

# Bible Criticism

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*Criticism* as applied to the Bible simply means the exercise of judgment. Both conservative and non-conservative scholars engage in two forms of biblical criticism: *lower criticism* deals with the text; *higher criticism* treats the source of the text. Lower criticism attempts to determine what the original text said, and the latter asks who said it and when, where, and why it was written.

Most controversies surrounding Bible criticism involve higher criticism. Higher criticism can be divided into negative (destructive) and positive (constructive) types. Negative criticism denies the authenticity of much of the biblical record. Usually an antisupernatural presupposition is employed in this critical approach. Further, negative criticism often approaches the Bible with distrust equivalent to a “guilty-until-proven-innocent” bias.

## **Negative New Testament Criticism.**

*Historical, Source, Form, Tradition, and Redaction* methods (and combinations thereof) are the approaches with the worst record for bias. Any of these, used to advance an agenda of skepticism, with little or no regard for truth, undermine the Christian apologetic.

### *Historical Criticism.*

Historical criticism is a broad term that covers techniques to date documents and traditions, to verify events reported in those documents, and to use the results in historiography to reconstruct and interpret. The French Oratorian priest Richard Simon published a series of books, beginning in 1678, in which he applied a rationalistic, critical approach to studying the Bible. This was the birth of historical-critical study of the Bible, although not until Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827) and Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791) was the modern historical-critical pattern set. They were influenced by the secular historical research of Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776-1831; *Romische Geschichte*, 1811-12), Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886; *Geshichte der romanischen und germanischen Volker von 1494-1535*), and others, who developed and refined the techniques. Among those influenced was Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810-1877). He combined elements of Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), and orthodox Lutheranism with historical categories and the critical methods to make a biblical-theological synthesis. This model stressed “superhistorical history” “holy history,” or “salvation history” (Heilsgeschichte)—the sorts of history that need not be literally true. His ideas and terms influenced Karl Barth (1886-1968), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and others in the twentieth century. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, capable orthodox scholars challenged “destructive criticism” and its rationalistic theology.

Among more conservative scholars were George Salmon (1819-1904), Theodor von Zahn (1838-1933), and R. H. Lightfoot (1883-1953), who used criticism methods as the bases for a constructive criticism. This constructive criticism manifests itself most openly when it considers such matters as miracles, virgin birth of Jesus, and bodily resurrection of Christ. Historical criticism is today taken for granted in biblical studies. Much recent work in historical criticism manifests rationalistic theology that at the same time claims to uphold

traditional Christian doctrine. As a result, it has given rise to such developments as source criticism.

### *Source Criticism.*

Source criticism, also known as literary criticism, attempts to discover and define literary sources used by the biblical writers. It seeks to uncover underlying literary sources, classify types of literature, and answer questions relating to authorship, unity, and date of Old and New Testament materials (Geisler, 436). Some literary critics tend to decimate the biblical text, pronounce certain books inauthentic, and reject the very notion of verbal inspiration. Some scholars have carried their rejection of authority to the point that they have modified the idea of the canon (e.g., with regard to pseudonymity) to accommodate their own conclusions (ibid., 436). Nevertheless, this difficult but important undertaking can be a valuable aid to biblical interpretation, since it has bearing on the historical value of biblical writings. In addition, careful literary criticism can prevent historical misinterpretations of the biblical text.

Source criticism in the New Testament over the past century has focused on the so-called "Synoptic problem," since it relates to difficulties surrounding attempts to devise a scheme of literary dependence that accounts for similarities and dissimilarities among the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Theories tend to work with the idea of a now-absent Q or *Quelle* ("Source") used by the three evangelists, who wrote in various sequences, with the second depending on the first and the third on the other two). These theories were typical forerunners of the Two-Source theory advanced by B. H. Streeter (1874-1937), which asserted the priority of Mark and eventually gained wide acceptance among New Testament scholars. Streeter's arguments have been questioned, and his thesis has been challenged by others. Eta Linnemann, once a student of Bultmann and a critic, has written a strong critique of her former position in which she uses source analysis to conclude that no synoptic problem in fact exists. She insists that each Gospel writer wrote an independent account based on personal experience and individual information. She wrote: "As time passes, I become more and more convinced that to a considerable degree New Testament criticism as practiced by those committed to historical-critical theology does not deserve to be called science" (Linnemann, 9). Elsewhere she writes, "The Gospels are not works of literature that creatively reshape already finished material after the manner in which Goethe reshaped the popular book about Dr. Faust" (ibid., 104). Rather, "Every Gospel presents a complete, unique testimony. It owes its existence to direct or indirect eyewitnesses" (ibid., 194).

(to be continued)