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EARLY BRITISH USE OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD  
OF NT INTERPRETATION PRIOR TO 1800

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

For Christian scholars, there has always been a compelling need to reconcile the life of faith with the demands of reason. The relationship between these two central aspects of theology was at the center of British thought during the period leading up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Historical-Critical method was born out of this discussion, created by scholars seeking to create a concept of scripture that would stand up to these new criticisms. While the Historical-Critical method was being developed and implemented in continental Europe during the latter part of this period, it is difficult, or impossible, to discern and enumerate a specific methodology being used in Britain prior to 1800. Due to this lack of a unified methodology, this paper will focus on the factors that facilitated the eventual implementation of the Historical-Critical method in Britain, and will discuss the usage of some rudimentary forms of that method that were present in this period.



<sup>1</sup>Some editing of the format has been done in order to make the paper conform more closely to the Turabian Style Guide requirements. Dr. Cranford

## EARLY BRITISH USE OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD OF NT INTERPRETATION PRIOR TO 1800

The Historical-Critical method is not easily defined. Most brief definitions either make the parameters too narrow to be adequately inclusive, or too broad to be useful. I find that combining the following two definitions can provide a sufficient explanation. Gerald Bray identifies this by saying that it is "...the 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."<sup>2</sup> Edgar Krentz approaches this term by defining the task of those who implement this method, saying that they use "...a disciplined interrogation of their sources to secure a maximal amount of verified information."<sup>3</sup>

While this may provide us with an adequate definition of the Historical-Critical method as it stands now, the following sentence in Krentz's definition alludes to the trait of this method that was central to its development in English scholarship. He follows the previously stated quote by saying, "They seek the truth that is valuable for its own sake."<sup>4</sup> This is the essence of the British approach to New Testament criticism between 1600 and 1800. With the newly-

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<sup>2</sup>Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-  
Varsity Press) 1996, 221.

<sup>3</sup>Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press) 1975, 6.

<sup>4</sup>Krentz, 6.

elevated role of reason in theological pursuit came the desire to separate tradition from truth. The methods of Historical-Criticism became the primary tools used to press this division.

There were rudimentary characteristics of the Historical-Critical method being applied to the New Testament in England prior to 1800, but there was certainly no unified method at this time. Much of the discrepancy can be attributed to the varying views on scripture that were being proposed. There were many individual ideas on scripture, but most can be placed within three major categories, each defined by their view of the relationship between reason and revelation.

The earliest of these groups can be called Rational Supernaturalists. They had a view of reason that was significantly elevated, although they still upheld that some scripture stood above the capacity of reason. This was the most shortlived definable movement, mainly because the ideas of this movement were borrowed and expanded by the Deists. The Deists raised the role of reason even higher in the hierarchy of authority and eventually began to regard scripture, as well as all historical revelation, as useless. The Unitarians inherited the concepts established by the Deists,<sup>5</sup> and eventually created a distinct movement. However, since they maintained the Deist view of scripture and, therefore, made no significant use of the Historical-Critical method; they do not play a significant role in our discussion. Finally is the extremely diverse group of more orthodox thinkers which eventually came to be labeled “Evangelicals” or “Pietists”<sup>6</sup>. This group held a view of scripture that was relatively traditional but supported this view with appeals

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<sup>5</sup>Bray, 236.

<sup>6</sup> Bray, 255.(I am using this term in relation to the later Pietists. This group is characterized by the evangelical writers of the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.)

to reason.<sup>7</sup> This was the latest critical movement of this period and was largely a response to both Deism and the corruption of the established church.<sup>8</sup>

Most modern scholars seem to agree that the Historical-Critical method was not truly established in any uniform manner until after the publication of Barthold Georg Neibhur's *Romische Geschichte* in 1811.<sup>9</sup> And while the development of this method was urged and shaped by the British Enlightenment philosophy of this period, the actual development took place mainly in Germany.<sup>10</sup> So any discussion of the use of the Historical-Critical method in British New Testament interpretation during this period must focus on the views of scripture held by members of these three schools of thought.

This will be my approach in the following pages. I will begin by giving a broad overview of each group and will follow by discussing the writings of one or two of that school's more influential scholars.

### ***Rational Supernaturalism***

Of the three movements we discuss, this may be the most difficult to define. It was the earliest of the three attempts to try to reconcile the paradox created between reason and faith. While the work of the Rational Supernaturalists was built upon by both the Pietists and the Deists, it is important to realize that the allegiance of this group was always to orthodoxy. While these theologians significantly elevated the role of reason above what it had previously been,

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<sup>7</sup> Bray, 255

<sup>8</sup> Bray, 226.

