

Lecture Twenty-One

The Historical-Critical Approach

Scope: Alongside the use of the Bible in faith communities as the authoritative guide to life, there arose after the Enlightenment an equal (and often competing) interest in the Bible among scholars as a source for the reconstruction of history. Historical critics were often in tension with faith communities because of their divergent aims, even though many of these critics also had theological commitments of their own. This presentation discusses the aims and methods of historical criticism with respect to the Bible and touches on the results of three great projects: the study of the history of ancient Israel, the study of the history of the early Church, and the quest for the historical Jesus.

Outline

- I. The Enlightenment in Europe (17th–18th centuries) initiated a new way of reading the Bible that created tension with traditional readings.
 - A. In many respects, the Enlightenment continued the ethos of the Renaissance but with a sharper edge.
 1. The effects of world exploration made even clearer the limits of the biblical world.
 2. The effect of the Wars of Religion in Europe was a moral revulsion against dogmatism.
 3. The effect of constant theological debate was a desire for a religion that consisted in moral teaching.
 - B. The fundamental assumptions of the Enlightenment challenged “the world imagined by the Bible.”
 1. The conviction that human reason is the measure of all truth put the authority of revelation in question.
 2. The premise that only verifiable facts can be true removed the value of mystery and metaphor.
 3. The triumph of historical consciousness reduced the Bible to a historical record, whose value was measured by its historical accuracy.

4. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) distinguished between “meaning and truth,” and in England, Deist thinkers challenged the revelatory character of Scripture.
- C. The *historical-critical method* in biblical studies combines Enlightenment premises, Protestant theological perspectives, and scientific methods.
1. The Enlightenment premises are found primarily in the reduction of a text’s significance to its historical character.
 2. Protestant theological perspectives come out in the value judgments made, for example, on “prophecy and law” or “origins and development.”
 3. Scientific methods consist in the accurate assessment of ancient sources for their historical rather than religious value.
- D. The relationship between historical criticism and the Church was uneasy from the start.
1. It was easy for the Church to embrace a “benign” form of historical inquiry that continued a focus on the traditional literal sense, and many scholars, working within theological institutions, saw themselves in service to religion.
 2. Unease grew with the sense that “history” really had a “theological” agenda of subverting the essentials of traditional faith.
- II. The study of the history of ancient Israel reveals the distinct way of reading the Old Testament.
- A. Archaeology is not only an important ancillary discipline to reading, but it becomes the model for reading.
1. The ability to “verify” archaeologically biblical accounts becomes a test of biblical truth.
 2. Reading biblical literature is like excavating an archaeological site: Dissection of layers of tradition yields chronological development in history.
- B. In combination with archaeology and comparative literature from the ancient Near East, biblical sources are deconstructed and reorganized according to historical periods.
1. The four sources of the Pentateuch are thought to yield information of a historical character, not about the events they report, but about the interests of their authors.

2. The division of Isaiah into three distinct prophetic voices in different periods and the location of Daniel in the Maccabean period affect the perception of the meaning of “prophecy.”
- C. The progress of historical study tends to problematize the “truth” value of biblical accounts far beyond the difficulty of Jonah’s whale.
1. If the patriarchs are simply legend, then what is “the faith of Abraham”?
 2. If the Exodus did not happen, then how is God a “liberator”?
 3. If there is no court of Solomon, then what is “Solomon in all his glory”?
- III.** The progress of studying the history of early Christianity follows a similar path, with archaeology playing the same role of measure and metaphor.
- A. The material in the New Testament is, if anything, more difficult, with only one narrative about events in early Christianity and the other literature lacking external controls.
 - B. The tendency has been to challenge the orthodox account (constructed from the Acts of the Apostles and Eusebius) on the basis of scientific analysis.
 - C. Developmental models serve to control the intrinsically fragmentary evidence: the dialectic of Jew and Gentile, the movement from charism to institution, the elimination of diversity through orthodoxy.
- IV.** For obvious reasons, the most contentious historical-critical project has been the quest for the historical Jesus.
- A. From the start, the quest was as much about theology as it was about history: the recovery of a “usable Jesus.”
 - B. There are three things we can say about this quest:
 1. The quest has led to diverse results.
 2. The real gain has been in a better understanding of the character of the Gospels.
 3. The degree to which Christians find the quest important is the degree to which historical-critical reading has become the dominant mode even within the Church.

Essential Reading:

B. Spinoza, “Of the Interpretation of Scripture” (from *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*), in W. Yarchin, ed., *History of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 198–207.

Supplementary Reading:

H. G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do the premises of the historical-critical approach differ from those of biblical interpretation in the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras?
2. Why is the battle over Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch or the historical Jesus in effect a battle over ways of reading the Bible?