



A Critique of Current Biblical Criticism

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Some years ago, Peter Stuhlmacher of Tübingen wrote of the growing suspicion in Protestant circles that the traditional historical-critical method was riddled with prejudice and powerless to produce solid results; he saw biblical scholarship turning to other, contemporary approaches.¹ Today, we may be at the point where that suspicion is most intense and the turning to other methods most widespread.

Just now, much of contemporary Bible interpretation in this country is taking its lead from a community of scholars outside the theological disciplines. The names of critics previously unknown to us, and attached to methods of which some of us had little inkling, appear with regularity in the texts and footnotes of essays, monographs, and volumes on biblical exposition, such names as Wayne Booth, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Frank Kermode, and a host of others. We hear of “synchronic,” sociological, aesthetic, and a Heinz 57 variety of other readings marking that “alien” community of literary critics and scholars. Further, the entire enterprise seems to bear an Anglo-American stamp, since transatlantic Bible interpretation still gives large room to traditional methods, despite the probable European origins of the new approaches.

It would be impossible adequately to describe and critique all the alternatives to traditional exposition being pushed by members of the “guild”—least of all for

¹Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

reasons of space. I will list and react to only four of them that have “danced out” at me, hoping the effort may be of some benefit despite its nature as a “first naiveté.”

I. FOUR CURRENT METHODS

1. *The “New Criticism”*

One “reading convention” pays exclusive attention to the text. It views the literary work, thus the Bible, as an artifact, cut off from its author (and reader). This type of approach rejects all external criticism and restricts interpretation to the text as such. For this “new criticism,” as it has been called, paying any mind to an author’s aim or goal represents an “intentional fallacy.” One of this century’s greatest thinkers has stood patron to this position: Hans-Georg Gadamer. Arguing in *Truth and Method* that understanding is never a subjective relation to an object but to the history of its effects, Gadamer dismisses authorial intention as a “yardstick for the meaning of a work of art.” In an analysis of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic, according to which interpretation involves transposing oneself into the author’s mind, he writes:

It is a fortiori true of understanding what is written down that we are moving in a dimension of meaning that is intelligible in itself and as such offers no reason for going back to the subjectivity of the author.²

2. *The Denial of Referentiality*

Another type of interpretation denies to words any referents beyond themselves. It opposes the age-old belief that words are signs for things or events in the world “out there.” Exegesis or interpretation must therefore concern itself solely with the “intratextual” relations of words, with whatever meaning may be gleaned from observation of the connection between “signifiers,” exclusive of what they might signify. In a retrospective on the work of the Harvard New Testament scholar Amos Wilder, John Dominic Crossan of DePaul, commenting on a line of Wilder’s poetry that reads “the zero breeds new algebras,” asks

whether much of our western horror has arisen not from too much zero in our humanity but from too much algebra, especially where such algebra is mimetic of some more absolute algebra above, behind, before, or below it.³

Fascism and ovens may apparently derive from the notion that words relate to things outside themselves.

In *The Genesis of Secrecy*, Frank Kermode of Harvard states that in light of the “indeterminacy of all narrative,” resulting from the fact that the words comprising an historical text have no reference to events in the world, we must opt for “mystery” or “secrecy,” and concludes that “our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us.”⁴

²Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 292.

³John Dominic Crossan, *A Fragile Craft: The Work of Amos Niven Wilder* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981) 67.

⁴Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979) 143-145.

3. *Oral History*

A third type of interpretation describes the text as hostile to speech or “live performance” with its context in the social and physiological, and as substituting an emphasis on death for the “metaphysics of presence” and its preoccupation with life. In *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, Werner Kelber, taking his lead from the humanities’ scholar Walter Ong, tracks the move toward “textuality” in gospel transmission, principally in Mark, a move that he believes is reflective of major social upheaval and occurring at great cost. Of Mark’s “reconstruction of Jesus’ past,” Kelber writes:

It is this gospel’s deepest irony that it cannot accomplish the literary re-presentation of Jesus’ past without abandoning the oral presence of the speaking Lord....The gospel, insofar as it represents the earthly Jesus at the steep price of silencing the speaking Lord and of withholding his apparition, implies an indelible christological deficit at the core.⁵

