

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

THE BRITISH-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT
OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL BASED
METHODS OF INTERPRETATION FROM 1918-1975

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Introduction¹

The Historical-Critical Method of interpretation played a very large part in the way Scripture was interpreted for most of the 20th Century. Interpretation was based on the historical significance of a text as well as looking to historical background as a means of interpretation. The most liberal views of interpretation came from Germany and were never fully accepted by Britain or America. One of the main difficulties for the historical-critical method was that it had a hard time reconciling the tradition and faith of the church with biblical scholarship. The interpretation strayed from looking at the Bible from a faith perspective and instead looked at the scripture through only a historical viewpoint. In this paper the historical background will be discussed as well as forms of criticism that were prevalent during this time. Also, significant scholars and their writings will be studied.

¹Editorial corrections to the format of the paper have been made in order to bring it into closer conformity with the requirements of the Turabian Style Guide. Dr. Cranford.

British-American Contributions

Historical Background

The Historical-Critical method of interpretation was introduced to give a secular view on the understanding of history.² For centuries it has caused a breach between the church and scholarship because this method of interpretation did not rely on the faith that was so important in the church for interpreting Scripture. “Its presence raises the question of the nature of responsible and valid interpretation that reflects accurately the contents of biblical texts and tells us what happened in the past.”³ The Historical-Critical method was not fully developed until the age of the Enlightenment, when it was thought that history was a way to find reason in truth.⁴ There became a new interest in Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, especially Paul. This interest was based on history, not on faith. By the 19th century, the intellectual and social revolution that took place shaped the continuing development of the historical-critical method.⁵ Historical criticism became the standard method of interpretation, focusing totally on the historical aspects of Scripture as the way of understanding what they mean. This also brought into question whether the history given in the Bible was correct or not.⁶

²Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 1.

³Ibid., 3-4.

⁴Ibid., 17.

⁵Ibid., 22.

⁶Ibid., 30.

World War I changed the outlook of the world and this greatly affected the way in which the Bible was interpreted. No longer was there the attitude of optimism that existed in the century before. After this time liberalism reigned, though in Britain it was totally embraced. It was during this time, between 1918-1975, that conservatives and liberals worked together in an academic setting.⁷ Jewish and Roman Catholic scholars were also being accepted in the Protestant world of biblical studies.⁸ There still remained the issue of reconciling faith and scholarship that had yet to be resolved within the church. Using history as the means of interpretation used present knowledge, thus separating God from history and brought history together without God.⁹ After 1945, many conservatives tried to make a compromise between the total acceptance of tradition and reconciling it with history, for this was seen as the only possible solution.¹⁰ The only way this reconciliation could work was to use both faith and history as a means of interpretation. By the 1970s, as the scholars of the historical-critical method began to disappear, it became clear that the “interdisciplinary efforts” of the earlier part of the century were gone and new influences began creeping into biblical interpretation.¹¹

Methods of Interpretation

⁷ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 377.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Krentz, 78.

¹⁰ Krentz, 77-78.

¹¹ Bray, 378.

Textual Criticism: helps to “establish an accurate text.”¹² Textual Criticism also helps find and take out unintentional errors that were made as scribes were copying them and also intentional changes that were made.¹³

Form Criticism: “identifies and classifies units of oral material and relates them to their presumed sociological setting in the earlier life of the community.”¹⁴ It also determines how these sociological settings have affected tradition.¹⁵

C.H. Dodd

Born in 1884, Dodd, considered a liberal, was seen as “the most influential New Testament scholar of the 20th century.”¹⁶ He was a New Testament professor at Manchester and Cambridge.¹⁷ In 1930 he accepted the position as the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis.¹⁸ He also became the Norris Hulse Chair of Divinity at Cambridge and General Director of the New English Bible.¹⁹ By the time of his death in 1973, Dodd had completed many

¹²Krentz, 49.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., 50.

¹⁵Ibid., 50-51.

¹⁶Wrexham County Borough Council, “Word Search for ‘C.H. Dodd,’” Quick Links, 2004. 28 March 2004.

http://www.wrexham.gov.uk/english/heritage/famous_people/ch_dodd.htm

¹⁷Bray, 433.

¹⁸Wrexham.

¹⁹Ibid.

books and commentaries dealing with the Gospels, Johannine epistles, parables in the Gospels, as well as apostolic preaching.

