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## The Historical Method in Biblical Interpretation

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THE failure of exegetes to agree on hermeneutical principles is said to be one of the major causes for the divisions in Christendom, and, as Avey pointed out more than 25 years ago, American denominationalism will not disappear unless all bodies agree on basic principles of Biblical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Biblical scholars of the liberal tradition claim that the greatest obstacle to any agreement among exegetes lies in the continued use of the so-called dogmatic method inherited from the Reformers. Its advocates are charged that on the assumption that the Bible is divinely inspired and inerrant they employ the proof-text method in an arbitrary fashion. The net result is said to be that these exegetes view the Bible as a static and fixed body of religious and ethical truths. Modern Biblical scholarship prides itself on using the historical method, also known as the scientific or critical method. Its adherents seek to trace the origin, the growth, and the interrelation of the manifold and various religious ideas and to establish the religious significance of these historical phenomena. Biblical interpretation is therefore according to Moehlmann primarily the task of the historian.<sup>2</sup> Only the historical scholar dare be entrusted with the task of discerning the underlying historical processes of Biblical literature.<sup>3</sup> By 1925 the historical method was adopted by most of the influential theological schools and by many denominational boards with the result that such important work as editing the religious literature and commissioning foreign missionaries was in the hands of the advocates of the historical method.<sup>4</sup> Ernst Scott asserted concerning the use of the historical method: "The right

of the historical method is now firmly established and needs no defense.”<sup>5</sup> Again he declared: “The outstanding fact in the modern investigation of the New Testament is the dominance of the historical method.”<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Bacon claimed that it was the duty of the theological seminary to supply the future pastors with the techniques of the modern historian so that they would be in a position to appreciate and interpret the historic faith of the Christian Church.<sup>7</sup> McCown accused the majority of writers dealing with the practical problems of civilization and the Church of writing in complete ignorance of the principles of Biblical criticism and historical interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

The historical method has exerted — and still exerts — a tremendous influence in American theological circles. The purpose of this essay is therefore to examine and evaluate the principles, methods, procedures, and conclusions of this method. The material is so voluminous that the scope of this essay had to be restricted, particularly in two areas. This study is limited to English source material. Furthermore, it is limited to an evaluation of the validity of the “negative” results of the historical method and by-passes the “positive” results of this method as they are evident in such a monumental work as Kittel’s *New Testament Lexicon*.

## I

Before considering the nature of the modern historical method, the principal motives which lie behind it should be noted. Ernst Scott listed three principal motives as encouraging the rise of this method: 1. It arose primarily out of the great awakening that accompanied the French Revolution. All authorities to which men had bowed theretofore were now examined, including the Bible. 2. A more specific motive, however, was the new sense of history that began to manifest itself during the latter years of the eighteenth century. At this time men were learning to view the past in the right perspective, realizing that history had a law of development underlying the succession of events called history. Historical monuments were beginning to be considered in the light of their surroundings. 3. As a result of the vast increase of historical knowledge, with archaeology uncovering many cities and civilizations, men were given a new insight into past centuries. Much historical ma-

terial was made available to the Biblical historian and helped shed light upon Biblical events and happenings. What the discovery of the microscope was for modern science, the new historical knowledge was for the development of the historical method.<sup>9</sup>

According to the liberal conception, the historical method comes to the Bible with certain convictions as to procedure, method, and the significance of evidence. It regards the sixty-six books of the Scriptures as a collection of historical documents. Biblical history, therefore, will be approached and treated in the same manner as a historian would examine the writings of Thucydides, Herodotus, Xenophon, Josephus, or Eusebius. The utilizer of the historical method in apprehending the meaning of the Biblical books will endeavor to ascertain the inner structure, the relation of their contents to one another and to other historical documents. Before a history can be reconstructed from a group of documents, as for example, the New Testament Gospels, the documents themselves must first be examined for their reliability as historical documents.

The historical method sets itself the task of examining the literature of the Bible without any preconceived ideas of what it ought to be. The unbiased student, if he follows the objective scientific procedure of research, cannot undertake the study of Biblical literature with preconceived ideas concerning its inspiration or hold, for example, a premillennial or postmillennial view regarding the eschatological portions of the Bible.

Although it is a piece of literature, the true historical interpreter will regard the Bible in the same light as he would the Vedas of the Brahmins, the Koran of the Mohammedans, or the Analects of Confucius. The student of the historical method assumes concerning Christianity that like all other movements it has inherited much, borrowed freely, and was continually altering its primitive elements. The historical method cannot allow for the pretension made by conservative scholars of the complete isolation of the Hebrew-Christian faith from external historical influences.