4. Reader-Response Criticism

The fourth and last type of interpretation to be noted is the so-called “reader-response criticism.” Scholars have long been preoccupied with the question of the oral inheritance of the New Testament authors. Form critics, for example, inquired into the shape of gospel tradition prior to its assuming written form and into the “situation-in-life” (Sitz im Leben) of the primitive community reflected by that tradition. Reader-response criticism at least dovetails with form-critical research, if it does not actually derive from it. The work most often referred to as restoring or initiating accent on the reader over against the author is Wayne Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction*; a 1977 *Journal of Religion* article by Robert Tannehill has been described as giving the approach entrée in biblical studies. Reader-response critics describe the relation of the biblical text to the reader, rejecting the autonomy of the text in favor of its dependence on the reader’s participation. Some go so far as to insist that reading not merely discovers the meaning of the text but actually creates it, that the reader-interpreter constitutes the text. According to this “reading convention,” accent on the reader spells accent on the temporal, that is, on the “journey” on which the text takes the reader, in contrast to the accent on the spatial in traditional, excavative research. In a recent study of Mark’s Gospel from the perspective of reader-response criticism, Robert M. Fowler writes:

Reading takes place through time, and the rhetorical effects of narrative are often the cumulative effects of the temporal experience of reading. Then, once this experience is the focus of criticism, the meaning of meaning also needs to be reinterpreted. No longer can meaning be understood to be a stable, determinate content that lies buried within the text, awaiting excavation. Rather, meaning becomes a dynamic event in which we ourselves participate.⁶

II. A CRITIQUE OF THE CRITICISMS

As preamble to reactions to the four types, let it be noted yet one more time that the witness of the New Testament authors to the word of God gone out to them is a

⁵Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 210.

⁶Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 3.

human word and for this reason accessible to methods invented and elaborated in the secular world. But that accessibility is not merely a fact of life; it is right and proper. It corresponds to faith’s relation to the world as God’s creation that “worldly” methods should be used in the interpretation or exposition of his word.

1. *Advantages of the Newer Methods*

We turn first to the advantages accruing to the type of research noted above. For example, traditional exegesis is spatial in nature, concentrating on the various “layers” beneath a text. It attempts to recover a text’s original condition (text criticism), its relation to texts of like or identical content (source criticism). It seeks to arrive at a level of the tradition anterior to what is written (form criticism), and at the level of editing or authorial intent (redaction criticism). Even

the nomenclature of this approach signals its spatial character, described in the lump sum as comprising the “steps.” At the same time, traditional interpretation is synthetic, holistic, concentrating on the arrangement of the various “steps” into an ordered whole.

On the other hand, attention to linguistic formulations of the question, to rhetorical study, as well as to probings tied to socio-cultural studies, is to be welcomed, because it prevents ignoring the form or structure of a text for the sake of its content. For example, the pursuit of a temporal model of reading furnishes needed corrective to the neglect of plot structure or sequence which often marks the traditional approach. And whereas the old method aims at synthesis, attention to narrative concentrates on whatever may lead up to it. Amos Wilder, hardly an advocate of novelty for novelty’s sake, notes the independence of narrative, of the story’s taking us along with it, weaving its own web of happening, and adds that we lose our place in the story if we stop to ask what this or that feature means or refers to outside it—precisely the type of inquiry that characterizes traditional exegesis.⁷ Derision or pity aside, we are certain to lose our place in the story with, say, this exposition of Luke 2:14:

The hymn consists of two members connected by a conjunction; and the three parts of the one member exactly correspond with the three parts of the other member.⁸

Attention to strategies by which a text carries its readers along can only enhance “transcription,” can only add to meaning, if it is meaning we are after.

2. *Problems with the Newer Methods*

a. The New Criticism. Turning now to reactions, the first type noted above with its exclusively “intratextual” concentration and spurning of the “intentional fallacy” is, happily, on the wane. For this we have new studies in rhetoric to thank. Hyperbole, irony, litotes (ironical understatement), *paraleipsis* (accent by professing to say little or nothing of the subject)—all those strange terms appearing at the

⁷Amos N. Wilder, *The Bible and the Literary Critic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 143.

⁸Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1953) 57.

end of a classic New Testament Greek grammar, for what other purpose than to “suade,” thus betraying intent? Purpose can scarcely be absent from this word: “I am speaking as a fool” (2 Cor 11:21), or from this: “I have been a fool! You forced me to it” (2 Cor 12:11). In the one instance, Paul suspects he may have given offence. In the other, he is certain of it. In neither case does he desire it. Return to a path earlier abandoned, return to Aristotle, for example, for whom rhetoric spelled persuasion, is doing the “new criticism” in with its scorn for the “intentional fallacy.” For if a text is ultimately “intentional,” it surrenders isolation.

b. The Denial of Referentiality. The Jewish scholar George Steiner, in the opinion of many one of the most provocative thinkers alive, concedes that the new approaches in interpretation have helped reclaim much that was lost in the study of letters, but refers to the nihilism implicit in the method which refuses to see any relation between word and world. The

final stakes, Steiner asserts, are theological, since the assumption that words have referents beyond themselves means to acknowledge a God who has made it so. He writes:

The notion of man's life in speech as one of diverse language-games with no imperative of reference except to the pragmatic, [is] radically inadequate....Where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight, certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable.⁹

In opposition to the notion of language as arbitrary, plurivalent, nonreferential, with a "void of meaning at its core," Amos Wilder contends that the final question as to any representation, fantasy, graph, emblem, rune, or utterance is that of reference. He adverts to the antinomianism or "gnosticism" attaching to the denial of referents and of its forfeiting any "purchase on reality," since the entire enterprise of signifying is to orient ourselves in reality and get a grip on it. Wilder's conviction is that those who claim there is no world except language itself push too far the valid insight that stories evoke their own reality, whereas a prior sense for the real pervades and tests all language and stories.¹⁰

There is a dark and ominous side to this denial of referents. Translate the sentence "language has no purchase on reality" to read: "human consciousness, human activity, an activity that ends in the making of words, of language, has no purchase on reality." Then, if reality there be, it must be "underground," occult, some "cosmic rhythm" to which we have been handed over, some world beneath the world of words we make, a world of genes and molecules and DNA. The result is release from responsibility, from morality, from rationality, and thus from truth, giving fate the last word. It is an old, old story, often shocking in the retelling. On balance, it has not been the algebra "mimetic of some more absolute algebra above," but the "zero in our humanity" that has ended in horror.

c. *Oral History*. Is it possible that Kelber's identification of our written gospels with the death of living words reflects a mistaking of the object? In a 1981 article in *New Literary History*, the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye assigns the Bible to what

⁹George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989) 85, 229.

¹⁰Wilder, *The Bible*, 24, 45, 47, 144, 167.

he calls the "hieroglyphic" phase of language, a phase in which the word is an active force, a word of power, and for which metaphor, the identification of person and thing, is the controlling figure.¹¹ In his book entitled *The Great Code*, Frye improves on his description, referring to the Bible as "radically metaphorical," that is, devoid of the anthropomorphic baggage normally attaching to metaphor. He describes the Bible's essential idiom as "oratorical," its "linguistic conventions" as intimately related to those of the spoken word and the oral tradition, and refers to the "metaphysic of presence" that meets us at every turn, for which he adopts the old term *kerygma*. Frye's reference to the Bible's "often" associating the written word with transcendence could have had Kelber's reluctant admission of vestiges of "orality" in Mark for its foil. An understanding of the Bible as mediating presence is Frye's alternative to applying to it categories and criteria that only result in confusion and exasperation.¹² He writes:

The Bible...is not a book pointing to a historical presence outside it, but a book that identifies itself with that presence.¹³

d. Reader-Response Criticism. Of the four alternatives to the traditional methods cited, reader-response criticism has the most to commend it. It does so, first of all, by virtue of its epistemological assumption, that is, that the knower cannot be separated from what is known, a truth in which Søren Kierkegaard once pioneered. Secondly, it has most to commend it because of its capacity for “tolerance” toward the traditional, historical-critical method. For example, in his book earlier referred to, Fowler writes:

I am not saying that the events and characters of Mark’s story bear no resemblance to the world outside it or that it was not originally aimed at real flesh-and-blood readers. Surely the Gospel does reflect certain events in first-century Palestine history, and surely it does reflect the concerns of a genuine flesh-and-blood audience.¹⁴

The purpose of such criticism, rather, is to pay heed to the reader and the reading experience in the interpretation of texts, thus to the temporal in contrast to the abstract and spatial which characterizes traditional methods of interpretation. That such an approach can be extremely helpful and illuminating can be seen from Fowler’s attempt. Naturally, not all reader-response critics are alike. Not all are tolerant toward the traditional methods, nor do all share the bias of modernity toward language as referential. But all share a certain concentration. Let Fowler, whose position appears least extreme, speak for them all:

We could say that the Gospel is not so much designed to construct its own world as it is designed to construct its own reader; it is not designed so much to say something about its implied world as it is to do something to its implied reader; the narrative does not strive to convey meaning as referential content as much

¹¹Northrop Frye, “Literary History,” *New Literary History* 12/2 (1981) 220.

¹²Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 24, 28-29, 42, 209, 213, 227.

¹³Ibid., 137.