Dodd was against the idea of the wrath of God and this is apparent in his interpretation of Romans. Dodd deals with this issue in an indirect manner in Chapters 9-11, as he comments on Paul's discussion of the Restoration of Israel. Dodd saw these three chapters as whole on their own and as a separate writing of Paul's that he decided to use for his present purpose.²⁰ But in this paper, only the first section will be looked at, Romans 9:6-29. That present purpose is to deal with the question: If Israel originally was the chosen people set apart to be used by God in his divine plan, how is that reconciled with the new method of salvation that includes both Jews and Gentiles? Dodd breaks Paul's discussion into three parts, the first deals with the sovereignty of God, the second establishes the "history of the process of selection" and from this looks at what God has accomplished in history to answer this question.²¹ First Paul must deal with the question as to whether or not God saved Israel as a whole. Dodd feels Paul's response to this issue is to look at the divine sovereignty of God, for it is for God to decide whether he gives salvation to Israel as a whole.²² Another question posed is why those chosen of God come from the line of Isaac as opposed to Ishmael? Dodd interprets Paul's response to mean that the answer lies in the fact that Isaac's birth was supernatural and a result of God's promise to Abraham.²³ This last question Dodd feels parallels the present problem on a smaller scale.²⁴ Through Paul

²⁰C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1932),148.

²¹Ibid., 150.

²²Ibid.,155.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

mentioning Jacob and Esau, this is seen as another example of God's divine will because it was determined before they were born who would be chosen.²⁵ Both were decedents of Abraham, but only one was chosen to carry out the plan, revealing that all who are descendants are not necessarily chosen. This is where Dodd's view against the wrath of God comes into play. Dodd feels Paul made a mistake by implying "God also creates bad dispositions in those who are not to be saved."²⁶ An example would be Pharaoh, for God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Dodd sees this as showing God as a vengeful God, full of wrath against those who are not chosen in the first place. Instead, Dodd feels that the positive side of God's mercy should simply be looked at.²⁷ Aside from this, Dodd concluded that the chosen people in God's plan are not the total restoration of Israel, but individual Jews and also Gentiles.²⁸ Dodd also comes to the conclusion that more history within the Old Testament should be referred to for evidence for Paul's argument. One passage is found in Hosea that refers to the restoration of Israel another passage is one in Isaiah that acknowledges that all of Israel will not be restored, only a remnant.²⁹

T. W. Manson

T.W. Manson was born on July 22, 1898. He succeeded Dodd as professor at Oxford and Cambridge.³⁰ He was very much against form criticism and instead preferred "the philological

²⁵Ibid., 156.

²⁶Ibid., 157.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 160.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Bray, 433.

approach traditional in England.”³¹ He was also Ryland Professor of Biblical Criticism at the University of Manchester from 1936 to the time of his death in 1958.³² He was elected to the British Academy Fellowship in 1945.³³ He was an extensive lecturer at universities around the world.³⁴ He also extensively studies Paul, focusing on the theological meaning in Pauline letters.³⁵ He wrote many books including *The Teaching of Jesus* (1931) and *The Saying of Jesus* (1939). *The Teaching of Jesus* was his most famous work, in which he studied in depth the teaching of Jesus as well as defining theological terms and concepts in the synoptic gospels.³⁶

Another work of Manson’s, *Ethics and the Gospel*, was presented at the Ayer Lectures. This book sought to shed light on the most features concerning the ethic of Jesus by looking at the Hebrew-Jewish background during the time of Jesus’ life.³⁷ This book mainly focuses on Old Testament and Judaism and contrasts the Hebrew ethic from the Greek ethic.³⁸ Manson declares the Hebrew ethic finds its foundation in what God has done for Israel.³⁹ An example of

³¹Ibid.

³²The British Academy, “Word search for ‘T.W. Manson,’” 2002-2003. 28 March 2004. <http://www.britac.ac.uk/fellowship/archive.asp?fellowsID=1806>

³³Ibid.

