

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

GERMAN USAGE OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD
FROM 1800-1918

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INTRODUCTION¹

The Historical-Critical Method of New Testament interpretation got its start in the enlightenment, and the scholastic search for scientific proof as a basis for truth. It opened scripture up to the individual investigation of its literary structure and its truthfulness.² This process seeks to follow facts wherever they lead, and does not assume that the text is infallible.³ The student of scripture is being asked to play the part of the historian. This put a lot of tension between the Church and the proponents of the Historical-Critical Method. The problem is that the two had different world views. The church had more of an Augustinian world view where as those pursuing the Historical-Critical Method had a world view shaped by the Enlightenment.⁴ The tradition of Augustine said that humans are corrupted by the fall, salvation requires the direct intervention of God, the doctrine of election, and it trusted the church and scriptures to provide knowledge of truth for individual life.⁵ The enlightenment world view saw human nature as innocent and thought the end of existence would occur when humanity could progress past sin.



¹Considerable editing of the format has been done in order to bring the paper closer to the requirements of the Turabian Style Guide. Dr. Cranford

²Harrisville, Roy A, and Walter Sundberg. The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Kasemann. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1995. 1

³Harrisville, Roy A. 1.

⁴Harrisville, Roy A. 28.

It saw humanity in charge of its own fate, and thought truth was obtained by a pursuit of critical knowledge and the freedom from superstition and oppressive institutions.⁶ Some theologians embraced these ideas leaving their faith out of their search. Others tried to build a bridge between the ideas of the scientific investigation of the history of the Bible and the traditions of the church. There are numerous theological writers from 1800-1918 in Germany. Schleiermacher, Strauss, Baur, and Schweitzer stand out in their contributions to New Testament studies during this period.

⁵Harrisville, Roy A. 30.

⁶Harrisville, Roy A. 30.

Historical-Critical Method of New Testament Interpretation from 1800-1918 In Germany

There were some important things going on that seemed to be pushing theologians to search for answers to the questions of the new rationalistic thought. One factor is the church's loss of the "Iron grip" it had on religious thinking⁷. This gave agnosticism and atheism an opportunity to be openly discussed and written about.⁸ There was more of a focus on the natural world, as the sciences such as calculus, physics, and other natural sciences became more popular.⁹ The industrial revolution helped increase the prestige of science.¹⁰ People were impressed with what science could do for them. Another factor that can not be left out is the changing political structures. The church in Germany was not a part of the state. This gave a home to liberal Protestantism in the German universities where objective research was the standard by which all areas of study were pursued, even theology.¹¹

Early in the nineteenth century, there was a movement that countered the revolution that

⁷Harrisville, Roy A. 89.

⁸Harrisville, Roy A. 89.

⁹Harrisville, Roy A. 89.

¹⁰Harrisville, Roy A. 90.

¹¹Harrisville, Roy A. 92.

was born out of the enlightenment. It was aimed at the scientific rationalists.¹² Romanticism was concerned with exploring the truth from all sides, not just the cold facts. It was thought that one should look for the truth in facts, emotions, and mystery.¹³ This can be seen in the fact that Romanticism brought a connection of poetry with Christianity¹⁴

Friedrich Schleiermacher

Friedrich Schleiermacher was the “Pioneering figure in the effort to re-conceive the theological task according to romantic canons of truth.”¹⁵ He has been called the father of Liberal Protestantism. He was born in Breslau in 1768.¹⁶ His Father was a reformed Chaplin in the Prussian army.¹⁷ He went to school at a Moravan school and eventually to Herrnhuter Seminary at Barby. He held several positions as an educator and as a pastor.¹⁸ Some of the positions that stand out include a university appointment at Halle, Pastor of Berlin’s Trinity Church, and eventually succeeded to a chair at the University.¹⁹ He wrote several books as well including

¹²Harrisville, Roy A. 69.

¹³Harrisville, Roy A. 70.

