

Introduction

After two thousand years, can there still be anything left to discover about the Bible? People who work in biblical studies are used to being asked this question. One answer – a true one – is that there is still primary research to be conducted, because the discoveries of modern times (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls) have increased our access to the world in which the Bible came into being; archaeology is continually revealing more about the physical realities of life in the biblical world; and fresh linguistic evidence sheds new light on the meaning of biblical texts. New information justifies fresh investigation.

But ancient texts require not only research, but also interpretation. When we have as accurate a text of the biblical books as can be secured, and as much knowledge as research makes available, we are still faced with the question: what does the Bible mean? This question can never be answered once and for all, not because the Bible changes, but because it takes two for meaning to be perceived: the text and its interpreter. In every age interpreters ask different questions, and so different aspects of the text's meaning emerge. The task of interpretation, unlike that of research, is never finished even in principle.

This book offers the reader a progress report on biblical interpretation in the 1990s. Biblical studies have been in turmoil throughout the last ten years, revealing that what seemed in the 1970s and 1980s to be a time of sharp controversies was really quite placid and conciliatory by comparison. The turmoil concerns less the interpretation of any given biblical book than the methods that ought to be employed in studying them all. Almost everyone who writes about biblical studies today talks in terms of a 'new paradigm' for reading the text – a shift from an interest in political history and the historical meaning of the Bible to a social-historical, sociological, literary or postmodern style of reading. At the same time, as readers will notice in many of the chapters below, interpreters are often at pains to claim that their new paradigm is not new at all, but the restoration of an older method which the intervening ascendancy of the 'historical-critical method' had temporarily

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effaced. Thus there is a perception among many biblical scholars that the newest approaches are also a restoration of something very old: for post-structuralist read precritical.

The first section of this book (chapters 1–11) accordingly surveys the present ferment over the aims and methods that students of the Bible should adopt. My own chapter (chapter 1) concentrates on the ‘paradigm shift’ itself, noting (what is undeniable) that the style of biblical studies has changed radically in the last decade or so, but at the same time asking whether the ‘historical-critical method’ (itself something of a misnomer to describe a complex set of attitudes and questions) may not have been falsely demonized in the process. When this book was being planned, some advisers suggested that there should be no chapter on historical criticism at all, since it was now entirely *passé*. Against this I have tried to show that ‘historical’ critics raised (and raise) issues that should still be on the agenda for the student of the Bible, and which will not go away.

The paradox that the newest methods hark back to the oldest is particularly clear in David Jasper’s study of literary criticism of the Bible (chapter 2). He argues that recent literary approaches often draw on the vast resources of precritical exegesis (Jewish and Christian) to revive insights into the text lost through historical criticism. In particular, he illustrates the current concern for ‘holistic’ readings, in which biblical books are read just as they stand and without asking the questions about earlier sources and editions that characterized the historical interest in the text. This concern he traces back to precritical interpretation which, he argues, was similarly holistic in its interests.

The four chapters that follow deal with various styles of interpretation concerned with the location of biblical texts in a particular society – and of their readers in a different one. Keith Whitelam (chapter 3) discusses sociological and anthropological study of the Bible. This, as he says, goes back in essence at least two hundred years, but has gained vastly in depth and intensity over the last ten years or so in both Old and New Testament study. As now conceived it does not only treat the Bible as evidence for the social setting of ancient Israel and the early Church, but also examines the historical and modern contexts within which the biblical books were and are read.

Robert Carroll (chapter 4) traces a variety of positions that can be identified on the current intellectual map: poststructuralism, New Historicism and postmodernism. He too shows that even the most recent of such movements join hands in some ways with precritical interpretation, seeing historical criticism as the common enemy – and ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’.

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New Historicism, which concentrates on the social setting in which history happens and is interpreted, has in fact produced some conclusions which, at least in Old Testament study, contribute also to 'historical-critical' enquiry, notably by redating much of the Old Testament to the Hellenistic age, only a couple of centuries before the Christian era. Its theoretical base, however, is 'ideology criticism', and its practical effect of redating texts is something of a side issue.

