

A Historical and Modern Evaluation

As one looks back over centuries of biblical interpretation it appears that there have been almost innumerable books written on the subject. There also have been interpretational approaches taken ranging from the purely allegorical to strict literalism or even mystical interpretations like gematria that looks for hidden meaning behind every letter. Previously this pursuit of biblical interpretation, in all its diversity and difference in traditions, had yet still remained almost exclusively within the realm of Christendom and occasionally Jewish scholars who wrote on things outside of the rabbinical traditions, until about the mid-17th century. The discussion up until that time still went back to basic convictions of the truthfulness of the Bible and theological principles derived from it. It was even the subject of such grand theological works as Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, one of the most significant results of Scholasticism in the Middle Ages before the Protestant Reformation.

With the advent of the Protestant Reformation came the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* and increasing weight and attention were given to scripture itself above the Medieval allegorical interpretations or the highly philosophical syllogistic reasoning that often characterized Scholasticism. Certain theological points were rallied around and based upon one's interpretation of scripture, and theological books were mostly written on principles that appear all throughout the Bible and not just in one particular book - a systematic theology of sorts. As more and more study of the scripture proliferated it set the stage to become an equal target, as anything else, for the effects of the Enlightenment and rationalism. That has ultimately led to some very long lasting results up to today which should be examined and addressed.

Effects of the Enlightenment and Higher Criticism

The advent of the Enlightenment in Europe in the mid to late 17th Century brought a great emphasis on rationality, scientific inquiry, and logical deduction. Blaise Pascal was one Christian who in that era took the new emphasis on rationalism as a complimentary boon to faith and insisted that the two complemented rather than opposed one another. Even earlier during the Renaissance, Desiderius Erasmus (von Rotterdam) was another well-studied Christian and intellectual who led the new learning which was spreading on continental, transalpine Europe into a form of Christian Humanism that used the learning to support one's faith. Dr. John Reynolds in his book *The Great Books Reader: Excerpts and Essays on the Most Influential Books in Western Civilization* wrote of

Erasmus:

"Erasmus also defied the modernist conviction that a combination of increased learning and of comprehending the world's problems will inevitably lead to secularism. He was a pious man without ignoring hypocrisy, and he was fabulously learned without thinking that the intellect was everything. " **(Foreword to Chapter 10)**

One of the results of the Enlightenment on the study of scripture was that a more scientific, organized, and methodological approach to interpreting scripture was developed. That is probably the root from which the idea of having a coherent "hermeneutic" derives from - a hermeneutic being an orderly framework for the interpretation of written texts which determines one's approach to interpretation and presuppositions about a text. It has become standard seminary practice today to teach hermeneutics to theology students, and it goes hand-in-hand with what is called "exegesis", which is an explanation or interpretation of something originating from thorough analysis of a text. This development has had both up and downsides, as we will see.

As European intellectualism advanced up through the 19th century the scriptures began to be interpreted by those outside of the Church as well, no longer remaining solely in the hands of clergymen or Christian laymen as a topic of examination. As it did so scriptural interpretation eventually fell upon the rough and rocky shores of German Higher Criticism which flourished in the 1800s. The Higher Criticism school of interpretation was largely deconstructionist and revisionist and sought to interpret the Bible in terms of stages of development or as the product of diverse social, political, and cultural causes over a long period of time.

The general thought was that everything else had been put to a scientific methodology, so why not scriptural interpretation? As it turns out this was done to the exclusion of any consideration of divine revelation whatsoever, and that approach suited the intellectual attitude and temperament of academic learning in the field of "biblical studies" at that time with few objections. One notable, early exception was the more conservative scholarly works of Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802-1869), but unfortunately he was going against the grain and trends of the times.

During that time (especially the 19th century) radical departures from Christendom's long held tenants of faith, creeds, and convictions about the Bible were being made and adopted in centers of learning where scriptural analysis had become a science like all the other sciences. It

was subject to the cold scalpel and scrutiny of the 'textual critic' who could with a superior methodology 'discern' the constituent elements of a, supposedly, more primitive form of the text before they were brought together in their final canonical form. It had become an etherized discipline, subject to any method of approach that was seen as valid in other areas of study.