<sup>9</sup> Krentz, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Bray, 225-226.

they always preserved the orthodox stance on the central importance of revelation.<sup>11</sup> Some of the most significant names involved in the Rational Supernaturalist movement in Britain were William Chillingsworth, John Tillotson, and John Locke.<sup>12</sup> The latest of these three, John Locke, was also the most influential and will be our focus here.

### ***John Locke***

While it could be argued that Locke's most widespread impact came from his work in the field of philosophy, his mark on theology may have been more profound. It would be a stretch to say that Locke utilized the tool that we now call Historical Criticism, but the role that his writings played in the development of that tool cannot be exaggerated. Locke was not exclusively a theologian, but the political philosophy for which he is known had, as its base, an intricate theological system. This system is developed within two works, both of which were written less than 15 years before his death in 1704.<sup>13</sup>

In the first of these works, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued for the supremacy of reason in all matters.<sup>14</sup> Locke was outlining what would become the basis of a profound shift in emphasis for orthodox theologians and opened the door for the development of the historical-critical method. In the second work entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke applied the concepts outlined in the *Essay* to Christianity.<sup>15</sup> While Locke wrote several

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<sup>11</sup> James C Livingston. *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 1. (Garden City, New Jersey: Prentice Hall) 1997, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Livingston 1997, 15, 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> Bray 1996, 230.

<sup>14</sup> Bray 1996, 230.

<sup>15</sup> Livingston 1997, 18.

notes and paraphrases on New Testament books that were published after his death,<sup>16</sup> his most significant impact on theology was this shift in focus that was rooted in his emphasis on reason.

The Historical-Critical method is founded on the basic principle that we must look beyond tradition to see the text in its original context. The assumption being made by those who agree with this principle is that information we can gain from reason supercedes that which is presented to us by the traditions of the church. Prior to Locke, authority flowed in the opposite direction. Locke argues in his *Essay* that genuine knowledge of God and religion can be gleaned through the use of natural reason.<sup>17</sup> But he also went beyond this to say that "...nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with, the clear and self-evident dictates of reason, has a right to be urged or assented to, as a matter of faith...".<sup>18</sup> This concept was latched onto and used as a foundation of the Deism movement, something that we will address later.

To say that Locke granted supreme authority to reason "...in all religious matters",<sup>19</sup> is somewhat misleading. In his *Essay*, Locke developed an intricate philosophical system which allowed him to use the tools of reason to approach theology, but did not force him to dismiss aspects of Christianity which were impossible to explain logically. This three-tiered system categorizes all philosophical assertions as being either: (1) according to reason, (2) contrary to reason, or (3) above reason.<sup>20</sup> It is this third category that allows Locke to proclaim the truth of

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<sup>16</sup> Bray 1996, 230.

<sup>17</sup> Livingston 1997, 18.

<sup>18</sup> John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. A.S. Pringle-Pattison, (Oxford: Oxford UP) 1956, 18-21; Quoted in James C Livingston. *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 1. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall) 1997, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Bray 1996, 230.

<sup>20</sup> Livingston 1997, 18.

statements that cannot be proven by reason. By saying that some truths are “above reason”, Locke allows for the belief in miraculous and improbable events that are listed in the scriptures. Locke explains this seeming contradiction by his explanation and juxtaposition of Faith and Reason.

Locke defines reason as the discovery of truth through the human faculties.<sup>21</sup> He defines Faith as the acceptance of truth through divine revelation.<sup>22</sup> I had a great deal of difficulty trying to understand exactly how Locke reconciled contradictions between these two means of discovering truth. It would certainly be easier to say that Locke gave one of these clear and absolute supremacy over the other, but this does not seem to be the case. Locke clearly states that knowledge given through revelation can be ascertained through reason,<sup>23</sup> but this is not true in all cases.<sup>24</sup> It is in these cases that the knowledge is considered to be “above reason”.

The means by which we may determine whether or not assertions that are “above reason” are true are given in Locke’s following work. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke began by questioning the picture of religion as it stood in his day.<sup>25</sup> Locke wanted to separate true Christianity from the rituals and dogmas that were added to it by years of tradition.<sup>26</sup> He strips these away in an attempt to find that which is truly necessary for salvation. Locke asserts that there are certain claims that are central to Christian belief which are above reason, but these are

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<sup>21</sup> Livingston 1997, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Livingston 1997, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 18-19.

