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Biblical criticism

Biblical criticism is an umbrella term covering various techniques for applying literary *historical-critical* methods in analyzing and studying the [Bible](#) and its textual content. The word "criticism" is not to be taken in the negative sense of attempting to denigrate the Bible, although this motive is found in its history. Technically, biblical criticism simply refers to the scholarly approach of studying, evaluating and critically assessing the Bible as literature in order to understand it better.

Originally synonymous with higher criticism, the term *biblical criticism* is now seen to encompass the whole spectrum of critical methods for applying general literary historical principles to evaluate the Bible and its text.

Higher criticism, arising from 19th century European [rationalism](#), generally takes a secular approach asking questions regarding the origin and composition of the text, including when and where it originated, how, why, by whom, for whom, and in what circumstances it was produced, what influences were at work in its production, and what original oral or written sources may have been used in its composition; and the message of the text as expressed in its language, including the meaning of the words as well as the way in which they are arranged in meaningful forms of expression. The principles of higher criticism are based on reason rather than revelation and are also speculative by nature.

Lower criticism, also called **Textual criticism**, generally asks questions having to do with the preservation and transmission of the biblical text, including in what manuscripts the text has been preserved, their date, setting, and relationship to each other, and therefore what is the most reliable form of the text. In this sense, it is virtually synonymous with what is called Textual Criticism.

Statistical criticism, uses mathematical and statistical methods to sift through variant readings. Instead of using manuscript families and the Bible critic's own reason, this type of criticism puts the various texts into a statistical formula to derive its text.

Higher criticism

The higher critical methods described below grew out of a German school of Biblical studies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Important names in the development of higher criticism include [Friedrich Schleiermacher](#) (1768–1834), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874); the origins of higher criticism are deeply intertwined with

rationalism and [naturalism](#). The concepts and methods behind higher criticism were carried from Germany across Europe, finding homes in the United Kingdom and France, among liberal [Anglicans](#) and [Catholics](#) respectively. In later times, higher critical methods were deployed in conjunction with the contemporary philosophical trends to de-historicize Scripture.

This history of applying critical methods in an attempt to pull down Scripture has meant that the value of higher critical methods has been, and still is, a matter of controversy among evangelicals. There are some who argue that entire field is irretrievably liberal and secular. For instance, when challenged that he was "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" in rejecting higher critical methods, James Montgomery replied "The difference is, you think there's a baby there, and I don't." ^[1] [Geisler](#) argues that evangelicals have been bedeviled by the offspring of methodological naturalism in biblical criticism largely through redaction criticism. ^[2]

Nevertheless, there are also evangelicals who argue that the higher critical methods study texts of human origin, and that evangelicals, believing that the Bible has origins both human and divine, can appropriately use the higher critical methods. For instance, [Osborne](#) writes,

[higher critical methods] become enemies of the veracity of Scripture only when imbibed with the radical skepticism of negative criticism. When utilized under the aegis of an inerrant Scripture, they become positive, helpful tools. ^[3]

and reports that

[Carl F. H. Henry](#) says, "What is objectionable is not the historical-critical method, but rather the alien presuppositions to which neo-protestant scholars subject it." When it is "freed from the arbitrary assumptions of critics," it becomes "highly serviceable as a disciplined investigative approach to past historical events." ^[4]

As Osborne, and indeed any evangelical proponent of higher criticism, will allow, the higher critical methods are as dangerous when allied to skepticism as they are helpful when allied to reverence; for this reason, it is entirely appropriate to exercise caution in the application of higher critical tools and the reading of higher critics, even while accepting the value of their work.

Historical criticism

Historical Criticism seeks to find the particular historical setting or perhaps, if developed over time, one or more historical settings. A biblical writing may be said to have a history of its own, which includes its time and place of composition, the circumstances in which it was produced or written, its author or authors, how it came to be written, and the audience(s) to which it was addressed. Dating a composition is often crucial in determining the history of a text. References to events in the text itself sometimes aid this process. In addition, external resources such as archaeological evidence or non-biblical writings from the same period are utilized.

Literary criticism

Literary Criticism is primarily concerned with the Bible's literary forms, structures and themes. How does it function to accomplish its purpose? This involves identifying the type and use of the various literary genre such as narrative, poetic, apocalyptic, oratorical, wisdom, epistolary, etc. It includes evaluating the language of a text, looking at the words and their various meanings or shades of meaning and the patterns of meaning ranging from phrases to sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and sections. To analyze these, it is often necessary to examine the grammar of the original language, which includes the arrangement of words and how their forms are changed (inflection or accident).