This is no exaggeration of the attitude toward the Bible that arose from Higher Criticism either, and an excerpt from a text-critical Bible commentary published in the first quarter of the 20th century can serve as an adequate illustration. Arthur Peake who was the Rylands Professor of Biblical Exegesis at the University of Manchester and Fellow at Merton College, Oxford edited a joint text-critical commentary on the Bible entitled *Peake's Bible Commentary* published in 1919. In the introductory article written by Rev. Ebenezer Griffith-Jones entitled

The Bible: Its Meaning and Aim

he wrote the following comments:

"Studying the Bible is thus only another way of studying life itself, and always in its spiritual relations... He must be a dull reader who, having mastered the Bible, fails to see himself somewhere in it - as he is, and ought to be.

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(pg. 1)

"The structure of the Bible as it has come down to us masks the gradual character of that process. The most primitive portions of its literature are embedded in a mass of later editorial matter, and the true chronological order of its parts has only comparatively recently been disentangled from a bewildering multiplicity of documents... The later editors may have used the annals of their race uncritically, and here and there may have mistaken legend for history, and myth for fact. " **(pg. 2)**

"Modern Biblical Science is the result of applying this instrument of inquiry to the facts of the Bible . It is based on the a posteriori as distinguished from the old a priori method of dealing with it... We must not be hard on the tenacity and even obstinacy of those who felt themselves called upon to fight against the modern view of the Bible. If their judgment was at fault, their motives were the highest... But, if the progress of Biblical Science has been slow, it has been inevitable.

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(pg. 3)

It is undeniable that the higher critics looked upon those who believed in the ultimate truthfulness and inspiration of the Bible as essentially "well intentioned but misguided", that they believed the Bible to be filled with myth and legend, and clearly thought of its study as a "Biblical Science" to be examined, broken down, reexamined, and regurgitated into a self-made result they admittedly call "a bewildering multiplicity of documents," which they mistake for the original form of the text. All this was performed to the end effect that one could claim to have "mastered the Bible" with this "instrument of inquiry". This is the cold scalpel and etherized discipline that I refer to above.

The Down-Grade Controversy and Princeton Theology

Yet this was not just a pastime and occupation of scholars in academia but it also seeped into and impacted the Church itself. To the extent in which it impacted the Church its results produced a theologically liberalizing tendency that led toward the laxity of doctrine. It is that latter tendency for which Charles H. Spurgeon was led to conscientiously withdraw from his Baptist denomination in 1887 over what was called the "Down-Grade Controversy". He did so, with sadness, due to his insistence that this 'biblical criticism' was causing a downgrade in faith among Christians who subscribed to it or to certain of its results.

To supplement Darwin's theory of evolution in the field of biological science the field of biblical textual criticism had soon borne similar fruit in Julius Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis. This hypothesis posited that multiple authors in different historical periods (none being Moses) had written the Pentateuch over a protracted period of time and that it was all eventually compiled by a final editor. This idea was eventually applied to the whole Old Testament. It was this that led to many theories of competing theologies in scripture between different authors and the possibility of errant human writing throughout scripture and was what Spurgeon was reacting to concerning its results in the Church and its theology. This was characteristic of the German Higher Criticism and its results obviously challenged all those of faith as something that needed to be dealt with or opposed.

Despite the serious angst this caused for many in the Church, faith - being faith - remained where the anchor held it. Spurgeon was one exemplary strong Christian who refused to be swayed by it. Also in America there were certain movements such as that which was developed at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey under the leadership of the eminent Charles Hodge in the end half of the 19th century. The "Princeton Theology" which developed there emphasized biblical inerrancy and sought to engage the new learning coming out of Europe in the context of faith.

Also of distinction and acclaim at Princeton was the astoundingly learned Robert Dick Wilson, who is said to have accumulated knowledge of forty-five languages and dialects during his lifetime in order to study the scripture in many of the ancient languages that it had been translated in. Wilson was a stalwart defender of scripture's integrity and truthfulness. He even directly engaged the Higher Criticism in a paper he wrote entitled [*Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly?*](#) in which he

applied his broad linguistic knowledge in defense of scripture. This Princeton Theology provided a much needed counter-balance to the interpretational tendencies and trends at the time, but the scales have tipped back and forth so many times since then from conservative to secular and liberal interpretations of scripture that it seems to be in a never ending battle and pursuit over matters of truth and authority of scripture.

To hasten a lengthy assessment of the history of biblical interpretation and its historical impact, biblical studies, being as they had become **studies** (implying that aforementioned methodological and academic approach), ever since the 19th century has been in a bit of a crisis (or crises). Being in such crises it has continually vacillated between periods of liberal interpretation and resurgence of conservative or neo-conservative responses to it up to this day.