Since, according to the modern users of the historical method, the Bible is a human book, written by ordinary men, the interpreter must operate with the possibility that it may contain errors, contradictions, and fallacies. In view of this, the student employing the historical critical method must sift the writings of the

Prophets and Apostles with the same scrutiny as he would any similar writing. The modern student, furthermore, must approach the Bible with the assumption that order and reason, causation and progress, are to be found in the narratives of the Bible as anywhere else. According to Adeney, the scientific or historical method involves "a rigorous exclusion of mere assumptions, a full and careful induction of all evidence, a strict, unbiased process of arriving at conclusions, and an orderly arrangement and classification of the knowledge thus attained."<sup>10</sup> The student of the historical method precludes the need of relying upon any supernatural aids in his efforts to apprehend the meaning of any Biblical book. Any student who is scientific in method, accurate, conscientious, and objective in his application of the historical method can interpret the Biblical literature properly.

The methodology of the historical approach to the Bible has been strongly influenced in its aims and methods by the example of the sciences.<sup>11</sup> Scientists, such as botanists, chemists, physicists, and doctors, have had wonderful results by patient observation, minute analysis, and comparison of all available data. Bible scholars study a Scriptural book as the botanist does the plant; in fact, some notable conclusions in the field of Biblical interpretation are based on a single word.

It is claimed that the methods and techniques which the utilizers of the historical method have applied to the corpus of Biblical books, are the same as those employed in the study of classical French, German, or English literature, or in the study of any historical writing. The methods governing historical interpretation set forth in such classic works on historical research as Langlois and Seignobos *Introduction to the Study of History*, Vincent, *Historical Research*, and Fling, *The Writing of History*, were adopted and followed, thus assuring an objective procedure.

## II

The purpose of the historical method, according to Avey, has been stated as follows:

(The historical method) . . . seeks to know the historical setting and atmosphere in which the experiences recorded occurred in the lives of men, to estimate with what degree of exactness one can determine just what was the nature of that experience

and to know how far it was similar to human experience of today.<sup>12</sup>

A number of complex operations are involved in applying the historical method to a Biblical passage, chapter, or book. All sound interpretation must start from the text intended by the author. In view of the many errors, deliberate and unintentional, which have corrupted the text of the various books of the Bible, it is necessary to detect these corruptions and restore the original text as far as possible. This specialized form of study is called "lower criticism."

After the text has been determined, the second step in the scientific study of the Scriptures is to make an accurate translation. This demands an extensive knowledge of philology and grammar. Every nuance of vocabulary and subtlety of expression must be adequately understood and properly translated.

The next step in the application of the historical method is to make use of the principles of Higher Criticism, one phase of which is known as literary criticism. The latter tries to localize a given writing, determine its author if possible, and ascertain all that is known about him; the place where the book was composed; the time of writing; the person or groups of people to whom it was addressed; and the occasion, cause, or circumstances for the penning of the document. These steps in the localization of a book have been summarized under six questions: Who? Where? When? Whom? Why? and What? The genuineness of a writing, whether it is pseudepigraphic or if in the course of tradition the book has been given a false ascription, is a problem closely related to the localization of a literary document.

Under "Who?" the problem of authorship is discussed. Literary criticism employs the same techniques as the student of English literature does in his evaluation of the claim that Bacon wrote Shakespeare. Two types of evidence are considered in the determination of the authorship of a document: external and internal. External evidence embraces two considerations: the traditions as to authorship and the light cast on the problem by its original recipients. Internal evidence is based on the vocabulary and style of a book together with reference to other literary productions of the writer, which are compared for ideas and content. Liberal scholars claim that the application of these literary canons to

Biblical literature has resulted in the denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, has established the ascription of Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah to some unknown author, has repudiated the authorship of many of the Davidic Psalms, and has proved that the Pastoral Letters and the Epistle to the Hebrews were not written by Saint Paul.

Under "What?" the literary features of the book are considered. A knowledge of literary forms is necessary for a correct interpretation of any piece of literature. The Bible contains such literary forms as history, narration, dialogue, proverb, drama, and essay. Matthew Arnold was convinced that the "first step toward a right understanding of the Bible," was to appreciate that its language was "not rigid, fixed, and scientific," but "fluid and literary."

