

Gardner-Webb University

British-American Development of
Historical-Critical Based Methods of
NT Interpretation from 1800 to 1918

A Paper Submitted To

Dr. Lorin Cranford

In Partial Fulfillment Of The Requirements For

Religion 492

By

Matthew Pennington

Boiling Springs, North Carolina

March, 1, 2004

Introduction¹

In the 19th Century, as the historical-critical approach to New Testament interpretation took hold of biblical scholars, its impact was felt throughout the realm of New Testament academia. Most of the enthusiasm that embraced this new way of critically studying the Scriptures was found on the main continent of Europe, more specifically Germany. Many of the universities and schools sought to use these methods and even create new methodologies of critically studying the New Testament with a vast array of perspectives by many individuals. However, one nation found itself isolated from the new interpretive methods that were being introduced to the rest of the scholarly world.

That nation was Great Britain, who a lot of times has found itself disconnected from the rest of Europe historically, again found itself disconnected from the rest of Europe in the academic area of New Testament studies. Along with Britain, its English-speaking counterpart, the United States, also found itself outside of the German loop of new critical methodologies of the New Testament. Nevertheless, when British scholars were introduced to the new historical-critical methods of biblical scholarship, many of them rejected its methods as they saw it as a threat to the foundation of faith for all Christians. The British felt that there needed to be somewhat of a balance between faith and criticism as the German breakthroughs in modern criticism threatened the very essence of Christian faith for many of the British scholars. These fears and concerns hindered the British development of biblical criticism as it found itself putting a very conservative spin on the critical approaches made by the more liberal Germans. It would take a lot of time for Britain to allow these new methods to enter into their academic world, and even longer for the United States to employ these methods into their own interpretive systems later on.



¹Substantial editing has been done to the format of the paper in order to bring it more closely in line with the Turabian Style Guide requirements. Dr. Cranford

British-American Development of Historical-Critical Based Methods of NT Interpretation from 1800 to 1918

In Britain, the Anglican church held to many of its traditions of accepting the Bible as authoritative and infallible, and to be interpreted literally. When the historical-critical method emerged, the conservative views of the Anglican church along with British scholars were hesitant to allow it to enter into their British schools. In fact, with the majority of the work being done with these new methods originating from Germany, many of the British scholars were not proficient enough in German to even translate the new work being done there in Germany.² Britain, along with the United States, usually distanced itself from the seemingly outlandish German methods that challenged every tradition that faith had affirmed as true. The German world is heavily immersed with new ways of thinking and philosophies and theories, but the English-speaking world was more resistant of these as they are perceived as man-made.³ One Briton who may not have been a noted theologian and rejected the Scriptures as divinely inspired or authoritative, but still influenced British interpretive criticism was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As a significant Romantic poet, Coleridge was fascinated with the German language as well as classical philosophy. Coleridge spent much time in Germany and attended various lectures at German universities to expand his way of thinking away from his conservative British way. Coleridge proved to be influential in philosophical and theological thinking through the early to middle part of the 19th Century, and somewhat challenged the British mind to broaden its approaches to the Bible as a literary work.⁴ In one of Coleridge's *Philosophical Lectures*, he chal-

²Stephen Neill & Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 3.

³Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1996), 324.

⁴Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, 3.

lenged the scholastic methods of the British, in studying the original languages of Greek and Hebrew and its overall effect on the Christian faith.

Some scholars see this as the first challenge to Britain's biblical conservatism, however some scholars argue that Britain may have been forced to question its views earlier. During the rise and prominence of the Deist movement in the previous two centuries that affirmed in a divine being that reveals himself through nature not by the Scriptures, which challenged the Anglican church to respond and claim its traditional beliefs about the Bible.⁵ To make a direct impact on the British Christian community to challenge its conservative views, it would take a noted Christian scholar to do so. The first Briton to do this was Herbert Marsh who was a Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. Marsh, who primarily taught in the early 19th Century, doubted the complete inerrancy of the Scriptures in approaching them in a critical way but yet still remained a devout Christian.⁶ Some of the other challenges Marsh made were concerning the Synoptic Gospels and the idea that there was a source material used by the authors to write their accounts, and lectured to his classes in English rather than in Latin.⁷ Here at Cambridge, the German biblical criticisms were influencing one of Britain's most prestigious religious schools.