Karl Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy

Stepping back one more time to examine the events that led up to the situation today, there is one more person worth particular mention when it comes to biblical theology in the modern era. Following on the heels of the theologically liberalizing trends prevailing in Germany in the early 1900s a Swiss theologian named Karl Barth arrived on the scene, who shook things up significantly. Karl Barth had grown up and been educated in the highly liberalized academic environment of early 20th century German-influenced biblical and theological studies, however he had a very different reaction to it than most.

Barth, taking assessment of the downgraded condition of biblical studies and explanations of the Christian faith, quickly came to realize how dry and powerless it had become and took a radical departure in his theological path from that of the contemporary European liberalism. His theology, which came to be referred to as 'dialectical theology', emphasized the paradoxical nature of divine truth as revealed in the scriptures such as God's working of both grace and judgment, which the concurrent studies utterly failed to address. His works in part held the academic interpretations of the day to be guilty of separating what should have never been separated, and also showed a general lack of spiritual insight and discernment into the purpose of scripture, the message that it was intended to convey to its reader, and the absolutely key role of faith.

He became a founder of neo-orthodoxy, which was the first major attempt at returning to a biblical faith since the onset of the skeptical textual criticism and theological liberalism in Christendom. Barth is a hero to many evangelicals today although some have criticized him for

perceived excesses or deviations from points of orthodoxy, and he himself was no evangelical. Nonetheless the effects of his influence are undeniable in that it led to a renewal in focus on biblical theology and regaining the pursuit of the fundamentals of the Christian faith (which led to the later, and often pejorative, designation of "fundamentalists" to its adherents).

Now, bringing this condensed survey of the history of theological development and biblical interpretation up to my own modern day context of conservative Evangelicalism, it is important to note that there have (in more recent times) been many theological works of great merit and richness written since the aftermath of WWII on orthodox, conservative, and evangelical biblical theology. The effects of taking a more scientific or hermeneutical approach to interpreting the Bible were not all negative, but it took the Church a significant amount of time to reclaim the approach for themselves and apply it within the context of the Church's historical faith and creeds.

Today it has the positive influences of encouraging a consistent hermeneutic or way of reading the scripture rather than interpreting it in any way that pleases you. However the underlying academic question of scriptural interpretation as a kind of 'science' seems to linger as long as it remains a "field" - and invariably every few years there are academic dissertations on theology or scriptural studies that try to reduce the books of the Bible to phenomenological (and ultimately human) products rather than being the result of inspired divine truth, or that attempt to liberalize doctrine to purely subjective applications.

A Recovery of the Canonical Approach to Scripture

With no lack of modern day adherents to the intellectual results and skepticism of the 19th century German Higher Criticism biblical interpretation still remains a debate today in academia and it is often fought on the battlefield of peer-reviewed journals, books, and papers. Meanwhile the conservative Evangelical Churches hold very different views than those prevailing in academia but sometimes seem ignorant of them or uninterested in engaging the prevailing ideas being fed to students in that setting. Yet fortunately there are some willing professors, pastors, and theologians who do rise to the task of intelligently and adequately engaging the academic atmosphere and current chords of interest and study.

The ceaseless debate on the nature of biblical studies is what has led me to this point of reviewing (briefly) the history of biblical interpretation, and it was prompted by a recent reading I encountered that piqued my interest from a book by **Brevard S. Childs** entitled [*Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*](#)

. In his book Childs proposes a highly unique approach (as pertains to the "field" in academia) to studying biblical theology, a

canonical approach

, and yet in many ways it has always been the very simple historical approach of the Church over the last two millennia. So to academia it is almost like being introduced to the approach it never accepted
. How novel!

Childs suggests the abandonment of the text-critical deconstructionism (or as he calls it, the "traditio-historical" approach) as yielding no real benefits to advancing, or even helping to illuminate, biblical theology in any way at all. He rather suggests that the finalized canon itself should be the object of study, not endless speculations on how the text took the form it is in now. I would also interject, from experience, that the text-critical approach leaves one spiritually dry and perhaps results only in leading one to intellectual pride concerning their methodology, as if reading the scriptures was something to be 'mastered' and not a matter of spiritual examination and transformation.

Speaking in particular of Old Testament studies though Childs makes a few of the following points in his "survey of the historical discipline" of biblical theology:

"In spite of the significant advances during these years, a whole set of unresolved problems has remained...