A problem closely related both to the authorship and the nature of the contents of a writing is the necessity of determining the sources that were employed by its writer. In a literary work, oral or written, or even both, sources may have been used which should be identified and, if possible, localized. The Book of Joshua and the Books of the Chronicles refer to written sources that were consulted and used by the authors of these Biblical books. In the field of Biblical literature, however, the identification of sources besides those indicated in the writings themselves, has become a passion with most liberal scholars, especially in the Old Testament field. A perusal of Pfeiffer's *Introduction to the Old Testament* will reveal how practically every book in the Old Testament has been broken down so that many Biblical writings resemble a patch-quilt. Colwell claimed that in the writing of Hebrew literature, "the scissors and paste" method was employed, thus enabling the modern student to discern the sources used in writing, re-writing, and editing the Old Testament books.

In the study of the Gospels, scholars are convinced that it is possible to detect the literary sources. Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John are supposed to have written their Gospels in the same manner as the pre-Christians wrote their histories. Confidently, Colwell has announced: "The identification of these sources made a sane interpretation of Gospel parallelisms possible and dealt a death-blow to superficial harmonizing of the Gospels."<sup>13</sup>

Since many of the books of the Old Testament, according to the

understanding of liberal scholars, give a great evidence of editorial activity, called redaction, the work of this redactor (a hypothetical personality) must be taken into account. Most of the redactional activity is supposed to have taken place in post-Exilic times.

The dating of a document, the "When?" is another problem the historical student encounters. There are two categories into which the evidence is grouped: external and internal. External evidence comprises the testimony derived from literature other than the document under consideration. Thus a number of New Testament books give information about other books in the canon which were written earlier. Thus Peter refers to the Epistles of Saint Paul as in existence as he writes 2 Peter (3:16). The non-canonical literature of the second century contains valuable information about the writing and formation of the New Testament canon. Internal evidence, on the other hand, consists of data furnished by the books themselves. An example of internal evidence as an aid to the dating of the Book of Luke, is the statement of 3:1, giving the 15th year of Caesar Tiberius as the year marking the beginning of Christ's public ministry, which means the Gospel must have been written after this year. The opening verse of the sixth chapter of Isaiah gives the year in which Isaiah began his ministry and consequently must have been written subsequently to this date. Evidence as to the date of a book is often found in a quotation or quotations from other books that are datable. Again, when the sources are dated or datable, it is possible to date the document of which they are a part. Often the place of a literary document in the history of culture or of a social movement is an aid in the dating of the book. The language of a literary document is sometimes datable. A book purporting to originate at a certain time and place, written, however, in a language never used at the time in question, or in the locality, cannot be genuine in its claim.

After these considerations have been determined, the next step, for the user of the historical method, is to consider comparatively the book being interpreted, especially with reference to its historical, cultural, social, economic, intellectual, and religious background, which may be determined by a study of the geography, epigraphy, numismatics, and archaeology of the period from which the book claims to have come.

## III

The application of the so-called scientific-historical-critical method by such liberal scholars as Bacon, Barnett, Burrows, Colwell, Cook, C. Craig, Dahl, Fleming, Gilbert, Goodspeed, Shailer Matthews, Moehlmann, Pfeiffer, Porter, Riddle, and a host of others, resulted in the following general conclusions and principles which, in their opinion, should be known and applied for successful and correct Biblical interpretation:

1. The concept of revelation, as Grotius contended long ago, is not to be identified with the Bible itself, but is to be found residing in the men that produced the books of Holy Writ. The spiritual experiences which Jeremiah and Peter had, cannot be made synonymous with their written words.

2. Not only has the idea of revelation been separated from the Bible, but a comparison of the Bible with the sacred books of other religions has given Christians a wider conception of the meaning of revelation. It is no longer possible to distinguish between true and false bibles. The difference between the Bible and other sacred writings is one of degree and not of kind.

3. Just as the conception of "revelation" has been altered, so the understanding of the word "inspiration" has been changed. The Biblical authors were not the only men who were inspired. Men in other nations also had experiences which must be termed as divine. Furthermore, inspiration does not belong to the writing, but only to the writer. Biblical scholars have come to recognize degrees of inspiration in the different writers of the Bible, ranging from extremely low to high. The test of the degree of spirituality possessed by a Biblical author is determined by the amount of spirituality his product is able to evoke in the reader.

4. While it is not the purpose of the user of the historical method to destroy the Protestant teaching of the infallibility of the Scriptures, yet the liberals assert that an honest study of the sixty-six books of the Biblical canon necessitates the abandonment of this view because of the errors, contradictions, and historical mistakes found in the Bible. Each book of Scripture, it is claimed, witnesses against the "theory of infallibility."