³⁴Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon, “Word search for ‘T.W. Manson,’” 1998-2004. 26 March 2004. <http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/m/manson.shtml>

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷*Theology Today*, Vol. 3, Number 3, “Ethics AND the Gospel & The Ethic of Jesus In the Teaching of the Church,” October 1961. 28 March 2004.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

this is the Deuteronomic code, which is preceded by a chronology of how God has dealt with Israel.⁴⁰ It is a result of this the Israel saw God in many different facets as King, judge, and protector.⁴¹ These Jewish traditions are seen in the Gospels through the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.⁴² The difference between what Hebrew ethic and the ethic Jesus presents is that Jesus never asks the church to do anything he has not already done Himself.⁴³ Anderson states concerning this book, it is challenging enough to disturb the moral turpitude which enervates the church.”⁴⁴

R. H. Lightfoot

R.H. Lightfoot was born in England in 1883.⁴⁵ He was a Professor of New Testament at Oxford.⁴⁶ He is responsible for introducing form criticism to England, through his book *History and Interpretation of the Gospel* (1935).⁴⁷ He also wrote various commentaries and was also known as the “forerunner of redaction criticism.”⁴⁸

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Bray, 432.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

One of his most significant works is his commentary on the Gospel of Mark. Included in this commentary is a chapter concerning studying the Gospels using form criticism. He uses this study to show how form criticism will not die out, but will continue to be used extensively. He feels form criticism “is the natural and indeed inevitable development of [source criticism.]”⁴⁹ Lightfoot feels the Gospels are made up of individual short stories that are linked together with reliable information the Gospel writer found, but these were not part of the original story.⁵⁰ This is central to the idea of form criticism in the Gospels. Lightfoot also points out that in the Gospels, the stories are put together in topical order as opposed to chronological order.⁵¹ Form criticism also “seeks to relate several stories to the life of the Church which cherished and preserved them, and made use of them to convey its message to the world; and this promises to be the most valuable aspect of the method.”⁵² This provides a way for modern people to understand what the difficulties and successes and goals of the early church were, connecting the modern and ancient in an intimate way. It is probable that some alterations were made to the Gospels, but with the new method, it has been discovered that these modifications have occurred to reveal truth in a clearer light.⁵³ Whether that idea should be accepted or frowned upon is up to the individual. Some would say that making modifications is destroying the infallibility of the original text, while others would see it as acceptable, because it is making truth and even Christ easier to un-

⁴⁹R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 100.

⁵⁰Lightfoot, 101.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 102.

⁵³Ibid.

derstand. Lightfoot concludes that he hopes form criticism will be able to accomplish what it was created to do: link the major themes found in the gospels with the Gospel.⁵⁴

James Moffatt

James Moffatt was a Scottish biblical scholar born in 1870. He taught biblical studies in Glasgow before taking a job at Union Theological Seminary in New York.⁵⁵ He followed German textual criticism and wrote more than forty books and commentaries in his lifetime.⁵⁶ His main accomplishment was as a Bible Translator. He wanted to have the Bible translated into “effective English.”⁵⁷ On September 18, 1924 his translation was published, *A New Translation of the Bible Containing the Old and New Testament*.⁵⁸ It was very popular, even though it was controversial. The translation of the Dodd commentary is in Moffatt’s translation. He argued that the history of the Old Testament was incorrect and dated the writing hundreds of years later than they were traditionally taught to have been written.⁵⁹ In his translation, he placed Scripture in the order in which he thought they belonged, such as chapter 14 of John he puts after the 15th and 16th chapters.⁶⁰ Moffatt also “changed the Bible according to guesses that had no basis

⁵⁴Ibid., 105.

⁵⁵Bray, 432.

⁵⁶Christian History Institute, “Word Search for ‘James Moffatt,’” 2003. 28 March 2004.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

whatever in old manuscripts.”⁶¹ Whether Moffatt was in the right doing this is an individual opinion, but whatever scholars feel concerning Moffatt, he was very influential. After he put out his translation, many others followed to put their own versions out.⁶²

One of the many commentaries Moffatt wrote, concerns James, I and II Peter, and Judas, which he includes all of them under the title of general epistles. I Peter is addressed to the Christians in Asia Minor who need uplifting during this time of persecution.⁶³ The letter follows the same format as most Pauline letters and Moffatt speculated that Peter may have known of at least Paul’s letter to Rome.⁶⁴ The similarities end there. The church is made up mostly of Christians, who were once part of the pagan world, but it is felt Peter never actually went there to evangelize, which was not unusual.⁶⁵ It was Silvanus who delivered the letter and it is probable that Peter dictated it to him and left him to put it into letter form.⁶⁶ It was probably written in the A.D. 70s, for there is no evidence to object to that tradition.⁶⁷ This paper will focus on I Peter 2: 6-10. The Scripture reference in vs. 6 comes from Isaiah 28:16, but Moffatt also sees two other similar passages refer to stone, Psalm 118:7 and Isaiah 8:14.⁶⁸ The cornerstone represents the “ideas of

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³James Moffatt, *The General Epistles: James, Peter, and Judas*. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1928), 85.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., 86.