Up until the middle part of the 19th Century, modern biblical criticism slowly crept into British scholasticism even with the help of Marsh and others. Even with those few who welcomed the German views of interpretation to counteract the traditional conceptions, the majority wanted to either appropriate the new views within the older traditions or were rejected completely and seen as an assault on the Christian faith.⁸ However, many representatives of the Anglican church began to call for Britain to reexamine their studies of the Bible and to take these new methods more seriously. In 1860, a group of seven Anglican ministers wrote a series of writings titled *Essays and Reviews*, which called for an open discussion of the Bible that would

⁵Henning Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 11.

⁶Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, 5.

⁷Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 341.

⁸Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith & Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 62.

not let traditionalism hinder the true, professional study of the Scriptures.⁹ This signaled the readiness of the people to seek out how to balance their faith along with new critical approaches to interpreting the Bible. The British scholarly world would be pushed to accept a part of these new types of criticism in a way that would later prove to be very successful and groundbreaking on the world scene. British scholars would become experts in Textual Criticism, also known as “Lower Criticism,” which is a method that determines the original state of the biblical text and its content by use of available manuscript evidence.¹⁰ The deeper, more troublesome questioning for the British dealing with authorship, cultural, and historical accuracy aspects were not delved into as much, as it was left up to Germany to continue to do its work there. The conservative aspects of the British forced critics to focus on minute textual study, aided by the vast range of texts and manuscripts to sift through and analyze.¹¹

There were many scholars who used these Textual Critical methods to deliver a New Testament as close to the original as manuscripts would allow them to be. Three notable scholars from Cambridge, A. J. Hort, B. F. Westcott, and J. B. Lightfoot, worked diligently to prepare a critical edition of the New Testament to counteract the known flaws of the King James Version, but yet their work proved to be conservative overall. However, these three scholars rejected the teaching of “realism” taking place in Germany, more specifically the School of Tubingen, and they responded to their systems of teachings as well. These three scholars were able to undermine the skepticism of the British conservatives by promoting the use of scholarship in approaching the text of the Scriptures in a critical way.¹² Even with their textual critical approach, they were able to establish conservative conclusions about Scripture that would sit well with the overall Anglican church position. Many British scholars began using this textual criticism in their professions to expand the study of the Scriptures. One example of British textual criticism can be found in a commentary of Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon written by Charles

⁹Robert Morgan, *Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 57.

¹⁰Jack B. Rogers, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 278.

¹¹Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 325.

¹²Noll, *Between Faith & Criticism*, 68.

Westcott, a professor of theology at King's College.¹³ In this commentary, Westcott uses the latest and best Greek manuscripts that could be found at the time and critically analyzed the original Greek text word for word engaging the Scriptures both on a textual and literary critical level. Even with the evidence that Britain was beginning to catch up with the rest of the European world in biblical criticism, even at a conservative pace, there were still opposition of the strict conservatives that opposed the new modern criticism techniques. Going into the late 19th Century, the Anglican church was beginning to accept new, but moderate, critical methods of interpreting the Scriptures. Many of the evangelicals outside of the Anglican church, however, were firmly opposed to these new methods of criticism. The most well-known opponent of modern criticism was the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon. The Baptist Union in Britain was beginning to experiment with modern criticism, but Spurgeon attacked those who did saying it would bring about spiritual devastation to British Christians in departing from the traditional faith and views of Scripture.¹⁴ However, Spurgeon did not respond to the challenge to answer these new critical claims with his own scholarly approach, but rather just attacked the methods themselves. Other opponents did take the challenge to provide scholarly answers to modern criticism such as Alfred Cave who made the effort to give some scholarly responses. Though Cave was heavily influenced by traditional views and did not have a profound understanding of the historical critical methods, but yet did attempt to at least recognize the new critical methods coming into Britain unlike Spurgeon.¹⁵ As modern criticism was beginning to take a hold of Britain, it would not be long for it to cross the Atlantic Ocean to reach its English-speaking counterpart, the United States. Also caught up in conservatism, the American approach, much like Britain, too would slowly allow these new critical methods to enter across its shores.