Political reading, according to Tim Gorringer (chapter 5), is also nothing new: the Church, for example, always saw the Bible as having a political message, at least until Luther drove a wedge between Christian and political life. But in its modern form it depends on Marx's insight that knowledge is socially situated, insisting that we should ask not just what the text meant or means, but who is reading the text and with what interests. Only then can the Bible be an instrument of social and political change rather than a means of entrenching the *status quo*.

One particular example of a political concern in reading the Bible has been the burgeoning feminist interest of the last few years. Ann Loades (chapter 6) shows how feminist attitudes to the Bible have polarized. Some feminists (e.g. Phyllis Trible) regard the Bible as a basically sound document which needs to be rescued from false androcentric interpreters; others (e.g. Mary Daly) think that the roots of patriarchy in modern society lie very largely in the Bible itself, whose androcentrism has if anything been underestimated. Feminists of the second kind can alert the reader to problematic elements in the Bible which can be overlooked by other kinds of political, anthropological and postmodern interpreters, whose work often has the practical effect of making the Bible easier to accept than it is on a historical-critical reading. Feminist interpreters of this kind are in many ways allies of the historical critics.

The art of interpretation – hermeneutics – has itself been the subject of much profound study in the modern period, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher. Anthony Thiselton (chapter 7) provides a detailed and searching account of modern hermeneutical theory, and shows how it has been the basis for many of the movements already surveyed in this volume through its destruction of the 'hermeneutics of innocence' – in other words, by showing that interpreters are themselves *situated*, not in the position of neutral observers.

Most students of the Bible have had theological (or religious) interests: they have wanted to understand the Bible, not as merely a historical document, but as the 'words of life'. Robert Morgan (chapter 8) provides a historical

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survey of the theological use of Scripture in Christian thought, stressing, like most of the contributors, the importance of the interpreter in the quest for religious meaning.

In describing the state of biblical studies above, I distinguished between interpretation and research. This is a rough-and-ready distinction, but it does serve to indicate to the reader that this volume does not provide, for example, a guide to biblical archaeology or to the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, one area of primary research that impinges very closely on interpretation is the contribution of philology and linguistics, particularly where the Old Testament is concerned. William Johnstone (chapter 9) describes and evaluates the linguistic contribution to our understanding of the Bible, showing how here too there has been a shift to a concern with the present form of the text rather than with the history of biblical languages (he illustrates this from the *Sheffield Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*). He himself defends a continued interest in historical ('diachronic') philology as a valid tool alongside the 'synchronic' concerns of contemporary linguistics.

Stefan Reif (chapter 10) comments on the whole scene of biblical studies from a Jewish perspective. He sees the 'biblical studies' taught in most theological centres as shot through with Christian attitudes, not least the assumption that the 'Old Testament' is fulfilled only in the New Testament and not legitimately continued in Judaism. He also regards 'biblical criticism' as a Christian phenomenon, explaining thereby why it was seldom adopted enthusiastically by Jewish scholars and is now fairly generally rejected in Jewish circles. It is perhaps worth noting how many of the contributors to this volume share many of his perceptions of biblical criticism, and would be sympathetic to traditional Jewish ways of reading Scripture: my own chapter is probably the only one to defend the type of biblical criticism he finds objectionable! It remains true that biblical study of the kind that goes on in theology departments remains more prominently a Christian than a Jewish activity, and that the reasons for this deserve to be more openly discussed than they are. Christian scholars need to listen much more closely to what Jewish scholars have to say about the books which are a shared heritage.

Finally in this first part we turn from interpretation of the Bible to its reception (not that the two can be sharply distinguished). In his chapter (chapter 11) Stephen Prickett examines, with the aid of several specific examples, what literature and art in the West have done with the Bible. He suggests intriguingly that from the study of the Bible in literature and art we can not only learn about past interpretations, but also be spurred on to new and more subtle interpretations of our own.

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In the second part of the volume each group or genre of texts is surveyed. The aim here is twofold: to inform the reader as to what is generally thought about the books in question, and to illustrate some of the methods described in chapters 1–11. It may be helpful to highlight a few points.