¹⁴“German Idealism” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Online. www.utm.edu/research/iep/g/germidea.htm. University of Tennessee at Martin.

¹⁵Harrisville, Roy A. 71.

¹⁶Harrisville, Roy A. 71.

¹⁷Harrisville, Roy A. 71.

¹⁸Harrisville, Roy A. 71

¹⁹Harrisville, Roy A. 72.

“Speeches” and a translation of Plato’s works.²⁰ His views on “Church and State provoked the authorities, resulting in trials, house searches, and threats of dismissal.”²¹ He spent the rest of his life as a pastor and as a theologian.²²

As the Father of Liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century, Schleiermacher did a lot for the “Reassessment of rationalist biblical criticism that contributed to the revival of biblical theology.”²³ As a pastor and a theologian his perspective was unique. “He combined a critical approach to textual and historical questions with a religious sensibility inherited from pietism.”²⁴

He was open to the modern Culture and was also willing to challenge the traditions of the Church. German Romanticism “Encouraged the belief that sound historical research into the facts of history was the way to penetrate to the all important ideas at the center of reality.”²⁵ He argued the Christianity was the highest form of religion. He argued that “Religion was the study of the non-rational side of human beings, which was just as important as the rational side.”²⁶ His interest, as seen in his writing title Christmas Eve, he tried to link Christian Confession to the re-

²⁰Harrisville, Roy A. 72.

²¹Harrisville, Roy A. 72.

²²Harrisville, Roy A. 72.

²³Harrisville, Roy A. 71.

²⁴Bray, Gerald. Biblical Interpretation Past and Present. Inter Varsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois; 1996. 326.

²⁵Harrisville, Roy A. 92

²⁶Bray, Gerald. 326.

sults of Biblical Criticism.²⁷ He wanted to link the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith.²⁸ He believed that Scripture was not specifically inspired, but the apostles were inspired or moved by the Holy Spirit., therefore their writings were inspired.²⁹ This could leave all books open to inspiration, because anyone could claim to be “moved by the spirit.” Schleiermacher would not necessarily see that as a problem. He was of the opinion that all books should be treated the same, even the Bible.³⁰

Since Christianity centers around the New Testament figure of Jesus Christ a major concern for those who would support the Historical-Critical Method was the actual life of Jesus, or the “Historical Jesus.” One thing that Schleiermacher emphasizes as a Romanticist is feeling, so naturally he would be interested in the feelings of Jesus. He will not “assign inner turmoil to Jesus. He believes that Jesus Christ did not say “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?”³¹ His thoughts on the Gospels played a factor in his developing this idea. He does not give much, if any, credibility to any of the Gospels except for John, because John was an apostle.³² John emphasizes the peace at the end of Jesus’ life, not the pain.³³ Because of this, Schleiermacher believed that God never turned his back on Jesus as he hung on the cross bearing the sin of the

²⁷Harrisville, Roy A. 73.

²⁸Harrisville, Roy A. 73.

²⁹Harrisville, Roy A. 77.

³⁰Harrisville, Roy A. 78.

³¹Harrisville, Roy A. 86.

³²Harrisville, Roy A. 81

world. He would argue that the relationship between Father and Son never changed.³⁴

Schleiermacher worked under the assumption that “The disciples wrote and taught under the ‘purifying influence’ of the living memory of Christ”³⁵ He noted that the other Gospels were second and third generation documents, and they were fragmented. His fragmentation theory was that we will never “achieve a connected presentation of the life of Jesus Christ,” because there are holes in the history that will never be filled.³⁶ John also has more merit, because it is an eyewitness account, and therefore is the most important source for information on the life of Jesus Christ.³⁷

David Friedrich Strauss

Strauss was born in Ludwigsburg Germany, and went to school at Tübingen and studied under several supernaturalist’s.³⁸ He had entered a contest at Tübingen on the topic of the resurrection. He says of that event, that “I proved the resurrection of the dead with full conviction, and when I made my last point it was clear to me there was nothing to the entire story.”³⁹ He went on to enroll in the master’s program at the University of Berlin. He hoped to study under Hegel,

³³Harrisville, Roy A. 86.

