that helps me to understand the human element better is acceptable to me.' We object. The human and the divine aspects of Scripture cannot be separated in such radical manner if one wishes to be consistent with one's (conservative) presuppositions as regards the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible.

4.2.2 There is a constant minimizing, not to say denying, of the inseparable connection of presuppositions - methods - results in any approach to the New Testament. Says another: 'My critical investigation of the Biblical text is the first step; I find it impossible to jump Lessing's "ugly, broad ditch"; but as a Christian I am primarily interested in the Bible's message. So I turn to the expedient of a *tertium datum*: I take an *illogical* jump from my historical critical spade-work on the text to my establishing of the message.' But the end-result is an unscientific, inconsistent and indefensible exegesis which is neither truly historical nor truly conservative, but a *tertium genus monstruosum* which is as foreign to the Bible as historical criticism itself.

4.2.3 There is the claim that the historical critical methods, as such, are in fact neutral; and that no method should be judged on the basis of presuppositions that applied originally, or at some earlier stage of its development. To validate this assumption, an analogy is sometimes drawn between the role of presuppositions in theology and in other sciences, for instance the medical. Today, it is argued, no one would expect that contemporary medical science should be judged in the light of ancient, even pagan, presuppositions. However, the analogy is not valid. The Bible comes with certain claims that are wholly unique. Further, historical criticism has never, and still does not, pretend to offer a neutral way of investigating the New Testament. Since **Aufklärung** times it has always insisted that precisely as a **critical** approach it is the only valid one, and that the very goals it envisaged are **rational** results from which the transcendental and the divine should be altogether excluded.

4.1.4 There is the denial that a consistent application of historical criticism inevitably leads to the question of how Lessing's 'ugly, broad ditch' between history and faith should be bridged. Says yet another: 'For me the use of historical criticism creates no distance between history and faith.' We would rejoin: 'Amen! But sir, what then do you understand under "historical criticism"?'

5. What is really involved?

5.1 What is involved for the conservative evangelical thinker is far more than the question of adapting from an allegedly neutral methodology such elements as are compatible with one's own literary or theological predilections. Far more, too, than the mere removal of a number of more or less offensive elements from otherwise inoffensive methods.

5.2 Various fundamental questions face the conservative scholar. We draw attention to four of them:

5.2.1 The first concerns **the divine inspiration of the Bible**. The conservative scholar's views of inspiration must necessarily be

oriented to some commonly acknowledged conservative 'definition' of inspiration. One such 'definition' is that of A A Hodge and B B Warfield (1881:17-18) in the previous century. They say:

'We prefer to use it (inspiration) in the single sense of God's continued work of superintendence, by which ... he presided over the sacred writers in their entire work of writing, with the design and effect of rendering that writing an errorless record of the matters he designed them to communicate, and hence constituting the entire volume in all its parts the word of God to us.'

This definition has commonly been taken as envisaging a verbal, plenary, infallible, inerrant, and unlimited inspiration of the Bible.

It is indefensible to disparage or minimize, as some are doing, all such 'traditional' definitions of inspiration as 'outmoded,' 'no longer acceptable,' 'overtaken by modern scholarship,' 'limiting the Holy Spirit's superintendence,' without offering another 'definition' based on 'modern scholarship' as orientation point. The point that we wish to stress is that a conservative view of inspiration brings with it certain very definite and inescapable limitations as regards the methodology which one may apply both to the text and the content of the Bible. These limitations do not lead to an inferior scholarship. It leads to an equally scientific scholarship, but one that lies on a level altogether different from that of historical criticism. More than that, since a conservative evangelical approach takes seriously the Bible's claim to divine inspiration, its methodology and results certainly have more claim to scientific legitimacy than historical criticism's.