⁶⁶Ibid., 86-87.

⁶⁷Ibid., 87.

⁶⁸Ibid., 116.

Christ's value and of human faith in him," though for some he is not the center, but he is in their way as a literal stone would be.⁶⁹ Moffat says the cornerstone determines the whole structure of a building.⁷⁰ What an accurate way Peter symbolizes Christ, because He literally determined the pattern and shape of our live. Paul deals with this same issue in Romans 9-11 that was discussed earlier, yet Peter is not referring to Israel specifically, but he is referring to Israel in the sense that he includes all who do not believe.⁷¹ Peter then goes on to refer to several Old Testament passages from Hosea, Exodus, and Isaiah and in this he shifts the divine promise from Israel to the Christian church.⁷² This is paralleled with what Paul discussed in Romans 9-11. Peter says they may rejoice in the blessings of the Lord, but Moffatt points out that at the time the Christians were being compared to cults of their day, so Peter was warning them against behavior that linked them with cults.⁷³ For this could ruin the witness they had concerning the one true God.

Vincent Taylor

Vincent Taylor was born in 1887. In 1936, he accepted a teaching position at Leeds.⁷⁴ He wrote many commentaries, including the gospel of Mark and the passion narrative found in Luke.⁷⁵ He also did studies in New Testament Theology with *Jesus and His Sacrifice* (1937) and

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., 117.

⁷²Ibid., 118.

⁷³Ibid., 119.

⁷⁴Bray, 433.

⁷⁵Ibid.

The Atonement in New Testament (1940) and *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (1958).⁷⁶ Most of his work dealt with New Testament themes and his “moderately critical standpoint” was very evident in these writings.⁷⁷

This paper will be dealing with the New Testament theme of Jesus being referred to the “Son of Man,” specifically found in Mark 2:10. Taylor starts by keeping in mind that for Mark the title “Son of Man” referred to Jesus’ Messianic title.⁷⁸ It is also possible that this title had the same meaning in wider circles since it was used in the way in the Book of Enoch, but Taylor feels that is unlikely.⁷⁹ This means that Jesus’ response to the scribes is not necessarily claim he is the Messiah, since it was not likely he wanted to make that known so early in his ministry.⁸⁰ This is probably likely since in the beginning of his ministry when he healed the man with leprosy, Jesus told him not to tell anyone. There are six different ideas of what “Son of Man” could mean to the people. Taylor feels the first idea, that man has the authority to forgive sins, is incorrect as well as the idea that it refers to the Elect Community.⁸¹ The view that “Son of Man” was not truly considered a Messianic title is thought not to be correct because Jesus uses that title Himself.⁸² It is also thought that maybe this phrase replaced the words “I who speak” in Chris-

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*. (London: MacMillan and Co. LTD., 1953), 199.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid., 200.

tian tradition seems unlikely because that would simply Jesus' words too much.⁸³ Taylor feels the views that the title reflects the beliefs of the Christian community and that it means "Representative Man" are possible, but Taylor believes the term simply reflects Jesus' own view of Messiahship.⁸⁴

W.D. Davies

W.D. Davies was born in 1914. He started teaching New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, New York in 1949. In 1966, he accepted a teaching position at Duke University. Davies wrote a first volume commentary on Matthew and wrote other books on the New Testament, including, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (1964) and *the Gospel and the Land* (1974). Davies most distinguished writing concerned a "reassessment of Paul in his Jewish context," in a book entitled *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1949).

In the conclusion to his book *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, Davies summarizes all that he discusses in his book. First Davies makes sure to bear in mind that Paul was a practicing Jew throughout his life, and though he was a missionary to the Gentiles, he always insisted that the Gospel was first for the Jews and they are to remain loyal to the Torah.⁸⁵ And though he may seem to focus too much on Judaism, when he claims to be universalistic in his face, it is noted that according to the Law of Judaism there are some practices he must still keep.⁸⁶ "A Paul who when he became a Christian ceased to be a 'Jew' would not be the Paul that we know; it was part

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1948), 321.