The current debate about the respective merits of ‘holistic’ (or ‘synchronic’) and ‘historical’ (or ‘diachronic’) study of texts is focused most clearly in John Ashton’s study of John’s Gospel (chapter 17), where he takes as a salient example of what scholarship has been doing with this Gospel the story of Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4). He distinguishes ‘smooth’ readings, i.e. readings where it is taken as a given that the text forms a unity and contains no evidence of dislocations or inconsistencies, and ‘rough’ readings where this is not the case. ‘Rough’ readings have traditionally resulted in hypotheses about the history of the composition of the text, that is, they have pointed scholars in a diachronic direction. As Ashton shows, ‘smooth’ readings are in the ascendant at the moment – but he points to reasons why we should not smooth over difficulties in the text through a doctrinaire commitment to synchronic approaches. There are also interesting reflections on this issue in Joseph Blenkinsopp’s chapter on the Pentateuch (chapter 12), where the newer ‘paradigm’ is more clearly in evidence but there is still respect for the old questions.

Another recent tendency is the treatment of the ‘historical’ books of the Old Testament, and (to a lesser extent, perhaps) the Gospels and Acts as ‘story’ rather than history – carefully crafted narrative whose literary and theological effect does not depend on its closeness to the historical ‘facts’. This is commented on in Iain Provan’s chapter (chapter 13), with reference to various holistic styles of reading and to the ideological criticism which has led to radical redatings of the material (see above under New Historicism). It can also be seen in PHEME PERKINS’S chapter on the Synoptic Gospels and Acts (chapter 16), which highlights the results of redaction criticism, where interest centres on what the evangelists have done with the sources at their disposal in order to tell the story of Jesus in a particular and distinctive way.

The continuing vigour of more traditional biblical criticism can be seen in James Dunn’s chapter on the Pauline Letters (chapter 18) and Frances Young’s on the non-Paulines (chapter 19), as well as in those on apocalyptic by James VanderKam (chapter 20) and on the prophetic books by Robert Wilson (chapter 14). All these chapters provide readers with an up-to-date account of the historical background and development of the biblical books in question, as well as their contents and importance in the Bible as a whole.

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Finally, Robert Alter's chapter on the poetic and wisdom books (chapter 15) identifies one area where there has been a particularly high degree of activity in the last twenty years or so: the identification and description of Hebrew verse. Despite two hundred years of research, the principles of Hebrew poetry are still not fully understood. Alter's survey, with carefully worked examples, brings the reader close to such consensus as there now is in a field fraught with controversy.

Biblical studies today is as far as possible from the stereotype with which we began, a sterile discipline which has lasted too long already. On the contrary, it is an exciting field in which the rate of change is now probably faster than it has ever been. The hope of all the contributors to this volume is that it will both inform readers about the current state of biblical scholarship, and also stimulate them to join in a fascinating and rewarding study.

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Part one

Lines of approach

1 Historical-critical approaches

JOHN BARTON

Historical criticism, also known as the historical-critical method, was the dominant approach in the academic study of the Bible from the mid-nineteenth century until a generation ago. In the English-speaking world it is now under a cloud. There is much talk of a 'paradigm shift' away from historical methods and towards 'text-immanent' interpretation which is not concerned with the historical context and meaning of texts; it is widely felt that historical criticism is now itself of largely historical (or 'academic'!) interest (see Barton, *The Future of Old Testament Study*; Keck, 'Will the Historical-Critical Method Survive?'; Watson, *Text, Church and World*). It is still practised, however, by a large number of scholars even in the English-speaking world, and by many more in areas where German is the main language of scholarship.

What is historical criticism? Unfortunately its definition is almost as controversial as its desirability. It may be helpful to begin by identifying the features which many students of the Bible now find objectionable in the historical-critical method, before trying to refine our definition by seeing what can be said in its defence. We shall outline four features normally said to be central to historical-critical study of the Bible.

GENETIC QUESTIONS

Historical critics, it is usually said, are interested in *genetic* questions about the biblical text. They ask when and by whom books were written; what was their intended readership; and, in the case of many biblical books, what were the stages by which they came into being – for it is historical criticism to which we owe the suggestion that many books are composite, put together out of a number of originally separate source documents. Often the finished product seems to be of less interest to such critics than the underlying sources.

