

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

EARLY GERMAN USE OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF

NEW TESTAMENT SEMINAR

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March 15, 2004

Introduction¹

According to Daniel L. Migliore, "Christians do not believe in the Bible; they believe in the living God attested by the Bible."² While this statement concerning Christians is correct, a bottom line truth is that the Christian's belief in the God of the Bible is deeply shaped or influenced by what the Bible says about God, and the means by which the Christian understands what the Bible says strongly depends on the method of Bible study or biblical interpretation he/she is using to investigate the biblical text.

For many decades, scholars, theologians and ordinary Christians from all backgrounds and locations have adopted diverse methods of biblical interpretation, and the historical critical method of biblical interpretation is one of them. This research will focus on the early German use of the historical-critical method of New Testament interpretation prior to the 1800s. In order to accomplish its focus, this research will discuss the meaning of the historical-critical method, issues surrounding it, key contributors to the historical-critical method of New Testament interpretation, and analogously apply the historical-critical methodology to a selected New Testament text.



¹Some editing of the document has been done in to bring the format of the paper closer to the Turabian guidelines. Dr. Cranford

²Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 1991), 46.

Early German Use of the Historical-Critical Method of New Testament Interpretation Before 1800

Historical criticism or the historical critical method is a method of biblical interpretation “which gives primary importance to the historical context in which the texts were originally composed and subsequently redacted, developed and supplemented.”³ The historical-critical method asserts the belief that a proper understanding of a text can only be acquired in the original context of the text.⁴ The period of changes that occurred in the European world during the Enlightenment served as a launching pad for the rise of the historical-critical method, which in itself endured condemnation from the church and state.⁵ A revival of intellectualism in 1700s’ Europe gave birth to the Enlightenment.⁶

The Enlightenment had a chilling effect upon the spiritual movements of the society and the church as well.⁷ Prominent Enlightenment thinkers were hostile to traditional Christianity and the over all rule of the church that prevented people from thinking for themselves.⁸ Though

³ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past & Present* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 221.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Harold S. Martin, “Online Theological Article”; available from www.brfwitness.org/articlrs.htm; retrieved 13 March 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

these thinkers did not abandon religion, they accepted as reality only that which appealed to human reason or could be proven by human reason.⁹ As the ideas that under girded the Enlightenment penetrated all of life, scientific explanations began to replace religious explanations.¹⁰

It is in this scientific environment that the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation was birthed. Since its birth, the historical-critical method has been hated by some as the Bible's most deadly enemy because of the interpretive scrutiny, through reason and science that the historical-critical method uses to interpret the biblical text. On the other hand, however, some theologians, scholars and ordinary Bible students have come to regard the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation as one of the best, most effective methods of Bible study for both comprehension and interpretation. The humanists of the Renaissance did not find it difficult to accept this view.¹¹

The emergence of the historical-critical method raised suspicion that things were what they really seem, especially in the Old Testament.¹² This suspicion produced strong interest from biblical scholar into focusing on details of the biblical text's authorship, the time of its composition, the geographical location of its composition, and many other historical details.¹³

The historical-critical method fought for two hundred years before it became a recognized method of biblical interpretation.¹⁴ Because the historical-critical method is a method of

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid, 222.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 223.

interpreting the Bible based on premises that tend to accord with human reason, both the church and the state vigorously combated it.¹⁵ Some of the primary assumptions held by most scholars who use the historical-critical approach to Bible interpretation are these:

- 1) The books of the Bible may not have been written by the persons to whom tradition (or the Bible text itself) assigns them.¹⁶
- 2) Certain passages in the Bible could have been interpolated (altered or corrupted) by someone other than the author.¹⁷
- 3) Some statements ascribed to Jesus may be the writer's idea of what Jesus might have said, rather than a record of His actual literal words.¹⁸
- 4) A number of Scriptural statements are the result of cultural conditioning, rather than a definite word from God.¹⁹
- 5) The Bible is the result of an evolutionary process; early Christians used pre-scientific depictions of reality in formulating their beliefs, and so today one must use critical reason to decide what is reality in the Bible and what cannot be reality.²⁰

Through the use of these assumptions, the historical critic questions the authorship and dating of most of the biblical text leading to rejection of some beliefs held by traditional orthodox scholars.²¹ However, over the passage of time, historical criticism spread and became the norm of biblical interpretation in mid 1700s. As British skepticism spread all over Europe, it was