Source criticism

One aspect of *historical criticism*, Source criticism is particularly concerned with identifying potential sources and precursors of the text we have now. An example of the use of source criticism is the famous Pentateuch division between source J and E. They are supposedly distinguishable by the use of the terms Yahweh and Elohim. Two additional sources were later proposed as P for priestly, and D for Deuteronomic. Hence the [JEDP theory](#) of authorship advocated by German scholar, Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).

Form criticism

Form Criticism, a hybrid of *historical* and *literary criticism*, is concerned with what oral precursors (stories, legends, myths, etc.) are discernable behind the text. What was its life-setting and genre? It begins with the recognition that a portion of a text may have a history of its own, independent of the larger work in which it is located. Reconstructing this process of development is known as tradition history. This is possible because in some instances the same biblical text occurs in different parts of the Bible in different forms. For example, Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), *The Psalms, a Form-Critical Introduction*. See also, Sigmund Mowinkel (1884-1965), *Prophecy and Tradition* (Oslo, 1946).

Tradition criticism

Tradition Criticism, often seen as part of *Source criticism*, seeks to postulate the process by which religious tradition was passed down and changed through the time-history of the biblical writings.

Redaction criticism

Redaction Criticism is concerned with when and by what process (of collecting and editing) did a particular section or book of the Bible reach its final literary form. The redaction critic's task is to analyze the individual instances where the editor/author may have redacted an earlier text or tradition, assess the overall significance of such changes, and interpret these in the light of the editor's literary and theological purpose.

Originally, redaction criticism was restricted to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), but it has been applied to other areas of Scripture. Norman Perrin states, "The prime requisite for redaction criticism is the ability to trace the form and content of material used by the author

concerned or in some way to determine the nature and extent of his activity in collecting and creating, as well as in arranging, editing, and composing." ^[5]

Textual criticism, or Lower criticism

Greek Manuscript Sometimes *textual criticism* is referred to as "lower criticism," as opposed to other fields of inquiry concerning the text, called "higher criticism." It is "lower" not because it is less important but because it is the discipline and study of the actual wording of Scripture, as opposed to the study of the sources and literary methods employed by the biblical authors.

The purpose of textual criticism is to establish the original wording or form of the biblical text as penned in the autographs, so far as this is possible. In dealing with ancient manuscripts, there is difficulty in determining what an author actually wrote for several reasons:

- The original autographs no longer exist, so extant (known, existing) copies must be used to make a determination.
- Various copies of surviving ancient manuscripts differ in their actual wording due to scribal errors that crept in through the process of copying and re-copying.
- Many manuscripts only contain incomplete sections of the original.
- Thousands of extant manuscripts (of varying textual content) dating from the 3rd century to the 16th century must be considered.
- Manuscript evidence suggests different textual traditions that developed geographically over time, which must also be factored into the process.

"It is the task of textual criticism to collect and study these various writings in which a text has been preserved, determine the changes that have occurred in the wording and arrangement of the text, assess the significance of such changes, and restore, if possible, the original wording or form of the text. If this is not possible, one must decide on the best or most reliable wording and try to account for the historical process through which the text has been changed. In every case, textual criticism seeks to establish a reliable text that can serve as the basis for serious study and reflection," (Achemier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*).

See main pages: [New Testament Textual Criticism](#) , [Inerrancy](#) , [Historicity of the Old Testament](#) , [Historicity of the New Testament](#)

Statistical criticism

There are different approaches to statistical criticism as discussed by Bruce Metzger in *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 163-169. One of the more interesting approaches was developed by Vinton A. Dearing, *A Manual of Textual Analysis* (Berkeley, 1959). Dearing basically combined two other statistical approaches (the principle of mediators , and calculus) to create his method. The principle of mediators developed by Quentin takes three texts and makes one out of the three the mediator. The other two texts will not have a common deviation against the median text. The problem with this method is that it only works well when dealing with a small number of texts since it works in groups of threes'. The calculus method developed by

Greg reveals possible relationships within given texts through his algorithm. The principle of simplicity also comes in when weighing the assumptions to be applied if more than one interpretation is possible.