³⁴Harrisville, Roy A. 86.

³⁵Harrisville, Roy A. 81.

³⁶Harrisville, Roy A. 75

³⁷Harrisville, Roy A. 84

³⁸Harrisville, 94.

³⁹Harrisville, 94.

but Hegel died a couple of days after Strauss arrived at the school.⁴⁰

Schleiermacher did not get the controversy surrounding his work that David Friedrich Strauss had with his writings. Strauss was strongly against rationalism while still disagreeing with the supernaturalist's. He was concerned more with the myth surrounding the life of Jesus, because "that is what changed the world."⁴¹ The rationalists point of view was that miracle events may have happened, but they were not miraculous. They happened as the result of a rational explanation.⁴² An absurd example of this kind of thought, though not necessarily an actual example used, is that Jesus did not walk on water, he was just standing in a shallow puddle. The supernaturalist's point of view is that Jesus did walk on water, and work beyond the laws of nature. Strauss had a different view from both of these. He was of the opinion that the writer that says Jesus walked on water was giving an interpretation of what he saw. It may be that Jesus was standing in very shallow water, or on a sand bar, or on a shiny rock that looked like the water. The point is that the particulars about the event are not able to be proven, and should therefore be considered myth, an interpretation of the actual historical event. The text uses "the imagery of the early church's inherited religious and literary tradition to make a statement about the spiritual significance of Jesus."⁴³ Schweitzer later said of Strauss, that he had "little critical sense, and completely ignored the problem of the origin of the church." However, he did raise some

⁴⁰Harrisville, 94.

⁴¹Bray, 330.

⁴²Borg, Marcus. David Friedrich Strauss: Miracle and Myth. Online. www.jesusseminal.com/Periodicals.4R_Articles/Strauss/strauss.html. Westar Institute, 1991.

new questions for scholars and caused them to “re-examine their presuppositions in gospel research.”⁴⁴ The rationalists gave a great emphasis to the Gospel of John, but Strauss criticizes them for this, because he says that it is the least historical gospel of all, and that goes against their own principles of historical research.⁴⁵ He said that Matthew and Mark were just alike, but Matthew tried to turn the gospel of Mark into a history account, but failed.⁴⁶

Strauss wanted to write a life of Jesus according to his “own idea.” He was of the opinion that Schleiermacher only went half way in his depiction of Jesus.⁴⁷ In 1835 Strauss published the first volume of The Life of Jesus, and caused a lot of controversy.⁴⁸ He wanted to penetrate tradition to the true concept beneath.⁴⁹ He says that the only truth to be found in the tradition of Jesus is that “Jesus Christ grew up in Nazareth, permitted himself to be baptized by John, assembled disciples, went about teaching in the land of the Jews, everywhere opposed Pharisaism and invited people to the Messiah’s Kingdom, but in the end was subject to the hate and envy of the Pharisaic party and died on a cross.”⁵⁰ It appears that Strauss would assume that the presence of any myth in a story means that the entire story is to be considered a myth. Paulus

⁴³Borg.

⁴⁴Bray, 330.

⁴⁵Bray, 330.

⁴⁶Bray, 330.

⁴⁷Harrisville. 94.

⁴⁸Harrisville, 95.

⁴⁹Harrisville, 97.

says of Strauss that he “had no license to infer from the presence of myth with in a given narrative that the entire narrative was to be classified as myth.”⁵¹ Strauss, however, did not see the importance in the actual history, so assigning the label of myth to a text is not a problem for him. Take the feeding of the five thousand for example. “The point of the text is not to report what Jesus did on a particular day, but to make the claim that Jesus is the bread of life who feeds his followers with spiritual food even to this day.”⁵²

Ferdinand Christian Baur

F. C. Baur is considered to be the greatest New Testament Scholar of his time. Bray calls him the “Main architect of a new understanding of the New Testament.”⁵³ He taught at Tubingen where he developed a ‘school’ of interpretation that tried to rewrite the early history of the church using the New Testament as his source.⁵⁴ He said that “Already in the second Century men began to falsify th doctrine of free will and to ascribe too much to human power.”⁵⁵ “If it was Strauss...who had raised the issue of historical criticism most sharply and fixed the battle-

⁵⁰Harrisville, 99.

