

THE LEGITIMATE LIMITS OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

MERRILL C. TENNEY

Wheaton College Graduate School

Biblical criticism is a comparatively recent development in the history of the Christian church. Except for the sporadic attacks of its enemies, like that of Celsus in the second century, the authenticity and integrity of the Biblical books were largely taken for granted. Occasional observations like Martin Luther's on James, that it was "a right strawy epistle," represented casual opinion rather than studied research. From the Council of Nicaea (325) to the end of the Reformation movements (1775) the church as a whole was more interested in discussing theology than it was in the historical and textual background of the Scriptures.

Beginning with the rise of rationalism in the seventeenth century under Spinoza and later with the Encyclopedists of the French Revolution, Christian scholars were confronted with the problems of the historical origins and validity of the Biblical records. If, as their opponents contended, much of its content was a mass of legend, written at a time later than the traditional dates demanded, and composed by men who possessed no first-hand knowledge of the facts, the genuineness and authority of the Bible would be seriously impaired. How could a jumbled miscellany of legends, shaped by the limited knowledge and concepts of an unenlightened or bigoted era, convey any imperative message that modern scientific thinkers would accept?

In attempting to meet this attack the present science of Biblical criticism was developed. The connotation of the term "criticism" is unfortunate, for it implies a negative attitude. Biblical criticism is not necessarily an attack on the Scriptures, but is an examination of their historical and literary relation to the times and events concerning which they were written. This study is not in itself destructive; it can confirm and illumine the Biblical text just as well as it can cast doubt upon it or devalue it. Insofar as historical and literary evidence can be used to find out exactly what the Bible means and to remove difficulties in understanding it, the study is beneficial.

In understanding the procedure of Biblical criticism, however, what limits should be set for it? Is not any questioning of the Bible a piece of impertinence? If the Scriptures are the Word of God, as most evangelicals believe, are they not above criticism? Would not any challenge to their truthfulness or integrity be blasphemous impudence?

Since the Bible was written by human beings who lived at definite times in definite places, it must be related to the circumstances and places in which it was produced. The historical events of which it speaks or from which it springs, the personalities who wrote it or whose deeds it chronicles, and the ideas that it contains are all a part of a setting to which other records and literature belong. A comparison between the facts and concepts in the Bible and those in contemporary literature may be a valuable means of interpreting its meaning for modern readers.

If the Bible is the revelation of God to men, it must be superior to any ordinary book. Not only must its teachings be reliable, but the historical framework in which they are contained must also be accurately formulated. It is true that psychological truth can be conveyed by historical fiction, as many novels demonstrate, but the Bible does not purport to be fiction. The events which it narrates are recounted as actual happenings, its characters are treated as actual men and women; and its ideas are set forth as the Word of God to men. If we take the Bible at face value, it demands not only attention but also obedience.

Where, then, shall Biblical criticism begin, and where shall it stop? Can we commence the process of historical and literary evaluation, only to halt at a fixed point, because to go beyond it would be sacrilege? Can we curtail our investigations without placing an unwarranted curb on honest scholarship?

In order to determine the proper sphere of Biblical criticism, the following limitations are suggested:

1. *The Limitation of Inspired Character.*

One should begin by recognizing the unique character of the Bible. Its dynamic is different from that of any other piece of writing that has survived from antiquity. The reality of this dynamic is amply attested by its effect on history. Throughout the period in which the Scriptures have been known and circulated, they have produced a moral impact upon men that cannot be duplicated by any other literature. The reading of the Law by Josiah moved the king to repentance and reform (II Kings 22:10-13; 23:1-25); the public translation by Ezra stimulated a sweeping change in the conduct of the people (Nehemiah 8:1-6; 9:1-3); and in more recent times the Bible, wherever it has gone, has proved to be a potent force in producing righteousness. Not all of its characters were moral, and not all of its history can serve as a model for present behaviour, but the standards by which it measures both those characters and that history are far above those of contemporaneous religious belief. Neither Homer, nor Plato, nor any other writer or philosopher has had the influence for moral change, nor has given such a lofty concept of God as has the Bible.

Any criticism that seeks to explain the Bible must take this fact into account. To treat the Bible simply as the Hebrew-Christian contribution to the literary achievements of the race, neither better nor worse than the other surviving documents of antiquity, is to undervalue it and to ignore the most striking characteristic of the book. A criticism that does not allow for this dynamic and that does not recognize its existence will draw partial, if not faulty conclusions. Such criticism will tell as much about the Bible as dissection of a corpse will tell about the living man. It fails to recognize its living quality.

2. *The Limitation of Evidence*

To conclude that the Bible is incorrect in its statements because it does not accord with the information that we possess overlooks the fact that not all the necessary evidence may be available. The narratives of the Bible do not pretend to give a complete account of all the events that take place, nor even to deal exhaustively with the phenomena that concern them most. Historical records of past ages have largely perished because of the wars, vandalism and neglect that they have suffered. Many statements of the Scriptures cannot be corroborated because they have hitherto remained the sole witness to the facts of which they speak, but they must not consequently be regarded with suspicion. As new discoveries enlarge the knowledge of the ancient world, they tend to confirm rather than to contradict the Bible. All interpretative hypotheses that are formed from known facts should be regarded as tentative until sufficient evidence is available to afford concrete confirmation.

