

*It is terrible to die of thirst in  
the ocean. Do you have to salt your  
truth so heavily that it does not  
quench thirst any more?  
—Nietzsche*

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## The Bankruptcy of the Biblical Critical Paradigm

**H**istorical biblical criticism is bankrupt. I use “bankrupt” in the exact sense of the term. A business which goes bankrupt is not valueless, nor incapable of producing useful products. It still has an inventory of expensive parts, a large capital outlay, a team of trained personnel, a certain reputation, and usually, until the day bankruptcy is declared, a façade which appeared to most to be relatively healthy. The one thing wrong—and the only thing—is that it is no longer able to accomplish its avowed purpose for existence: to make money.

It is in this precise sense that one can speak of the historical critical method generally, and of its application to biblical studies in particular, as bankrupt. Biblical criticism has produced an inventory of thousands of studies on every question which has seemed amenable to its methods, with a host of additional possibilities still before it. It has a method which has proven itself in earlier historical periods to be capable of remarkable achievements. It has in its employ hundreds of competent, trained technicians. Biblical criticism is not bankrupt because it has run out of things to say or new ground to explore. It is bankrupt solely because it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret

the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.

How did biblical criticism become insolvent? Here are at least a few of the reasons.

### 1. The method as practiced was incommensurate with the intention of the texts.

The writers of the New Testament bore witness to events which had led them to faith. They wrote “from faith to faith,” to evoke or augment faith in their readers. Ostensibly, historical criticism is not hostile to these intentions, but should serve to make the same decision for faith or unfaith accessible across the gulf of centuries to readers today. In actual practice, however, this seldom happens, and for good reason. For the very essence of scientific and historical inquiry in modern times has been the suspension of evaluative judgments and participational involvement in the “object” of research. Such detached neutrality in matters of faith is not neutrality at all, but already a decision against responding. At the outset, questions of truth and meaning have been excluded, since they can only be answered participatively, in terms of a lived response. Insofar as they are retained at all, “truth” is reduced to facticity, and the text’s “meaning” is rendered by a paraphrase.

Such “objective neutrality” thus requires a sacrifice of the very questions the Bible seeks to answer. But if our questions do not anticipate a certain type of answer, how can we hope to receive it? If our methodology is not designed to reveal meaning, the possibility that meaning might emerge is blocked in advance, through the manner in which the problem is stated. Having initially turned to the text seeking insights about living, we find ourselves ineluctably drawn by our method further and further from the place where the text might speak.

This detached, value-neutral, ahistorical point of view is, of course, an illusion. For all empirical work can be carried out only on the basis of certain meta-empirical, ontological, and metaphysical judgments, and the expectations and hypotheses which follow from them. “He who makes no decisions has no questions to raise and is not even able to formulate a tentative hypothesis which enables him to set a problem and to search history for its answer.”<sup>1</sup>

Historical criticism did operate, although covertly, on the basis of such meta-empirical underpinnings: a faith in reason and progress and an ontology of naïve realism. In the context of belief in progress, historical method became the means to delineate the development of ideas and institutions toward that historical apex *modern times*. It is clear in all this that the “objective standpoint” is none other than the historically conditioned place where *we* happen to be standing, and possesses no neutrality or detachment at all.

We will see later that the historical critical method had a vested interest in undermining the Bible’s authority, that it operated as a background ideology for the demystification of religious tradition, that it required functional atheism for its practice, and that its attempted mastery of the object was operationally analogous to the myth of Satan and the legend of Faust. For the time being the point is solely that the fiction of “detachment” made vital relatedness to the content of the text impossible. By detaching the text from the stream of my existence, biblical criticism has hurled it into the abyss of an objectified past. Such a past is an infinite regress. No amount of devoted study can bring it back.

The biblical writers themselves never treated their own past in such a manner. Their past was a continual accosting, a question flung in their paths, a challenge, and a confrontation. But because the scholar has removed himself from view, no shadow from the past can fall across his path. He has insulated himself from the Bible’s own concerns. He examines the Bible, but he himself is not examined—except

by his colleagues in the guild! This disregard of the voices of the past, this systematic stopping of the ears and restraint of the will do not constitute objectivity but are instead the negation of the manifest intent of the subject matter.

The historical critical method has reduced the Bible to a dead letter. Our obeisance to technique has left the Bible sterile and ourselves empty. The further we have advanced in analysis the more the goal has receded from our sight, so that today many of us might well say with Nietzsche, "*Ich habe meine Gründe vergessen*"—I have forgotten why I ever began.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The ideology of objectivism drew historical criticism into a false consciousness.

