



ST ANDREWS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Kerang

A study of the Bible as God's revelation to man

THE WORD: TEXTUAL CRITICISM VERSUS HIGHER CRITICISM¹

CAN WE CRITICISE THE TEXT OF THE BIBLE?

There has been much confusion and controversy over the matter of “higher” and “lower” criticism of the Bible.

“Criticism” in its grammatical sense means merely the exercise of judgment. When criticism is applied to the Bible, it is used in the sense of exercising judgment about the Bible itself. This can be very helpful for a Christian, as long as it does not go contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

There are two basic kinds of criticism and two basic attitudes about each kind.

TWO MAJOR DISTINCTIONS

Higher criticism

When scholarly judgment is applied to the *genuineness* of the biblical text, it is classified as “higher” or “historical” criticism. This judgment is applied to the *date* of the text, its *literary* style and *structure*, its *literary form*, its *historicity*, its *sources*, and its *authorship*. This approach developed into what is labelled as higher criticism. Generally the outcome of higher critical approaches to the Old Testament by the heirs of the “destructive theology” of the late-eighteenth century has been a kind of “destructive criticism” of the Bible.

It is based on an unjustified anti-supernatural bias which is superimposed on the biblical documents.

A higher critic of the Bible may say that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, nor Daniel the whole book of Daniel, nor did any miracles recorded in the Bible actually occur, because miracles are scientifically and rationally impossible.

Some say that Isaiah did not write the whole book of Isaiah, since that would involve supernatural predictions (including some about king Cyrus by name) over a hundred years in advance. Likewise, negative critics concluded Daniel could not have been written until c. 165 b.c., which would place it after the detailed descriptions of world governments and rulers down to Antiochus IV Ephiphanes (d. 163 B.C.). Here too they assumed Daniel could not be giving supernatural predictions of coming events.

It either neglects or minimizes the role of the apostles and eyewitnesses who recorded the events.

Of the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and John were definitely eyewitnesses of the events they report. Luke was a contemporary and careful historian (Luke 1:1-4). Indeed, every book of the New Testament was written by a contemporary or eyewitness of Christ. Even such critics as the “Death-of-

¹ This study is based on the work of Geisler, N. L., & Nix, W. E. (1996, c1986). *A general introduction to the Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press.

God” theologian, bishop John A.T. Robinson, admit that the gospels were written between A.D. 40 and 65, during the life of eyewitnesses.

But if the basic New Testament documents were composed by eyewitnesses, then much of destructive criticism fails, for it assumes a much later date in order for the alleged “myths” and distortions to occur, because according to them that it takes at least two generations for a myth to develop, hence the late dating of the books of the New Testament.

It assumes wrongly that the New Testament writers did not distinguish between their own words and those of Jesus.

That a clear distinction was made between Jesus’ own words and those of the Gospel writers is evident from the ease by which a “red letter” edition of the New Testament can be made.

READ 1 COR. 7:10, 12, 25. What do we find here? How do we understand these words of the apostle?

.....

READ REVELATION 1:8, 11. Can you see the distinction between the words of John and the direct words of Jesus?

.....

In view of this the New Testament critic is unjustified in assuming that the gospel record is not actually reporting what Jesus said and did.

It incorrectly assumes that the New Testament stories are like folklore and myth.

In actuality there is a vast difference between the simple New Testament account of miracles and the embellished myths of the second and third centuries A.D. In point of fact, the New Testament writers explicitly disavow myths.

READ 2 PETER 1:16. What is the apostle warning against? Is it not then wrong to say that the authors of the books of the New Testament were only writing their own fables?

.....

Paul also warned against belief in myths on several occasions (1Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14).

READ 2PETER 1:19-21. In the light of what is said here, what is your answer to the “higher critic”?

.....

It undermines the integrity of the New Testament writers by claiming that Jesus never really said (or did) what they claim he said (or did).

Even some confessed evangelical critics have gone so far as to claim that “‘Jesus said’ or ‘Jesus did’ need not always mean that in history Jesus said or did what follows, but sometimes may mean that in the account at least partly constructed by Matthew himself Jesus said or did what follows.”²⁸ But this clearly undermines confidence in the Gospel records, and in the truthfulness of the events recorded in them.

On this critical view the Gospel writers become *creators* of the events, not *recorders*. Indeed, one writer claimed that Matthew created the Magi story (Matt. 2) out of the turtledove story (of Luke 2). For according to Robert Gundry, Matthew “changes the sacrificial slaying of ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,’ which took place at the presentation of the baby Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:24; cf. Lev. 12:6-8), into Herod’s slaughtering the babies in Bethlehem (6:2-6)!”

It neglects the role of the Holy Spirit in activating the memories of the eyewitnesses.

Much of the rejection of the gospel record is based on the assumption that the writers could not be expected to remember sayings, details, and events 20–40 years after the events. For Jesus died in A.D. 33, and the first gospel records probably come from between about A.D.50–60.³¹

But here again the critic is rejecting or neglecting the clear statement of Scripture. For Jesus promised his disciples that “the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.” (John 14:26).

So even on the unlikely assumption that no one recorded anything Jesus said during His lifetime or immediately after, the critics would have us believe that eyewitnesses whose memories were later supernaturally activated by the Holy Spirit did not accurately record what Jesus did and said. It seems far more likely that the first-century eyewitnesses were right and the twentieth-century critics are wrong, than the reverse.

Textual criticism

When scholarly judgment is applied to the *authenticity* of the biblical text, it is classified as “lower” or “textual” criticism. Lower criticism is concerned with the *form* or *text* of the Bible and attempts to *restore* the readings of the *original text, the autograph*. Not to be confused with higher criticism, which studies the *value* of a document, lower critics study the *form* of the words and *structure* of a document.

The positive of **textual** criticism: textual criticism is based on the *assumption that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, textual critics are interested in obtaining the original textual reading by applying certain criteria or standards of quality.*

Textual criticism is concerned with recovering the original text of a literary document. By it, scholars attempt to seek and eliminate errors by using plausible explanations for emendations that have crept into the text. Through the study of numerous manuscripts, principles of textual criticism have been formulated that are applied to many different sorts of literary works.

LET’S DISCUSS:

Is the criticism of the text of the Bible a good or bad thing?

.....

What is wrong about “higher criticism”?

.....

What is good about “lower” or “textual” criticism?

.....

	Textual Criticism	Higher Criticism
Basis	Supernaturalistic	Naturalistic
Rule	“Innocent till proven guilty”	“Guilty till proven innocent”
Result	Bible is wholly true	Bible is only partially true
Final Authority	Word of God	Mind of man
Role of reason	Man discovers truth (Rationally)	Man determines truth (Rationalism)