¹⁴Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 64.

as it strives to achieve communion with its audience by means of a forceful event that takes place through time.¹⁵

III. THE PERSISTENT HISTORICAL QUESTION

Once upon a time, a principal pioneer of the method most analogous to reader response was accused of anthropocentrism—wrongly, as I believe. Rudolf Bultmann’s insistence that there could be no talk about God which was not at the same time talk of human existence was only the obverse side of his insistence upon an act of God for us as effecting the presence of the Christ of the kerygma. And despite the precedence Bultmann assigned to that Christ over the “Jesus of

history,” he did concede the latter as the occasion for the former—which very concession led his pupils to initiate a “new quest,” and by means of what now passes for the spatial or layered, holistic or synthetic method of research. There may be better warrant for charging reader-response criticism with anthropocentrism, since the argument it makes on behalf of the reader as necessary to interpretation is so strong as to suggest that the text is invented in the process of being read. In other words, the contention that there can be no talk of the text which is not at the same time talk of the reader seems to have no obverse side, the “time” through which that “forceful event” occurs by which narrator and reader unite being only the reader’s time, not a time in advance of or apart from the reader.

There is no question but that pursuit of the layered, spatial, diachronic, synthetic, mimetic, representational, referential, *traditional* methods of interpretation is fated to end in frustration and exasperation—it always has and always will. Stuhlmacher’s description of the current malaise to which the traditional methods have brought us is as eloquent as any:

For colleagues in the discipline, for pastors performing their office, and for students, historical criticism is the agent of a repeated and growing rupture of vital contact between biblical tradition and our own time. Among the older and younger theologians...this distancing effect is accompanied by an enormous and at times even alarming uncertainty in their use of scripture.¹⁶

But the question those methods are designed to address, however clumsily, and however inept their practitioners, will not be silenced. The question reads: “What has happened? Is there anything, something, an event, a thing, a person, independent of the author and the text to which they conceivably point? If it is at least legitimate to argue for referents, how to describe them?” It is the historical question, and it will not go away. But aside from whether it will or will not, it must not, for at least three reasons:

First, because of the possibility that an author, a storyteller, real or “implied,” is not merely after achieving dramatic results sufficient to win the reader’s allegiance, but also after linking those results to some independent, “transcendent” reality which could justify that allegiance, render it more than aesthetic appreciation. Norman Maclean was not only intent on telling the story of the “blow-up”

¹⁵Ibid.,57.

¹⁶Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 65.

that left thirteen smokejumpers dead in the Mann Gulch fire of 1949, a tale calculated to attract him because of his own experience with fire and forest, and more than a match for his rhetorical powers. The storyteller came near expiring from repeatedly traversing the site of the tragedy, climbing in the cold and wet or in heat only twenty degrees below certain death, in addition to wheedling details from reluctant witnesses, and badgering experts to assist with transforming his high-school variety calculation into respectable computation. Maclean was certain there had to be an ending to the story somewhere,

although it might take a storyteller’s faith to proceed on a quest to find it and on

the way to retain the belief that it might both be true and fit together dramatically.¹⁷

Second, the historical question must be put because faith cannot remain aloof from critical testing. Years ago, Adolf Schlatter, in an essay entitled “Atheistic Methods in Theology” argued that the neo-Kantians of his day had assigned religion to a storm-free area, thus depriving faith of all significance for science. A faith removed from critical testing, Schlatter contended, enjoyed immunity only at the cost of losing meaning. Words without referents and texts with readers as their creators are invulnerable to attack; they may mean whatever one wishes them to mean. A faith that hangs on the question of referentiality, of transcendence, can run aground, but between heaven and hell is precisely where faith belongs.¹⁸

Third, the historical question must be put because it witnesses to the sovereignty of the God who has made his revelation contingent upon a particular person, place, and time. As my hero Ernst Käsemann put it years ago, it was for the sake of pointing to this contingency that the gospels were written. The New Testament authors are not first and above all historians, nor are their productions to be regarded first of all as history. But this is not to say that those authors did not have a crucial concern with what we call history, and a life or death stake in the reality of its “transactions.”

Finally, on whatever side of the divide we may be, with the traditionalists or their critics, or somewhere betwixt the two, there is the humbling fact of the text’s priority, of its “givenness.” The text, the work of art, the musical composition existed before ever we came upon it. It can, and some day surely will exist without us—which makes parasites of us all. If we could surrender to that truth, that “givenness,” we might not quite make it out of our skins, might not make it “out of the dungeon”—to borrow C. S. Lewis’s metaphor—but we might at least “look out through the bars,”¹⁹ we might become better readers. After all, is there need of more critics, and should I have listed any? As Steiner writes, “critics advertise.”²⁰

¹⁷Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1992) 144.

¹⁸Adolf Schlatter, *Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1985) 43-44.

¹⁹C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969) 101-102.

²⁰George Steiner, “‘Critic’/‘Reader’,” in *George Steiner: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University, 1984)