The United States was as hesitant to use these new critical methods in their understanding and study of the New Testament. However, the country had just come out of a period known as the 2nd Great Awakening, led by Charles Finney and Dwight L. Moody, who promoted Christianity as a more experience-based faith from within an individual's spirit. This particular time

¹³Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 345.

¹⁴Noll, *Between Faith & Criticism*, 75.

¹⁵Ibid.

was filled with revivalism characterized by high numbers of emotional conversions of Americans into the Christian faith. Also, new theological questions were being raised as Reformed, or Calvinistic, theology had been the mainstay of the major American Christian groups. However, the 2nd Great Awakening eroded much of the previous Reformed thinking and traditional doctrines were being questioned. This was one of the important factors leading up to the entrance and later the eventual acceptance of modern critical methods into the United States. The United States was isolated for much of the 19th Century from Europe diplomatically, so it took a while for the new critical methodologies of the New Testament to cross the Atlantic. This was somewhat hindered by the reluctance of the British to receive these new methods, which shortly thereafter introduced the United States to these new critical methods in the last third of the 19th Century. Similar to Britain, America had to get over its own concerns with to hold onto traditional orthodoxy to begin to use modern critical methods.

Before the influence of modern criticism, American Christians held firmly the belief that the Bible contained the infallible divinely inspired words of God.¹⁶ Every word interpreted in the Bible, according to the American view, was truth and everything was to be taken as literal fact. Coming in to the end of the 19th Century, many Christians in America knew that the Bible was the true Word of God, but how it became that were the questions being raised. Much like Britain, American scholars wanted to prove the infallibility of the Bible, but do so in a scholarly and textual critical way. Like the Unitarian, Coleridge of Britain, who challenged the British scholars to look at philosophical influences as well as German ideas into biblical criticism, so did America have those challengers who were far removed from the traditional Christian groups predominantly in New England.

One of those challengers was Theodore Parker who was a philosopher, specifically a transcendentalist, who questioned the complete authority of the Bible in the early 19th Century. Parker had many radical claims that shocked many of the conservative Christians in America such as Scripture originating from man not God, and took a German approach to Old Testament stories being based on mythology not historical fact.¹⁷ This produced more mainstream Ameri-

¹⁶Ibid., 11.

¹⁷Ibid., 14.

can Christian scholars to respond to the challenge in a scholarly way early in the 1800s. Some of these included Andrew Norton, a professor from Harvard, who became more familiar with the European views of biblical criticism in order to introduce these new biblical critical methods into Harvard Divinity School, one of America's prestigious institutions.¹⁸ Another noted scholar, Moses Stuart, was a seminary professor who used modern criticism from Europe to discern more the message of the Bible more effectively, which still had its roots from special revelation.¹⁹ Although these scholars were not very successful in promoting the newly learned methodologies throughout America, it was a spark that ignited the curiosity of other American scholars, which would just overflow in the last part of the 19th Century.

It would take the gradual acceptance of modern criticism in Britain, for America to really catch onto modern criticism in the late 18th Century. The new knowledge gained in America from the British influence of critical methods along with frequent discoveries of manuscripts and documents from biblical times during this time period influenced greatly the American response to modern criticism. The area of academic life and universities were becoming more professional in the issue of critical Bible scholarship in the United States shown by the founding of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1880.²⁰ This was a signal of the movement of America to embrace new methods of biblical criticism. Germanic models of biblical interpretation were being used at John Hopkins University and Harvard was becoming a serious research university of textual criticism. Many new scholars emerged to take these new methods and implement them in their respective universities. One significant scholar who contributed significantly to the American scholarly approach to "lower criticism" was Charles Hodge, one of the founders of Princeton Seminary. Hodge, along with other conservative American biblical scholars, saw the usefulness of modern criticism, but yet wanted to balance it with traditional faith. Hodge was a very influential theological teacher and is well-known for writing his *Systematic Theology*, which showed his particular stance on Scripture. In his section on the Word of God, Hodge claims that the

¹⁸Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 342.