¹⁵ Harold S. Martin

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

well received and quickly circulated in Germany due to Germany's decentralized status.²² By this time, all educated Germans spoke French, and many of them had studied in England.²³ This created a perfect environment for British and French intellectual views to take hold in Germany. By 1734, the University of Gottingen, in Germany, was established and became a major center for biblical scholarship.²⁴ As the scope of religious beliefs and intellectual views widened with an increase in the number of German scholars, lots of universities began to be established.²⁵ This great increase in the number of German universities created a market of new ideas and great intellectual diversity that made Germany a dominating leader in the scholarly world.²⁶

This huge increase of intellectual diversity in Germany led to disputes over the right interpretation of Scripture or the best method of biblical interpretation, and these disputes were dividing the church.²⁷ In order to provide a solution to the theological chaos, some theologians adopted what is known as 'rational orthodoxy', which uses reason to resolve theological debates.²⁸ This theologically chaotic environment set the stage for theologians to science to investigate discrepancies in the Bible.²⁹ As critics of Christianity began to religious look in the Bible for so-called inaccuracies, biblical scholarship in Germany had to adopt a historically accurate,

²²Gerald Bray, 225.

²³Ibid, 227.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid, 228.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹Ibid.

yet critical method of biblical interpretation³⁰. In its rise to become the interpretive norm in academic Germany, many scholars and theologians influenced and contributed to the historical-critical method of biblical/NT interpretation. This research will now turn its spotlight on the various key German contributors to the development of the historical-critical method.

Johann Gottfried Eichhorn is known as the founder of modern Old Testament Criticism.³¹ Eichhorn was born as the son of a pastor on October 16, 1752 in a little village now lost in the kingdom of Wurtemberg.³² During the Easter of 1770, he went to Gottingen to attend the famous Georgia Augusta University.³³ While studying in Gottingen, Eichhorn was greatly influenced by the ‘spirit’ of classical literature and of historical research with a mixture of moderate orthodox theology.³⁴ Eichhorn had the opportunity to have J. D. Michaelis, a renown Biblical scholar, as his theology teacher, Walch, a great church historian, as his history teacher, and Heyne as his teacher of classical philology.³⁵

J. G. Eichhorn “was the first to make a systematic study of the Bible using the category of myth.”³⁶ He composed great introductions to the Old Testament and the New Testament.³⁷ He

³⁰Ibid.

³¹T. K. Cheyne, *Founders of Old Testament Criticism: Biographical, Descriptive, And Critical Studies* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 13.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid, 14.

³⁶Gerald Bray, 248.

³⁷Ibid.

was a versatile scholar who was very comfortable working in both the Old and New Testaments.³⁸ After receiving his doctorate from the university of Jena in theology and the studies of Oriental languages, he was appointed professor of Oriental languages at the university of Jena.³⁹ As a theologian/ Orientalist, he approached Old Testament studies with overwhelming capability to historically and critically analyze the text and its history.⁴⁰

Eichhorn's *Introduction To The Old Testament* was a phenomenal success that influenced the opinions of many in that time, and it was reproduced through four editions during his lifetime.⁴¹ According to J. P. Gabler, the father of Biblical theology who republished Eichhorn's early work *Die Urgeschichte*,⁴² the analysis of Genesis into two documents "can in our day be regarded as settled and presupposed, without fear of any important opposition."⁴³ In Eichhorn's study of the early history of the Pentateuch, he observed that it is made chiefly of two documents: Jehovistic and Elohist.⁴⁴ His investigations led him to the conclusion that most of the writings of the Hebrews have passed through several hands, and he took for granted that all the so-called supernatural facts relating to the Old and New Testaments were explicable on natural

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹T. K. Cheyne, 14.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid, 21.

⁴²A work that does a critical examination of the narratives in the early part of Genesis, which first appeared anonymously in Eichhorn's *Repertorium* (For Biblical and Oriental Literature) in 1779.

⁴³Cheyne, 22.