Objectivism as used here refers to the academic ideal of detached observation of phenomena without interference by emotions, will, interests, or bias. It can be spoken of as an ideology because it does not correspond to reality and is incapable of realization. The error of objectivism as an ideology lies in its intellectualism, its blindness to the irrational or unconscious, and its separation of theory from practice. Its falsehood lies in the systematic repression of its error.

Objectivism is intellectualistic. Intellectualism, says Mannheim, is "a mode of thought which either does not see the elements in life and in thought which are based on will, interest, emotion, and *Weltanschauung*—or, if it does recognize their existence, treats them as though they were equivalent to the intellect and believes that they may be mastered by and subordinated to reason."<sup>3</sup> Intellectualism is characterized by a complete separation of theory from practice, of intellect from emotion, and finds emotionally determined thinking intolerable. When it encounters a mode of thinking which is necessarily set in an irrational context, as political or religious thought always is, the attempt is made so to construe the phenomena that the

evaluative elements will appear separable from a residue of pure theory. Left obscured is the question of whether in fact the emotional is so intertwined with the rational as to involve even the categorical structure itself, thus making the sought-for isolation of the evaluative elements *de facto* impossible.<sup>4</sup>

Here the problem of the academy becomes unavoidable, with its endemic separation of theory from practice, mind from body, reason from emotion, knowledge from experience. Is anything but intellectualism possible when our questions do not arise primarily out of the struggle with concrete problems of life and society, from the blistering exposure to trial and error, from the need for wisdom in the ambiguous mash of events? Can historical criticism, practiced in the academy, ensnared in an objectivist ideology, ever do more than simply refer the data of the text away from an encounter with experience and back to its own uncontrolled premises?

In such a context biblical study is rendered innocuous from the start. Here we are trained to think in a framework which strives to negate every evaluation, every trace of mundane meaning, every proclivity toward a view of the whole. The result is a hermeneutic with whose categories not even the simplest life-process can be thought through. The outcome of biblical studies in the academy is a trained incapacity to deal with the real problems of actual living persons in their daily lives.

Objectivism is not simply in error, however. It is a false consciousness. Error is unintentional. Falsehood knows but has sought to forget its own face. Objectivism is a false consciousness because evidence of its error is systematically repressed. It pretends detachment when in fact the scholar is attached to an institution with a high stake in the socialization of students and the preservation of society, and when he himself has a high stake in advancement in that institution by publication of his researches. It pretends to be unbiased when in fact the methodology carries with it

a heavy rationalistic weight which by inner necessity tends toward the reduction of irrational, subjective, or emotional data to insignificance or invisibility. It pretends to search for “assured results,” “objective knowledge,” when in fact the method presumes radical epistemological doubt, which by definition devours each new spawn of “assured results” as a guppy swallows her children. It pretends to suspend evaluations, which is simply impossible, since research proceeds on the basis of questions asked and a ranked priority in their asking. But such judgments presuppose a system of values and an ontology of meanings which not only give weight to the questions but make it possible to ask them at all. Even the choice of syntax and vocabulary is a political act that defines and circumscribes the way “facts” are to be experienced—indeed, in a sense even creates the facts that can be studied.<sup>5</sup> And finally, objectivism pretends to be neutral when in fact the scholar, like everyone else, has racial, sexual, and class interests to which he is largely blind and which are unconsciously reflected in his work. (Why, for example, do German scholars persist in using the offensive term “*Spätjudentum*,” as if Judaism ceased to exist with the rise of Christianity? Why are there so few women and Black biblical scholars in this country? Why has hermeneutical scholarship so long ignored the rich tradition of Black preaching?)

On the American scene the problem has been exacerbated by the struggle to gain standing for departments of religious studies in secular universities previously closed to all religious instruction. In order to dissociate religious studies from denominational and dogmatic stigmatization, it seemed necessary to assert the scientific character of the discipline. The descriptive approach became the magic key to academic respectability. This has in actual practice meant objectivism with a vengeance, and accounts at least in part for the virtual abandonment recently (regardless of theoretical leanings, which were often of the best sort) of the beachhead which Bultmann had established.