¹⁹Noll, *Between Faith & Criticism*, 14.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Scriptures are divinely inspired and infallible through divine intervention.²¹ With that in mind, his views would be conservative but yet would have a balance of criticism similar to what was happening in British scholarly circles. Hodge considered textual criticism as an acceptable means in understanding the Scriptures better, and even traveled to Europe to learn more of these critical methods. However, the German models that were considered “higher criticism,” as discussed earlier was a viable threat to the Christian faith according to Hodge. His feelings on this matter were influential on Princeton University as it contained many articles in the *Princeton Review* which opposed these emerging “higher criticisms.”²² This opposition was backed by Hodge’s claims that “higher criticism” that was present in Germany was supported by rationalist, philosophical presuppositions, not on the concrete study of the text itself.²³ The American conservative textual criticism approach was identical to the British approach, and also did not produce entire new methodologies but rather reused the German critical models to fit into its conservative views.

The conservative approach to the modern criticisms in America did not just exist in Evangelical circles, but in the American Catholic tradition as well. In 1893, Leo XIII issued the *Pvidentissimus Deus*, which was an official Church stance on biblical studies as a reaction to the “rationalists” who denied inspiration of the Bible and followed the liberal German scholarly views.²⁴ Even with this opposition against the “higher criticisms,” the Catholic Church did encourage the studies of original biblical languages along with verifying the text of the Scriptures through “lower criticism.” This significant statement reestablished the conservative views of inspiration and infallibility, but did encourage scholarly efforts in textual criticism. The American Jesuits, who placed an importance on education, also supported the pope in attacking the liberal views of those who used “higher criticism,” but advocated their monasteries to learn more of the

²¹Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 154.

²²Rogers, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 279.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Gerald Fogarty, *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 44.

Greek and Hebrew to fill in any ambiguity the Latin Vulgate may provide for.²⁵ This issue of biblical criticism was a factor in all realms of Christian life in America, both Evangelical and Catholic alike.

²⁵Ibid., 45.

Conclusion

By the end of the 19th Century, both Britain and America had been exposed fully to the modern biblical criticism. The battle waged on between those scholars who were against the acceptance of these new methods, those who wanted to moderate the new methods, and those who wanted to follow the German systems of “higher criticism.” Through time though, many of the scholars did compromise and saw the importance of in-depth scholarly study of the Scriptures. The basis of the use of these methods of study was not to disprove the claims of the Bible or even the Christian faith, but yet to know more of what God has revealed to those that read the Bible. The efforts of textual criticism by both the British and Americans showed to be very successful in producing more technical and critical approaches to the history and culture of the New Testament writings. These British-American movements proved to be a major achievement in producing more critical editions of the Greek New Testament.²⁶ Even though the modern critical methods that threatened the British-American perspectives on Christian faith, it still challenged those scholars in their respective countries to examine the integrity of the Bible and if it is being done in a truly scholarly fashion. Today, these scholars who stepped out of their conservative box to look like biblical rebels in a sense can be seen as pioneers who made it a profession to study the Scriptures in a scholarly, critical way here in America and across the Atlantic in Great Britain. This is still a controversial issue, as to how Christians are to balance their faith in God with their own ability to use reason to critically interpret the Bible. The answers are not always easy to give as the correct solution, but rather Christian scholars today seek God and excellence at the same time in their approach of studying God’s Word.

²⁶Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 325.



Bibliography

- Bray, Gerald. *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1996.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Philosophical Lectures*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. London: Pilot, 1949.
- Fogarty, Gerald. *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.
- Morgan, Robert. *Biblical Interpretation*. New York: Oxford, 1988.
- Neill, Stephen & Tom Wright. *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*. New York: Oxford, 1988.
- Noll, Mark A. *Between Faith & Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.
- Reventlow, Henning. *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- Rogers, Jack B. *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.