5.2.2 A second basic question is that of **Christology**. After more than two centuries, historical criticism is as far as ever from recognizing, or at least doing justice to, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. The Jesus of historical criticism remains a mere human being stripped of His supernatural qualities. Crucial elements of the manner in which these methods deal with the literature and content

of the New Testament, imply a radical denial of the deity of Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus Christ, then, is in a very real sense 'a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence' (1 Pt 2:8 AV) for historical criticism.

5.2.3 A third question concerns the intrinsic improbability of the manner in which many of the New Testament writings are supposed to have attained their final form. It is instructive to listen to the objection of a well-known literary critic, the late C S Lewis (1975:106-7):

'Whatever these men (historical critics of the New Testament) may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel.'

And again (1975:111):

'These men ask me to believe they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed, and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.'

The hypothetical origins of the New Testament writings as suggested, for instance by advocates of Source-, Form-, and to some extent, even Redaction Criticism, are so radically opposed to the above conception of the divine inspiration that even moderate advocates of these methods are compelled to accept a more liberal view of the inspiration.

5.2.4 There is another fundamental question. On what scientific grounds can one defend the practice (a) of severing (with an adaptation here and there) a radically critical methodology from its own critical presuppositions and applying it to another set of radically contrary presuppositions with which it is intrinsically incompatible, and then (b) through rationalization and intellectual gymnastics categorizes this *tertium genus monstruosum* as 'scientific'? Many refuse to see the logical inconsistency involved in such a stance. Be it as it may, such a stance can be maintained only by abandoning, minimizing, or ignoring conservative evangelical presuppositions.

6. The alternative?

6.1 The alternative to historical criticism is, of course, the time-honoured grammatico-historical approach to the Bible. The investigation of the grammatical elements of the text and its historical setting serve as a basis for determining the 'theological' element involved, namely, the Holy Spirit's intention, meaning, and message for the Church. During the past century-and-a-half the method has been refined in many ways. Here the word 'historical' is used in a sense which is wholly compatible with conservative presuppositions, namely, that there is '... a dimension of the actual, past, objective events which occurred in history which goes beyond the presuppositions of modern critical historiography' (Ladd 1967:190). The conservative evangelical thinker insists that on various points Lessing's axiom is '...either quite false or else quite misleading and thus harmful to truth' (Bromily 1946:195).¹⁷

17 See Bromiley 1946:195-198 for discussion. Bromiley points out: (i) that Lessing mistakenly identifies rational truth which is human, with revelational truth which is supra-human, that is divine; (ii) that Lessing separates too absolutely the historical and the eternal with regard to the knowledge of God; and (iii) that Lessing presses too far the contingency of historical events.

6.2 That this approach is scientific in own right is beyond question: it is in full accord with the self-testimony of the Bible; its presuppositions are in full harmony with claims of Scripture; and its methodology cannot be faulted when judged in the light of its own presuppositions and goals.¹⁸ The conservative scholar can and does indeed bring to bear upon the New Testament text, its literary and historical aspects, all means and methods of scientific study, but **only** so far as they are not incompatible with his controlling subjective presupposition about the Bible itself (Fryer 1984:268).

6.3 'The assured results of modern scholarship' says C S Lewis (1975: 117), 'are "assured" ... only because the men who know the facts are dead and can't blow the gaff.' No wonder then that conservative scholarship is critical of the 'assured results' of historical criticism. Taking the divine inspiration seriously, conservative evangelical scholarship refrains from indulging in an unrestrained and often arbitrary manner, often simply for the sake of novelty, in all sorts of rational criticism of the Bible. Consequently, the results of conservative scholarship are more in accord with the Bible itself, more edifying to the Church of Christ, and more lasting in their positive effects. Historical criticism has an undeniably deadening effect on the Christian faith despite the exalted intentions of its advocates. On the other hand, a conservative evangelical approach to the Bible has withstood the test of the times as the one and only way of coming to know the mind of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the Biblical writings.

18 Cf Maier 1977:25, 'Historical criticism over against a possible divine revelation presents an inconclusive and false counterpart which basically maintains human arbitrariness and its standards in opposition to the demands of revelation.'

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