(a) *The fundamental problem of whether the discipline is conceived of as a theology of the Old Testament or as a history of Israel's religion, or both, has never been resolved...*

(b) *The problem of handling theologically a literature whose enormous variety and multi-layered growth had been convincingly demonstrated, has resulted in a deep erosion of any attempt to bring coherence into an ever-changing collage...The various attempts to isolate theologies of 'J' or 'P' have only exacerbated the problem [a reference to the different theoretical sources for the Pentateuch which Julius Wellhausen proposed in his Documentary Hypothesis]*

(c) *Clements has signalled a significant problem in pointing out that the discipline of Old Testament theology has not engaged the question of*

how the biblical text was heard and appropriated in practice by concrete communities of faith . Rather under the guise of hard-nosed historical study, the meaning of the literature has been sought

apart from its actual historical reception

. When the history of exegesis is occasionally introduced, it serves only as a foil for a modern author's new proposal.

(d) *Finally, the relation of Old Testament theology to both Judaism and to the New Testament remains confusing and ill-defined. Eichrodt largely shared Wellhausen's low estimate of the late*

post-exilic period, and assumed that in some fashion the New Testament had recovered from prophetic religion what Judaism had lost...

In sum, it seems neither unfair nor an exaggeration to conclude that the field has run into a stalemate." (pgs. 4-5)

Having made reference to the confusing and subjective attempts, from the methodology of the Documentary Hypothesis, to "isolate [multiple] theologies" within a single book or text Childs mentions the stalemate and dead-end that the field of theology has been bequeathed from that path of approach in attempting historical deconstruction of the text. As a deconstructionist approach it attributes the complexity of a text or even the style of writing or topics of prophetic revelation to the work of multiple hands (its adherents see it as impossible that a single person could write in such diverse styles and on complex and diverse subjects)

As such Childs has called that approach out for the chaos and fruitlessness that it ultimately leads to. The deconstructionist approach is largely unuseful. Relating to this Karl Barth's investigation into the "paradoxical nature of divine truth" offered a theological reconciliation for the diverse emphases of scripture, which might tempt some to attribute them to many (human) sources, and rather attributed it to only one eternal, transcendent, and divine source.

Childs then continues his analysis in stating:

"That the final form of the biblical text has preserved much from the earlier stages of Israel's theological reflection is fully evident. However, the various elements have been so fused as to resist easy diachronic reconstructions which fracture the witness of the whole.

*The controversy with the traditio-historical critics is not over the theological significance of a depth dimension of the tradition. Rather, the issue turns on whether or not features within the tradition which have been subordinated, modified or placed in the distant background of the text **can be interpreted apart from the role assigned to them in the final form***

when attempting to write a theology of the Old Testament. For example, to seek to give theological autonomy to a reconstructed Yahwist source

[another imaginary, hidden source posited by Wellhausen]

apart from its present canonical context

is to disregard the crucial theological intention

*of the tradents of the tradition, and
to isolate a text's meaning from its reception*
." (pg. 11)

It is from here that Childs presents his canonical approach which is quite simple: to only interpret the entirety of the final form as given to us. This is a refreshing return to traditional biblical interpretation by centuries of Christian writers over the last two millennia. George Eldon Ladd, who was professor of New Testament History and Biblical Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote in the introduction to his book *Jesus and the Kingdom* that in past study of the Gospels many critical scholars had concluded "

that the facts of history have been so reinterpreted by Christian faith as to leave only a dim outline of the historical Jesus

" (xi) in the Gospels. He then says, however, that "

The present author believes with Martin Kähler that

the 'historical Jesus' is a creation of modern secular scholarship and that the Jesus who actually lived in history is the biblical Christ pictured in the Gospels

. If the Gospels portray a dimension about him which transcends ordinary historical experience, that is not because this dimension was added to the historical Jesus by the believing community but because

it was present in the Jesus of history

" (xiii). In other words, if the canonical portrayal of Jesus seems remarkable, it is because Jesus himself was remarkable indeed.

I, like Childs, reject the Documentary Hypothesis and also reject, like Ladd, similar attempts in the New Testament to isolate a perceived "authentic substratum" in the text - not just because it is defunct and haphazard to the 'field' but primarily because it is just plain wrong and hyper-skeptical. I still hold that position despite attempts by bible-believing Christians to integrate its "findings" into historical faith by stating that it doesn't matter who, or how many, wrote a work - only that it is inspired. This in my estimation is "so much nonsense", and is only arrived at by not being skeptical of the skeptics' own approach and conveniently ignoring the finer points that clearly show that they are trying to reconcile into their faith something inimically opposed to any underlying basis of authority in scripture.