<sup>24</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Livingston 1997, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Livingston 1997, 20.



not contrary to reason because they are accompanied by “outward signs”.<sup>27</sup> There are two types of outward signs; the first being miracles, the second being prophetic fulfillment. These criteria allow him to disregard claims to revelation that are made by misled zealots whom he labels “enthusiasts”.<sup>28</sup>

This is a significant distinction with regards to the Historical Critical method. It allows the theologian to use the human faculties, which is the dividing line between reason and faith for Locke, to define revelation in a way that it can still be considered reasonable. In other words, Locke is making it possible to discern what is and is not revelation by acknowledging the presence of outward signs. Because these signs are identified through the tools of human reason (i.e. sight, touch, and logic); Locke is still allows that revelation stands above reason, but that same revelation must be authenticated by reason.

Above all, Locke was a devout orthodox Anglican.<sup>29</sup> This devotion becomes unmistakable in light of the Christ-centered focus of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. So Locke’s goal was not the overthrow of traditional Christianity, but to shift the paradigm and give a much more significant role to reason in the process of theological inquiry. Locke sought to remove the layers of tradition that were attached to the text in order to find the truth that lay underneath. This shift is the very foundation of the Historical Critical method as it was used within the later church. However, the impact of his philosophy was not limited to orthodox theology.

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<sup>27</sup> John Locke. *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I.T. Ramsey, (Stanford: Stanford UP) 1958, 20-21; Quoted in Livingston, James C. *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 1.(New Jersey: Prentice Hall) 1997, 19-20.

<sup>28</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Bray 1996, 230.

## *Deism*

The Historical-Critical method is founded on some of the rationalist principles that Locke proposed, but it is also a tool of response against the Deists who claimed their foundation in those same principles. The beliefs of these deists can not be pinned down in any easy manner because the specifics of these beliefs varied from one Deist writer to another.<sup>30</sup> However, for the purpose of demonstrating the impact of this movement on the development of the Historical-Critical method, it is only necessary that we discuss the Deist view of scripture. The details of this view are rather uniform throughout the community of Deists.

In short, the Deists came to regard scripture as irrational<sup>31</sup> and unnecessary.<sup>32</sup> This posture was born out of the Deist respect for Natural Religion. In the most broad terms, Deists believed that reason is the tool that God has given man that he may discover the true religion. This true religion has always been accessible, so any claims to religious supremacy made through claims to special historic revelation are invalid.<sup>33</sup>

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the golden age of English Deism. There were many important Deist scholars in Britain during this period, but we will focus on just two. We will begin by looking at John Toland and the way he built upon Locke's system in order to truly make scripture subordinate to reason. Then we will discuss Matthew Tindal in order to see his role in elevating Natural Religion above revealed Christianity.

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<sup>30</sup> Bray 1996, 230-231.

<sup>31</sup> Bray 1996, 230.

<sup>32</sup> Livingston 1997, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Livingston 1997, 22.

## *John Toland*

Any discussion of the theology of John Toland must be preceded by a statement discussing his religious affiliation. While Toland was clearly a Deist, he did not see himself as a heretic. Toland saw himself as a disciple of John Locke and he built his theology upon the system within Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>34</sup> The difference between Toland and his teacher is the same fundamental discrepancy separating Orthodox Christianity and the whole of the Deist movement: the issue of revelation and scripture.<sup>35</sup>

Toland's most influential work, published in 1696, was titled *Christianity not Myste-rious*.<sup>36</sup> Toland's choice in the wording of his title was quite deliberate and pointed.<sup>37</sup> It was written as a response to a notorious sermon preached two years earlier by Robert South entitled *Christianity Mysterious, and the Wisdom of God in Making It So*.<sup>38</sup> This allusion signals the purpose of the work; to express his dissension with the orthodox view that some mysteries of revelation had to be accepted even if they could not be substantiated by reason. This work's most important goal, with regards to its effect on the development of Historical Criticism, was its alteration of Locke's view of revelation. Toland shortened Locke's list of three categories of knowledge to two; (1) According to reason and (2) Contrary to reason.<sup>39</sup> Toland would define the difference

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<sup>34</sup> Livingston 1997, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Bray 1996, 231.

<sup>36</sup> Bray 1996, 231.

<sup>37</sup> Robert E Sullivan. *John Toland and the Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptations*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press) 1982, 51.