3. *The Limitation of Personal Understanding*

Sometimes the critic rather than the evidence may be at fault. He may not have seen the evidence in its proper light, and so have drawn hasty or false conclusions. Biblical language can be misunderstood because it is not in the idiom of our own times. Numerous small misinterpretations of the New Testament have been cleared by the discovery of papyri which have not changed the readings of the manu-

scripts, but which have shown that a well-known word had been wrongly translated. Any previous critical judgment on the text, however learned, would have been erroneous because of imperfect understanding on the part of the critic.

The critical student of the Scriptures should learn to discount his own prejudices when dealing with evidence. Complete objectivity is probably impossible, for even unconsciously human beings think in molds; but if the theologians of the past have failed to interpret the Scriptures correctly because of an "unscientific" bias, it is equally true that many critics of the present fail even more lamentably because of an antisupernaturalistic bias. In cases where positive evidence is lacking, suspended judgment is imperative; and the benefit of the doubt should be given to the Bible's claims for itself.

4. *The Limitation of Purpose*

In forming any conclusion concerning the historicity and truthfulness of the Scriptures, we should always keep in mind the purpose for which they were written. The writers of the Bible did not include more than their purpose of writing demanded, nor did they explain contemporary phenomena for the benefit of scholars in the twentieth century. To charge them with omission or obscurity is to presuppose an obligation that they would not have recognized. Their readers or hearers would have understood easily allusions that are obscure to us, and would have been able to fill in gaps by commonplace knowledge that is not now available.

Furthermore, one should assume that these writers were normally truthful. Apart from any question of inspiration, the authors of the Old and New Testaments were not impelled by a perverted ambition to victimize a gullible public. They were not making a point of producing religious fiction. Most of them were prophets and preachers who jeopardized their lives to proclaim what these manuscripts contain. They would not have wasted their efforts in trivia, nor would they have propagated untruth. Falsehood is not unknown in religious literature, but there is no reason for beginning Biblical research with the assumption that the subject of study is untrustworthy.

5. *The Limitation of Positive Contribution*

The unfortunate connotation of Biblical Criticism which has brought it into disrepute is that it is characterized by destructive denial. Generally it has been accused of constantly attempting to find discrepancies in the Bible, and to discredit its truth. To enumerate apparent inconsistencies or disagreements in its text may be a part of the total procedure of investigation, but to conclude on a basis of insufficient evidence that these indicate unreliability is quite another thing. The aim of a healthy criticism should be to seek a fuller understanding and confirmation of the purpose of sincere writers and to clarify their obscurities, rather than to make these obscurities a reason for rejecting their testimony.

These limitations do not circumscribe the scholar in his investigative work. He has the utmost liberty to search for evidence, to classify and to interpret it, to view the Bible in its light, and to formulate hypotheses of interpretation that may prove helpful. They do mean that he cannot honestly entertain a hostile bias to the Scriptures and at the same time do them justice, nor should he treat an hypothesis as fact when it has not sufficient material evidence to support it. He should be sure of his premises before he asserts emphatically the finality of his conclusion.

As an illustration of the application of these limitations one may cite the work of E. R. Thiele on *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*. For years the chronologies of the kings of Israel and Judah had defied reconciliation, and many

scholars had concluded either that the Biblical text was corrupt, or that it was historically untrustworthy. Thiele, operating on the principle that the record was truthful, though obscure, showed quite satisfactorily that it involved two methods of reckoning that changed without notice in the text. While he did not solve all the problems of chronology immediately, his simple explanation reconciled the conflicting figures and confirmed the existing account. Accepting the presupposition of essential truthfulness led to fuller investigation and to sounder conclusions.

The recognition of these limitations is not a plea for obscurantism, but for more persistent research. Where the Bible seemingly disagrees with history, we need to probe deeper into the available evidence and to be ready to rearrange our thinking, if necessary. Hypotheses may come and go; understanding may be imperfect; but truth is eternal, and is available to those who will pay the price for it.

The Bible and Non-Inspired Sources (cont. from p. 81)

study of genealogies kept them from the truth of the gospel. Accordingly, that same apostle who teaches us that "all Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" also warns us against the perils of inordinate speculation, admonishing us in Titus 3:9 to "shun foolish questionings, and genealogies . . . for they are unprofitable and vain."

Today's Critics (cont. from p. 88)

and ultimately combined into the Pentateuch about 400 B.C. (cf. also Gottwald, pp. 16 ff.).

The position that a critic takes regarding the Scriptures is basic. Either he regards them as reliable, authoritative and a trustworthy basis for his treatment of the biblical period or he rejects it as trustworthy.

Once the critic has decided this basic question he should consider the Bible as literature, evaluate it in its cultural tradition and as a record of a religious encounter. Interpretations throughout, of course, will be directly effected by his basic presupposition.

The tools of the critics fundamentally are the same: the text in the original language, grammar, dictionaries, archaeology, history, geography, and other studies that shed light on the Scriptures. Methodology likewise is similar and varies only as it is determined by the basic presupposition of the critic. His attitude toward the validity of Scripture is paramount.