⁴⁴Ibid, 24.

principles.⁴⁵ Eichhorn sought to judge the Old Testament texts from the standpoint of the ancient world, and to account for them by the superstitious beliefs that were then generally in vogue.⁴⁶ He regarded many books of the Old Testament as spurious, questioned the genuineness of 2 Peter and Jude, denied the Pauline authorship of Timothy and Titus, and suggested that the canonical gospels were based upon various translations and editions of a primary Aramaic gospel.⁴⁷

August Hermann Francke, a disciple of Phillip Spener, was “one of the most important exponents of pietistic biblical interpretation.⁴⁸ Francke held the belief that the individual passages of the Bible should be read in the over all context of the whole Bible, and this context was found complete in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ He argued that *historico-grammatical exegesis* (an early term for the historical-critical method) was the key to a deeper understanding of the text, which will result into holy living.⁵⁰ August Hermann Francke studied theology, and in 1684 he was called to Leipzig as professor of the Hebrew language.⁵¹ In Leipzig, he influence the world of biblical scholars and students as well through his teachings on historical-criticism. He was a Protestant minister and philanthropist, who was greatly encouraged or discipled by

⁴⁵Online article accessed at www.1911encyclopedia.org/E/EI/EICHHORN_JOHANN_GOTTFRIED.htm retrieved on 16 March 2004.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Gerald Bray, 241-242.

⁴⁹Ibid, 242.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹www.1911encyclopedia.org

Philipp Jakob Spener.⁵² He helped to establish the *Collegium philobiblicum* for the systematic study of the Scriptures.⁵³ He became a leading exponent of Pietism, and he served as professor at the University of Halle and as pastor in a nearby town.⁵⁴ He established at Halle the Francke Institutes, which started with a paupers' school at his parsonage and grew rapidly.⁵⁵ By Francke's death, more than 2,200 children were being served, and the institutes exerted strong influence on the growth of Prussian education.⁵⁶

Johann Albrecht Bengel is known as the founder of modern NT textual criticism.⁵⁷ A Lutheran divine and scholar, Bengel was born at Winnenden in Wurttemberg, on the 24th of June 1687.⁵⁸ His father died in 1693, and a friend, who became a master in the gymnasium at Stuttgart, educated Bengel.⁵⁹ In 1703 Bengel left Stuttgart and entered the university of Tubingen, where, he devoted himself especially to the works of Aristotle and Spinoza, and in theology to those of Philipp Spener, Johann Arndt and August Franke.⁶⁰ After receiving his degree, Bengel devoted himself to the study of theology.⁶¹ During this time he had religious doubts be-

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Gerald Bray, 242.

⁵⁸www.1911encyclopedia.org/B/BE/BENGEL_JOHANN_ALBRECHT.htm

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

cause of the difficulty of ascertaining the true reading of certain passages in the Greek New Testament.⁶² In 1707 Bengel entered the ministry and was appointed to the parochial charge of Metzingen.⁶³ In the following year he was recalled to Tubingefi to undertake the office of Repe- tent or theological tutor.⁶⁴

The works on which Bengel's reputation rests as a Biblical scholar and critic are his edi- tion of the Greek New Testament, and his Gnomon or Exegetical Commentary on the his Greek New Testament.⁶⁵ His edition of the Greek New Testament was published at Tubingen in 1734, and at Stuttgart in the same year, but without the critical apparatus.⁶⁶ The text was followed by a critical apparatus, the first part of which consisted of an introduction to the criticism of the New Testament, in the thirty-fourth section of which he laid down and explained his celebrated canon, *Proclivi scriptioni praestat ardua* (The difficult reading is to be preferred to that which is easy), the soundness of this work, as a general principle, has been recognized by succeeding critics.⁶⁷ The second part of the critical apparatus was devoted to a consideration of the various readings, and here Bengel adopted the plan of stating the evidence both against and in favor of a particular reading, thus placing before the reader the materials for forming a judgment.⁶⁸ Besides doing his own compositions, Bengel was also the editor of many other works, classical, patristic, ecclesias-

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

tical and expository.⁶⁹ The more important are: *Ordo Temporum*, a treatise on the chronology of Scripture, in which he enters upon speculations regarding the end of the world, and an Exposition of the Apocalypse which enjoyed for a time great popularity in Germany, and was translated into several languages.⁷⁰ Bengel is definitely one of the greatest contributors to the early German use of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.

Johann August Ernesti, a Professor at Leipzig and author of *The Biblical Interpreter*, he concentrated on the New Testament to the exclusion of the Old Testament.⁷¹ He approached the Scriptural text from a purely historical and grammatical position ignoring the church's theological traditions.⁷² Ernesti, a German theologian and philologist, was born at Tennstadt in Thuringia, of which place his father was pastor.⁷³

At the age of sixteen he was sent to the celebrated Saxon cloister school of Pforta (*Schulpforta*).⁷⁴ At twenty he entered the university of Wittenberg, and studied afterwards at the university of Leipzig.⁷⁵ In the following year he accepted the office of conrector in the Thomas school of Leipzig, he was, in 1742, named professor extraordinarius of ancient literature in the

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Gerald Bray, 244.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Online article accessed at http://www.fact-index.com/j/jo/johann_august_ernesti.html retrieved 16 March 2004.