<sup>38</sup> Sullivan 1982, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Livingston 1997, 21.

between Deism and Rational Supernaturalism by negating Locke's idea that revelation (a term that is inclusive of, but not limited to scripture) could stand "above reason".

For Toland, no revelation can be defended as truth that stands contrary to reason. Whereas Locke believed that some revelation stood outside of reason's power of illumination, Toland asserted that all true revelation is accessible through reason. Toland acknowledged the fact that orthodoxy had accepted that some aspects of faith are above the reach of the faculties of reason and that "...we must adore what we cannot comprehend."<sup>40</sup> However, he believed that this type of revelation was useless. For Toland, revelation is only useful if it is reasonable.<sup>41</sup>

Where Locke had stopped just short of creating a system in which reason was the rule by which revelation must be judged bar none, Toland pressed on. For Locke, revelation could stand above reason as long as that revelation was accompanied by outward signs which were identified through reason. Toland negates this possibility entirely. This would create the fundamental paradigm that would rule the Deist approach to scripture. For Toland, reason is the judge and guide that God has given each of us in order to make sense of all things.<sup>42</sup> In order for this principle to be maintained, it must also be maintained that God would never reveal anything to us that was not in accordance with reason.<sup>43</sup> Within Toland's system, revelation is always rational, never mysterious.

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<sup>40</sup> John Toland. *Christianity Not Mysterious*. Eds. J.M. Creed and JS Boys Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge UP) 1934, 21-22; Quoted in Livingston, James C. *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 1. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall) 1997, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Livingston 1997, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Livingston 1997, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Livingston 1997, 22.

## *Matthew Tindal*

While Toland represents the first, somewhat transitional, phase of the Deist movement, Tindal is representative of the movement in its later stages. The two men were contemporaries, but their impact came during two different phases of Deism. Tindal's greatest work, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, was written 33 years after the publication of Toland's *Christianity not Mystrious*.<sup>44</sup> This work, written when Tindal was 73 years old, was written as a summary of his theology and stood as the most influential work of the Deist movement. This book is a culmination of the Deist thought and some have even called it "the Deist's Bible".<sup>45</sup>

If the essence of the Historical-Critical method, in its academic sense, relates to treating the Bible as a literary and historical text rather than a divine scripture; then Tindal approached the Bible in a Historical-Critical manner. In *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, Tindal completely dismisses the idea of special revelation. In doing so, he completely dismisses the claims of the authority of scripture made by the established church. For Tindal and for the Deists and Unitarians who followed him, the Bible is nothing more than a literary and historical text with absolutely no special significance above and beyond what can be gleaned by all individuals through natural reason.

Tindal begins by establishing two basic principles and then building his case for natural religion off of those assertions. First, if God is always the same then whatever comes from him will be equally consistent. Therefore, perfect religion cannot be altered.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, human nature is also from God and therefore constant so God's perfect religion will be dispensed equally

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<sup>44</sup> Bray 1996, 231.

<sup>45</sup> Livingston 1997, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Livingston 1997, 23.

to all peoples throughout time. Therefore, historical revelation can add nothing to this perfect and constant religion so scripture is completely superfluous.<sup>47</sup> In other words, God's perfect religion has always been available to all people at all times through reason and human nature, so there would be no need for God to add anything. For Tindal, Christianity is a new name given to this perfect religion.<sup>48</sup>

There is a second aspect of this thought that was grasped by the Unitarians in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Tindal placed great emphasis on the universal nature of the revelation of the true religion. Tindal believed that God would not reveal himself to one people at one specific time.<sup>49</sup> Any doctrine not revealed to all people and accessible through reason, could not possibly be a true doctrine.<sup>50</sup> As I said earlier, this school of thought has no problem approaching the Bible in a Historical-Critical context. It is through this lens that the Deists succeeded in breaking away from the foundation laid by Locke and opening the door for post-enlightenment universalism.

### *Pietism*

Let me begin by separating my use of this term from other understandings of Pietism. This term is often applied to persons and theological movements who have very little in common. The Pietism we are discussing here was born out of the English nonconformist movement

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<sup>47</sup> Bray 1996, 231.

<sup>48</sup> Livingston 1997, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Bray 1996, 231.