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Thus, in the case of the Pentateuch, historical-critical approaches generated the hypothesis that Genesis–Deuteronomy should be read, not as five discrete books, but as the interweaving of four separate, older sources (see chapter 12 on the Pentateuch; also Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch*; Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century*). Once they had established the existence of these sources, Pentateuchal critics took little further interest in the Pentateuch as it now stands. Even where they asked about the theology of the work, they took this to mean the four separate theological outlooks of the sources J, E, D and P, and made no attempt to integrate these into any larger whole. To the question ‘What is the Pentateuch?’ they answered ‘The amalgam of J, E, D and P’: thus a question potentially about the *nature* of the work was given an exclusively genetic answer, an answer couched purely in terms of the work’s *origin*. Much the same would be true for the Synoptic Gospels, where historical criticism concentrated on the ‘Synoptic Problem’: how are the overlaps and divergences among the three Synoptic Gospels to be accounted for, and how far can we reconstruct the process by which the Gospels as we now have them were compiled? (On the Synoptic Problem see the classic textbook, Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, and the annotated bibliography by Longstaff and Thomas, *The Synoptic Problem*.) It could be said that historical criticism addressed itself almost entirely to the question of how we came to have the Bible, and when it had solved this problem, saw little else for the biblical scholar to do.

ORIGINAL MEANING

Because of its concern for the history and prehistory of the text, historical criticism tended (it may be said) to be interested in the ‘original’ meaning of the text, what it had meant to its first readers, and not what it might mean to a modern reader. Very sophisticated philological and linguistic studies could be brought to bear on obscure texts, in order to establish what the original author could have meant in his own historical period. Institutions such as the lawcourt in Israel (cf. Köhler, *Hebrew Man*) or services for worship in the early Church might be reconstructed in order to discover what the texts that belonged in those contexts had meant in their own time. A term such as ‘justice’ might turn out to involve concepts quite different from ours, when it occurred in the Psalms or in Paul’s epistles. The concern was always to place texts in their historical context, and to argue that we misunderstand them if we take them to mean something they could not have meant for their first readers – indeed, most historical critics regarded this as obvious. The ori-

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ginal meaning was the true meaning, and the main task of biblical scholars was to get back to this meaning, and to eliminate the false meanings that unhistorical readers thought they had found in the text. Thus when in Philippians 1:1 we read in the Authorized Version of 'bishops and deacons', a historical critic would point out that these terms did not mean what they later came to mean, as titles for two levels in the developed church hierarchy of later times, but referred to quite different officials in the early Pauline churches. This made it illicit to appeal to such a text in support of Catholic church order, for example (see Beare, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, for an elementary statement of this point).

HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

Historical criticism was also concerned with history in the straightforward sense of the term – not only the historical context of words and meanings, or the historical development of texts, but what happened in the past. In the nineteenth century a major influence on great biblical critics such as W. M. L. de Wette, Julius Wellhausen and D. F. Strauss was the burgeoning discipline of historical writing in the German-speaking world. Scholars such as Theodor Mommsen and Leopold von Ranke set themselves the task of writing, for the first time, a properly critical history of the classical world, by going back to the original sources and refusing to accept what ancient writers said at face value. In the same way, biblical historians subjected the historical books of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and Acts to a critical scrutiny that asked what *really* happened – as opposed to what the (far from impartial) writers of those books believed (or wanted their readers to believe) had happened. Similarly, source-analysis of the Gospels had as one of its aims the recovery of the earliest sayings of Jesus and the original stories about him. This would make it possible to reconstruct a genuine history of his life and times, rather than simply retelling the story as the Gospels present it. And Wellhausen called his examination of the Pentateuchal sources and their themes *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*: sorting out the order and historical implications of the four Pentateuchal sources was the necessary precondition to writing a critical history of Israel (which, however, never got written).

DISINTERESTED SCHOLARSHIP

Perhaps most important of all, historical criticism was meant to be value-neutral, or disinterested. It tried, so far as possible, to approach the text without