⁵¹Harrisville. 108

⁵²Borg.

⁵³Bray, 321

⁵⁴Bray, 321

⁵⁵Baur, Ferdinand Christian. *On the Writing of Chruch History*. Peter C. Hodgson Ed. Oxford University Press: New York 1968. 99.

ground, it was Baur who gave a truer and deeper picture of the history of dogma and theology.⁵⁶ He held similar views to Strauss in that he thought the importance of the text lied in the message and not the actual happening of the recorded event. Baur writes this about the resurrection: “Historical research needs to hold merely to the fact that for the disciples Jesus’ resurrection became the firmest and most irreversible certainty. Thus, not its factualness but rather the faith in Jesus’ resurrection serves as object of research. The process by which this faith emerged lies beyond the reach of “psychological analysis” let alone historical verification.”⁵⁷ Recovering the historical Jesus, buried under theological tradition and debate, was still thought to be attainable. The epistles, thanks to Baur, were now an important, if not the most important, source for knowledge about early Christianity.⁵⁸ They took precedent, because they were written “In the heat of controversy and intended for immediate use, therefore were an unrivaled source of information.” Baur saw three “circles in the early church competing for influence.”

These were Palestinian Judaism, Diaspora Judaism, and the Hellenistic Gentile circle.⁵⁹ Palestinian Judaism was the most likely to retain the most authentic memories of Jesus, because it was closest to him. Paul belonged to the Diaspora circle, but this circle was more open to outside influences. The third, Hellenistic Gentile circle, was eventually merged with the other two and became the dominant influence. It was new church and soon weeded out those that did not

⁵⁶Harrisville, 123

⁵⁷Harrisville. 116

⁵⁸Bray, 322.

⁵⁹Bray, 323.

belong. The 'orthodox' group that remained were the most Hellenized group of all.⁶⁰

Albert Schweitzer

Schweitzer criticizes nineteenth century German New Testament scholarship because it worked of false assumptions about the nature of Jesus and his teaching. He said that Schleiermacher may have been dancing around terms trying to make his assumptions fit into his explanations. He says that the "rationalists were more straight forward."⁶¹ He said "We can at present day, scarcely imagine the long agony in which the historical view of the life of Jesus came to birth. And even when He was once more recalled to life, He was still, like Lazarus of old, bound hand and foot with... the grave clothes of dogma."⁶² He was interested in the eschatological theories.⁶³ According to Bray, Schweitzer was convinced that Jesus himself believed that he would return in the very near future, but Jesus was wrong. After his works on Jesus and Paul, New Testament studies in Germany entered a new era.

⁶⁰Bray, 323

⁶¹Schweitzer, Albert. The Quest for the Historical Jesus: The Macmillan Company: New York, 1959.

⁶²Schweitzer, Albert. An Anthology. Charles R. Joy, ed. Beacon Press: Boston; 1956. 77.

⁶³Bray, 340

Conclusion

In conclusion there was a strong emphasis on the life of Jesus Christ in the Historical-Critical Method of the Nineteenth century. There was a rebellion against the historical, and scientific developments of the enlightenment. However there was still an openness to explore the history of Christianity and of Christ. While these writers may have opposed each other at points, or even by method, they did challenge each other to push for the truth. There were many writers that were not mentioned that wrote during this time period in Germany, but these four, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, David Friedrich Strauss, Ferdinand Christian Baur, and Albert Schweitzer all stand out among them. Schleiermacher and Schweitzer mark the beginning and the end of this time period, while Straus and Baur did great work in progressing the thought and challenging those involved in New Testament Study.

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