Objectivity is much to be desired. But objectivity must be separated off from the ideology of *objectivism* and given new footing. A new type of objectivity is attainable, not through the exclusion of evaluations, but through the critical awareness and proper use of them. Lest this be construed as counsel simply to try harder under the old presuppositions, let us be clear that what is demanded in the face of bankruptcy is not a pep talk to the sales force but new management. If all historical knowledge is relational knowledge, and can only be formulated with reference to the position of the observer, we are faced with the task of developing a radically different model for the role of the interpreter vis-à-vis the text.

### 3. Biblical studies increasingly fell prey to a form of technologism which regards as legitimate only those questions which its methods can answer.

Technique is absolutely essential in any field of inquiry. But technique is essentially value-blind. It depends for its functioning on orders given outside its area of competence. It is all the more crucial then that the technique employed be commensurate with its object, for techniques can only produce those results for which they are created. I have already argued above that the historical method as practiced has not been adequately commensurate with the biblical texts. In this case the carrying over of methods from the natural sciences has led to a situation where we no longer ask what we would like to know and what will be of decisive significance for the next step in personal or social development. Rather, we attempt to deal only with those complexes of facts which are amenable to historical method. We ask only those questions which the method can answer. We internalize the method's questions and permit a self-censorship of the questions intrinsic to our lives. Puffed with pretensions to "pure scholarship," this

blinkered approach fails to be scholarly enough, precisely because it refuses to examine so much that is essential to understanding the intention of the text and our interest in reading it.

Preoccupation with technique leads to a self-perpetuating reductionist spiral. Existing technique determines the direction of further inquiry, including the developing of additional techniques, which themselves presuppose the previous techniques, *ad infinitum*. In this process there is no room for an examination of premises, nor is there any capacity to question the appropriateness of the techniques employed for answering the questions which the text might pose.

Technologism need not be disastrous, whether in oil production or in biblical criticism. But it must be subordinated—always, in every field, without exception—to an adequate hermeneutic. Yet, in spite of remarkable strides in hermeneutical thought, biblical technologism reigns unchecked. The horse rides the horseman and the goal is not reached.

#### 4. Biblical criticism became cut off from any community for whose life its results might be significant.

Historical biblical research, as long as it was situated in an antithetical position to orthodoxy, was the *Wehrmacht* of the liberal church. During this period its relationship to the vital centers of an entire community's life was crucial. Gradually, as success became assured, a shift took place. The community of reference and accountability became, not the liberal church, but the guild of biblical scholars. The guild, however, is not a community but a collective. It is simply a peer group on the model of any other professional guild, subject to the same virtues (preservation of high standards, rewards in terms of prestige to those deemed most worthy, centralization and dissemination of information, etc.) and vices (development of an "expert"



ethos, invention of a technical esoteric language, repression of innovation, conformity to peer-group values) which characterize all other professional groups.

This removal of scholarship from a vital community had consequences disastrous for both. For the community it was disastrous because its own self-consciousness as a people under the Word was largely deprived of critical and constructive contributions. For scholarship it was disastrous because the questions asked of the texts were seldom ones on which human lives hinged, but those most likely to win a hearing from the guild. Historical criticism sought to free itself from the community in order to pursue its work untrammelled by censorship and interference. With that hard-won freedom it also won isolation from any conceivable significance. For since truth is not absolute, but only approximate and relational, its relevance can only emerge in the particularity of a given community's struggles for integrity and freedom.

Here the crisis in biblical studies links up with the crisis in the churches generally, since they themselves have become problematic as the locus of Christian community. For many liberal Protestant scholars in America, the most urgent question has become that of finding a context in which their interpretations of the Bible might have significance—or, stated more fundamentally, a context which would give that interpretation significance. Here, as at every other point, the crisis in biblical scholarship is seen as an epiphenomenon of a far more comprehensive crisis in the culture itself.

**5. Biblical criticism developed in a historical context which has now changed. In the present context it is, as now practiced, obsolete.**

Far too little attention has been paid to the polemical/apologetical origins of biblical criticism. It was first used as a weapon against existing orthodoxies, and only later was

it pressed into more constructive service. One of its first exponents, Richard Simon (d. 1712), a Roman Catholic, used historical criticism to undermine Protestant dependency on the Bible as the sole source of authority. Reimarus used it to assault the historical basis of Christianity itself.