⁷⁵Ibid.

university of Leipzig, and in 1756 professor ordinarius of rhetoric.⁷⁶ In the same year he received the degree of doctor of, and in 1759 was appointed professor ordinarius in the faculty of theology.⁷⁷ Through his learning and his manner of discussion, he co-operated with SJ Baumgarten of Halle (1706-1757) in disengaging the current dogmatic theology from its many scholastic and mystical excrescences, and thus paved a way for a revolution in theology.⁷⁸

Ernesti greatly contributed to profane criticism in Germany or, more so, the early use of historical-critical method of NT interpretation.⁷⁹ It is chiefly in hermeneutics that Ernesti has any claim to eminence as a theologian.⁸⁰ In his *Institutio Interpretis N. T.* we find the principles of a general interpretation, formed without the assistance of any particular philosophy, but consisting of observations and rules which, though already enunciated, and applied in the criticism of the profane writers, had never rigorously been employed in biblical exegesis.⁸¹ He was, in fact, the founder of the grammatico-historical school, a school that solely focused on the historical-critical method of biblical or NT interpretation.⁸²

Consequently he refutes the opinion of those who in the illustration of the Scriptures refer everything to the illumination of the Holy Spirit, as well as that of others who, disregarding all

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

knowledge of the languages, would explain words by things.⁸³ The "analogy of faith," as a rule of interpretation, he greatly limits, and teaches that it can never afford of itself the explanation, of words, but only determine the choice among their possible meanings.⁸⁴ At the same time he seems not to see any inconsistency between the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible as usually received and his principles of hermeneutics.⁸⁵ Because Ernesti affirmed both his principles of hermeneutics and the inspiration, he affirmed that the Bible should not be read as any other book, but when read, it should be done with humbled criticism.⁸⁶

Johann David Michaelis studied in England and became Professor of Oriental Languages at Gottingen.⁸⁷ Michaelis basically initiated the rigorously historical study of the biblical documents.⁸⁸ In his New Testament hermeneutics, Michaelis only recognized as an apostolic book as canonical, which excluded Mark, Luke, Acts, James, Jude, Hebrews, and possibly Revelation.⁸⁹ J. D. Michaelis was trained for academical life under his father's eye.⁹⁰ At Halle University, Sigmund J. Baumgarten influenced him, especially in philosophy, while he cultivated his strong taste for history under Chancellor Ludwig.⁹¹ In 1739-1740 he qualified as uni-

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Gerald Bray, 245.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰http://www.fact-index.com/j/jo/johann_august_ernesti.html

⁹¹Ibid.

versity lecturer.⁹² One of his dissertations was a defense of the antiquity and divine authority of the vowel points in Hebrew.⁹³

All of these great Bible scholars and critics greatly influenced or contributed to the early German use of the historical-critical method of NT interpretation. Some modern readers of the Bible are very unfamiliar with the subject of historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. A discussion of this subject leads an individual to wonder exactly how does the historical-critical method work when studying a specific biblical text.

For example, when the ordinary reader of the Bible studies the Scripture (specifically the letter to the Ephesians) and stumbles on the question of authorship, he/she asks, “Who wrote the book of Ephesians?” When the historical critic studies the question of authorship, he/she asks, “Did Paul write the book of Ephesians?” When this question is answered, the historical critic goes on to seek answers to the questions when, where, to whom is it written, where is the receiver located, and did the author really write all of what is contained in the letter. In a search for the answers to all of these questions, the careful Bible student employs the scientific reason of the historical-critical method to figure out the details or context of the text which sums up into the aggregate story or letter.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

Conclusion

The historical-critical method of New Testament interpretation has definitely endured many battles through many generations. Since its early use and dominance in early German biblical scholarship, the historical-critical method of interpretation has positively influenced the modern world's comprehension of the biblical text, and it has brought to light the intricate details of the historical context of the texts. These contextual details of the Scripture have provided insightful understanding of the text. Even though many scholars and theologians have refuted the historical-critical methodology, elements of historical criticism still continues to form part of main line biblical hermeneutics. The contributions of the great German scholars and theologians to and through the historical-critical method of New Testament interpretation still continue to greatly influence Christianity and biblical hermeneutics today. It is very probable that historical criticism will continue to form a part of biblical hermeneutics until the next generations.

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