⁸⁶Ibid.

of his very integrity as a man that he should retain his Hebrew accent, as it were, even in his new faith.”⁸⁷ Many people have a problem with Paul’s nationalism, but Davies says his nationalism is an intricate part of his faith, since Israel has been considered the chosen people of God since the Exodus.⁸⁸ He feels that the “enigma” of Israel as the chosen people has existed in every century, even into the twentieth century and that this is partly the cause of the hatred towards the Jews that has been so prevalent in the twentieth century.⁸⁹ Therefore it would be severely lacking evidence the view that Paul saw Christianity as the “antithesis” of Judaism as it is often thought.⁹⁰ “The Gospel for Paul was not the annulling of Judaism, but its completion.”⁹¹ Davies feels that Paul applied Christ to the Torah, making the “Pauline Christ the New Torah,” for Paul constantly in his letters referred to Christian themes by using concepts from the Torah.⁹²

B.M. Metzger

B.M. Metzger was born in 1914. In 1938 he became a New Testament professor at Princeton and was known as an “outstanding conservative scholar of Greek.”⁹³ Metzger has written over twenty books, but the two books for which he is well known are *The Text of the New Testament* (1964) and *A Textual Commentary on Greek New Testament* (1971).

⁸⁷Ibid., 321-22.

⁸⁸Ibid., 322

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid., 323.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Bray, 436.

In his book, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament*, Metzger extensively shows how to use Greek to interpret the correct meaning from the Bible. He first looks at how ancient writings were created. First, he shares how clay tablets, stone, bone, wood, leather, papyrus, and other tools were used to store ancient writings.⁹⁴ Metzger then tells of how these writings usually came in the form of scrolls.⁹⁵ Later in the book he discusses some of the 5,000 different manuscripts that contain parts of the New Testament.⁹⁶ In this book he also discusses the modern scholars and methods of criticism using the Greek New Testament. Lastly, he gives examples of how to interpret the New Testament using different Greek words to narrow it down to find the original text.

C. K. Barrett

C.K. Barrett was born in 1917 and later became one of the “major British New Testament scholars.”⁹⁷ He was a Senior Lecturer in Theology at University of Durham from 1945-1958, then he was made professor of Divinity there from 1958 until 1982.⁹⁸ He was conservative, yet

⁹⁴B. M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 3.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 36.

⁹⁷Bray, 436.

⁹⁸The British Academy, “Word search for ‘C.K. Barrett,’” 2002-2003. 28 March 2004. <http://www.britac.ac.uk/fellowship/archive.asp?fellowsID=27>

critical in the philological tradition of Cambridge.⁹⁹ He wrote many commentaries on various books of the New Testament including John, Romans, I and II Corinthians.¹⁰⁰

In his commentary on the book of Romans, it is evident that “Barrett admires, but does not imitate Barth.”¹⁰¹ He also tends to add words to his translation that are not in the manuscript, though, “an original translation of the text-carefully compared with its variants-precedes each section.¹⁰² There much evidence that Barrett tries to be very faithful to Paul because he truly tries to tell the reader what Paul has to say and not give new ideas to distract the reader from Paul’s message.¹⁰³ Also, Barrett makes sure to emphasize what Paul found important and that is what the materials he presented intended.¹⁰⁴ In this commentary Barrett “demonstrates Paul’s principle that salvation is a matter of the Spirit and not of the letter.”¹⁰⁵ He also compares each passage with the Hebrew and the Septuagint.¹⁰⁶ Barrett spends quite a lengthy amount of time discussing what Paul meant by the word “flesh.”¹⁰⁷ While he knows all the different means of the word, he does not seem to take into account that Paul was using the Greek word that philosophers had deemed the root of human evil, but Barrett stays so faithful to Paul that the reader

⁹⁹Bray, 436.

¹⁰⁰Bray, 436.

¹⁰¹*Theology Today*, Vol. 16, Number 1, “The Epistle to the Romans,” April 1959. 28 March 2004. <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1959/v16-1-bookreview8.htm>

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

knows when disagreements over this word is going to occur.¹⁰⁸ Barrett neither tries to force the “historicity of the Genesis narrative” on people, nor does he believe “the modern man sinned in Adam.”¹⁰⁹ It is obvious in this commentary that Barrett is still very influenced by the old traditions.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

Conclusion

The historical-critical method was deeply influenced by the two World Wars, which robbed much of the world from their optimism and brought secularism both into society and religion. As a result, the method of historical criticism changed as well. Liberalism was the trend, more so in Germany, than in Britain or America, but nonetheless, it still affected all scholars involved in this time period. Textual criticism and form criticism dominated interpretation. Many scholars looked for new ways to perceive the New Testament, the main interest being in the Gospels. They strove to be true to the Bible, but also to make an impact on scholarship in their own unique ways. Some were more successful than others in their attempt, but all played a part in shaping historical-criticism in the mid-twentieth century.

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