The effect was traumatic. Conservative exegesis had interpreted Scripture in the context of a total theological construction of history. The new analytical approach, on the other hand, broke down every total construction in order to arrive at smaller units which might then be recombined through the category of causality. There can be little quarrel that the historical significance of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis (which no one today accepts as then formulated) was its usefulness as a method for destroying the conservative view of biblical origins and inspiration, thereby destroying its entire ideology.

As long as this ideological onslaught was made for the sake of desirable fundamental change, that is, as long as it was seeking breathing room for the spirit and the right of the intellect to free inquiry, its thrust was utopian in the best sense of the term: it sought to destroy an existent state of reality for the sake of one which it conceived to be better. Today, however, that war is largely over, and biblical critical scholarship has become the established status quo. Now the unconscious ideological elements in its position have become visible. And the unhappy consequence of this unmasking is not just that liberal biblical scholarship also proves to have been ideological, but that it has ceased to be utopian, and no longer moves toward a greater comprehension of truth. It is as if, at the moment of its victory, it had forgotten why it had fought, and settled down on the field of battle to inventory its weapons in hope of discovering some clue as to their further usefulness. Here, as in other revolutions, those who were fit to overthrow were not fit to govern.

The conservative ideology, for its part, was not wholly deceived by the ideology of objectivism, though it was at a

loss to know how to overcome it. For it sensed instinctively that the modernist was not nearly so interested in being changed by his reading of the Bible, as in changing the way that the Bible was read in order to conform it to the modern spirit. Conservatism was not, for all that, juxtaposing a “biblical spirit” to the “modern spirit,” but was instead trying to forestall the final dissolution of the precritical spirit of orthodox Christendom. One can today more sympathetically appreciate conservative and fundamentalist anxiety at the loss of religious naïveté. But Christianity needed and still needs the acid bath of criticism. In this case scientific criticism performed an iconoclastic function for faith. If we are today moving toward a “postcritical” epoch, it can only be in the literal sense of the term: *after* criticism, not *above* it! The task now is to find a way forward to what Paul Ricoeur calls “a second naïveté,” in which faith performs an iconoclastic function in respect to criticism.<sup>6</sup>

It is in this polemic/apologetic context that the role of “New Testament Introduction” can be understood. “Introduction” was not so much an introduction to the Bible as to the biblical critical ethos. Students studied the great textbooks—Moffatt, McNeile, Enslin—but seldom read the biblical text. “Introduction” provoked an inferno of debate. People’s lives changed as a result of its study. Is it any accident that the victory of biblical criticism coincided with a sharp shift of emphasis away from “Introduction” to that of biblical theology—that is, from assault to construction? I have even heard professors wonder aloud why they ever devoted so much attention to introductory problems. There was also, to be sure, the excitement of discovery, the need to press questions to their limits and to establish a certain consensus. Except for certain outstanding problems (including the periodic reopening of issues believed closed), that work is now a part of the history of the discipline, and was a necessary and vital contribution. All that, however, does nothing to mitigate the fact that the questions asked operated at the level of objectivization rather

than self-reflective understanding. Introduction served to distance rather than to mediate the text.

The biblical theology movement for its part marked a massive defection from the objectivist paradigm. That it was unable completely to free itself from that paradigm is no judgment on its value. In every revolution the thesis lives on in the antithesis for a time. What Brevard Childs chronicles as the crisis of biblical theology<sup>7</sup> is in fact its desperate opportunity to take the next step forward to a total paradigm change. For we have also learned to do objectivistic biblical theology! We can describe Paul's view of grace with as much benign condescension as we adjudge the carbon date of a Qumran fragment. Whatever the excesses of the biblical theology movement, there is only one that counts, and that is its excessive dependence on objectivism.

Bluntly stated, biblical criticism was a certain type of evangelism seeking a certain type of conversion. No depreciation is intended by those terms, loaded as they are. Only those still under the illusion that biblical criticism was ideologically neutral should be offended by their use. Far more fundamentally than revivalism, biblical criticism shook, shattered, and reconstituted generation after generation of students, and became their point of entrée into the "modern world." The failure of historians of missions and evangelism to register the spectacular evangelistic success of biblical criticism is nothing less than phenomenal, and is but one more indication of the blinding power of its objectivist ideology.

To say that biblical criticism has now, like revivalism, become bankrupt is simply to summarize the entire discussion to this point. It was based on an inadequate method, married to a false objectivism, subjected to uncontrolled technologism, separated from a vital community, and has outlived its usefulness as presently practiced. Whether or not it has any future at all depends on its adaptability to a radically altered situation.