<sup>50</sup> Livingston 1997, 23.

during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>51</sup> These nonconformists felt that the established church, with its focus on rational doctrinal correctness, was of no use for Christians who were seeking guidance to lead their everyday lives.<sup>52</sup> While the church was concerned with reforming thought, the Pietists were concerned with reforming people's lives.<sup>53</sup>

This vital shift in emphasis becomes very apparent in the theology of John Wesley, the central figure of Pietism in England. However, there is very little difference in the way that the two parties view scripture. In the following section, I will address Wesley's use of the Historical-Critical method, as well as his impact on the development of that method.

### ***John Wesley***

Wesley is best known as the founder of the Methodist movement within the Church of England.<sup>54</sup> His theology was similar to the established church in some areas, but radically different in others. For example, Protestant orthodoxy during Wesley's time held a distinctly Calvinist theological view.<sup>55</sup> Despite this, Wesley was much closer to the Arminian viewpoint.<sup>56</sup> This is reflected by the emphasis on grace and free-will that is the cornerstone of his much of his

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<sup>51</sup> Bray 1996, 255.

<sup>52</sup> Alister E McGrath. *Christianity Theology: An Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell) 2001, 82.

<sup>53</sup> McGrath 2001, 83.

<sup>54</sup> McGrath 2001, 83.

<sup>55</sup> Bray 1996, 255.

<sup>56</sup> Bray 1996, 255.

theology. This emphasis led Wesley to develop a view of scripture that would cause fewer discrepancies with his theology.<sup>57</sup>

Wesley interpreted scripture by, what he labeled, the “analogy of faith”.<sup>58</sup> This method was developed in accordance with the emphasis on experience and relevant faith and practice, which were cornerstones of Pietism.<sup>59</sup> To put it a different way, Wesley’s “analogy of faith” allowed the individual to judge scripture in a way that the deeper meaning related to faith took precedent.

John Wesley was as much a disciple of John Locke as Toland had been. This does not mean that they held similar views on the hierarchy of authority within theology. The system within Locke’s *Essay* had a profound impact on the formation of Wesley’s own theology.<sup>60</sup> This is extremely evident in his view of belief as it relates to reason. Wesley echoed Locke by asserting that belief is defined as an “...assent to a proposition on rational grounds.”<sup>61</sup> This continued Locke’s qualification of revelation; mainly that it must be accompanied by outward signs which were discernible through the faculties of reason.<sup>62</sup> Locke did not follow Locke’s methods completely, but he used Locke’s system to seek philosophical congruence within his own theological

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<sup>57</sup> Bray 1996, 235.

<sup>58</sup> Bray 1996, 235.

<sup>59</sup> McGrath 2001, 83.

<sup>60</sup> Richard E. Brantley. *Locke, Wesley, and the Method of English Romanticism*. (Gainesville, Florida: Gainesville University Press) 1984, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Brantley 1984, 28.

<sup>62</sup> Locke, *Reasonableness*, 19-20.



system.<sup>63</sup> Locke's goal, as defined by Alistar McGrath, was a "...correspondence between sense perception and receptivity to immediate and traditional forms of grace."<sup>64</sup>

In light of this association with Lockean rationalism, it is interesting to note that Wesley viewed scripture as both divinely inspired and infallible.<sup>65</sup> As I said earlier, while his theology varied sharply from what was found within orthodoxy, his view on scripture rested along the same plane. This does not mean that Wesley did not approach scripture critically. Wesley sought proof based in experience and in congruence with reason, in order to provide rational basis for his faith. This was the result of his dependence on Locke's rationalism. He was one of the earliest proponents of Textual Criticism in England. He translated the bible from Greek into English in 1754, and he wrote a highly influential commentary on the New Testament.<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that much of Wesley's effort in the field of Textual Criticism was heavily dependent on the work of the German scholar J.A. Bengel.<sup>67</sup> Bengel developed the earliest forms of the critical apparatus and Wesley drew from this work quite liberally when developing his own texts.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Brantley 1984, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Brantley 1984, 29.

<sup>65</sup> Bray 1996, 235.

<sup>66</sup> Bray 1996, 235.

<sup>67</sup> Bray 1996, 242.

<sup>68</sup> Bray 1996, 242.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is important that we not separate ourselves from this inquiry. The questions surrounding the relationship between scripture and reason that were at the center of these controversies are still essential questions of modern theology. The Historical-Critical method was the result of attempts to reconcile these facets of Christianity and forms of this tool are still in use today. Sometimes it is difficult for us to step out of our modern understanding in order to see the true scope of innovation that was manifest in the words of these theologians. These men, even the ones that stepped well outside of the bounds of what we would consider to be Christianity, stripped away the layers of tradition that clouded the orthodox view of scripture.

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