I mostly wanted here to express my overall frustration with how I have noticed the increasing trends of secularization in the "field" (and perhaps because of its very treatment

as
a "field") of biblical studies throughout history and at present day, and how I think we can get out of it by learning from the past. This is why I latch onto 'refreshing' approaches such as the

one Childs presents. Reconciling faith and academic learning in today's world seems very hard indeed, especially when bad habits and trends die hard, but some like Brevard Childs are brave enough to engage in the task. The way in which biblical studies is treated as something that needs to be "advanced" however is problematic in the first place, and prompts us to question (finally getting to the namesake topic of this article)

what the object of biblical theology is

The Object of Biblical Theology

Even if a universal consensus were to be reached on "how to read the Bible" that would mean that there would then be a single accepted object or result of biblical inquiry according to the scientific, hermeneutical, and exegetical methods of inquiry, and no doubt it would be the most magisterial work of theology man has ever seen. But then we would have a new problem of such a work (telling us how to read & interpret scripture) essentially being a kind of Mishnah (the Jewish explanation of the meaning of the Tanak/Old Testament), and it would also have to be a text that is itself infallible which we would set **beside** the Bible itself. This is not even to mention that this pursuit (even if such a futile goal was to be reached) particularly excludes consideration of any revelation and working of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith to powerfully explain and apply the words of scripture in our lives rather than just trying to read and understand the Bible by itself in a vacuum.

What is the endless debate about? Does man really think that a scientific method born 350 years ago out of the Enlightenment will bring man to a pinnacle of self-achieved religious knowledge and a "fundamental" insight into the origin, meaning, and reason for the scriptures? If we truly think that then we are perhaps in danger of building up an intellectual Tower of Babel founded upon the cornerstone of pride, which will not survive when the world-system as described in the book of Revelation collapses before God's reckoning and judgment. As

Hebrews 12:27

says, there will be a "

removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain

" (NASB) or as more tersely put by the NLT, "

All of creation will be shaken and removed, so that only unshakable things will remain

". Will our intellectual constructions outside of what the text of the scripture says remain?

Even in the most faithful and admirable of theological writings which I greatly enjoy reading, inasmuch as it still works in the framework of advancing a field of knowledge and not rather toward the

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(which I am proposing here)

of its spiritual impact on the reader or hearer

of the word of God then it "advances" something which will never reach fruition. I believe this is also Brevard Childs' point of the very thing that has been ignored in past biblical studies in academia: its intended message for reception.

As a brief aside, perhaps in this discussion I have also omitted (but certainly not forgotten) the obvious implication which the very term 'Theology' itself clearly indicates: that Theology is about **God** and is completely centered upon Him and His words, ways, and dealings with all created things. Thus my reference to 'Biblical' Theology and also examining the scriptures themselves should be seen as a natural extension of Theology (**God-ology**) itself, stemming from that foundational truth to focus specifically on the written Word

(what I mean by 'Biblical') which is revealed from God (the scripture). I realize that I am using 'Biblical Theology', as a term, somewhat unconventionally here, as it is often set against 'Systematic' Theology in distinction, but instead here I use it more to refer to scripturally-based Theology as opposed to, say, Natural Theology or other derived forms of Theology.

So behind this 'object' of scripturally-based, canonical, Biblical Theology is of course the very source of truth itself, God, which the object itself points to. Thus the "spiritual impact on the reader or hearer", which I say is the object (or purpose, goal, intention, meaning, etc.) of Biblical Theology, is designed to lead the reader or hearer to the very originator of the words of spiritual truths being read: God.

To summarize then, Theology should be studied for the sake of revealing the truth of the scripture itself, and not focusing on better ways to advance our own methodologies to approaching the text. Yes, hermeneutics should be applied when interpreting scripture carefully, while not forgetting the role the Holy Spirit can play in illumination of the divine words of scripture in our hearts and minds. However pursuing hermeneutical methodology should be strictly **secondary** to the goal of explaining the meaning and reason for a text to the reader or hearer of God's word. Any other pursuit leads to dry intellectualism without a spirit or heart, such as Karl Barth ran smack dab into during his studies in Germany.

In such a dry wasteland and atmosphere of biblical studies it is no wonder that many people, as George Whitefield did long ago, cry out "I thirst!" for the Holy Spirit to breathe life into their otherwise dead and futile pursuits of trying to understand the scriptures. This is because it is often sought apart from God's own illumination in the heart and soul and not accepting God's word in its final canonical (I also say original) form for what it actually says, but when the soul comes to itself it realizes its deficiency and need

. May we ever be as the Bereans, studious and attentive to the words of scripture, but also be those who are characterized as Spirit-filled believers who walk in the word and are not hearers only.