5. Historical criticism has radically transformed the character

of the Bible, having humanized and assigned it a place with the sacred books of the great religions of the world. "The attainment of this new conception of the Bible as a whole, since it conditions the understanding of all separate parts and teachings of the Bible, is perhaps the most important event in the entire history of interpretation."<sup>14</sup>

6. The principle of evolution, accepted by the natural and social sciences, has also been demonstrated as active in the history of the Jewish people as recorded in the Old Testament and in the history of Christianity as found on the pages of the New Testament. The religions of both Testaments must, therefore, be studied as the movement of a vitally developmental character. As a result of the reconstruction of Hebrew and Christian religion, according to evolutionary lines, the Judaeo-Christian movement must be considered the product of social forces; there is, consequently, nothing *unique* about the religious experiences reported in the Bible.

7. The Biblical books were written by different men; the Scriptures appear as a library of richly varied and deeply human writings. This new conception allows for appreciation of its true humaneness, which has been denied by those who held the Bible had only one ultimate author, namely, God.

8. Many books that were traditionally believed to be a unity, the product of one pen, have been shown to be comprised of many documents. Thus the Pentateuch, considered by the Church and Christ as the work of Moses, is now portrayed as "a mosaic" of many documents. The sources which comprise the Hexateuch, the critics claim, can be ascertained with precision and accuracy. The same claim is made concerning other Biblical writings.

9. Many chapters of Biblical books (for example, Genesis 1-3), and even entire books formerly regarded historical, are now classed as symbolical and nonhistorical. Thus Jonah and Esther are interpreted as works of fiction and as parabolic.

10. An outcome of the historical method has been the belief in the existence of a close relationship between the Hebrew civilization and the civilization of the Semitic world in general. The Hebrew religion did not grow in a vacuum, but in closest relationship to other Semitic religions. A study of the geography, archae-

ology, and history of the Near Eastern world reveals the dependence of the Jewish Old Testament upon Babylonian, Egyptian, Assyrian, and other Oriental people. Historical research, it is alleged, reveals that the Hebrews took institutions and rites common to other Semitic faiths, such as the Sabbath, circumcision, sacrifice, priesthood, prophecy, prayer, feasts, fasts, menhirs, and the distinction between clean and unclean, and ethicized and spiritualized them.

The New Testament writers were also influenced by their environment. Christ is considered to have borrowed some of His teachings from the Mishnah and other Rabbinical writings, while Saint Paul is supposed to have adopted ideas from Hellenistic thought and the mystery religions.

11. Historical criticism has lessened, and in many cases destroyed, the traditional use of isolated texts in the prophetic literature. While formerly the Old Testament Prophets were considered to have value in proportion to the extent and clearness of their reference to the Messiah, they now are read and understood mainly in the light of their times. The Prophets are seen as ardent patriots, practical reformers, and initiators of great spiritual teachings.

12. Historical study has made an important contribution to the correct interpretation of the Old Testament by showing that the "four silent centuries" between Malachi and the penning of the New Testament are not silent. Research has shown, it is claimed, that in this period of Jewish history are to be found the fears and hopes of the Hebrews as expressed in such books as Esther, Jonah, Daniel, Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, and many Psalms. This period presents a variegated literature, represented by the pietistic (Psalms), the legalistic (Chronicles), and the prophetic (Jonah and Zechariah). The historical method has rendered a valuable service by enlarging the appreciation of the divine economy, by revealing how God in the days of Jewish legalism was preparing a prophetic highway for Christ.

13. The rejection of the idea that the Biblical authors had been the recipients of supernatural revelations communicated directly to them by God, it is claimed, is another result of the application of the historical method to the Bible. According to the Old Protestant idea, Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and others, through

Jehovah's help, were able to make predictions concerning future events, normally beyond the ken of human knowledge. Inasmuch as the prophets of other religious faiths likewise claimed this ability, the historical student needs to scrutinize the assertions of Biblical writers in the same manner as he would those of Mohammedanism and Hinduism. Since the contra-natural intervention of God is against the scientific spirit, the so-called prophecies of the Bible must be re-examined and explained in a way consonant with the dictates of reason. The idea of God exerting His will by forcible intervention in the affairs of individuals and nations is a conception contrary to human knowledge.

14. According to Porter, the historical method has shown the great importance of the personalities of both Testaments.<sup>15</sup> Higher critical research has made men like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Saint Paul, and Saint John prominently stand out with great definiteness by revealing their importance for the religion of Israel and the development of the Christian Church respectively. They have been revealed as initiators, discoverers, and creators of great spiritual truths, facts otherwise obscured by the dogmatic approach. The truths of religion have been expressed mostly in the lives of great personalities, and it is in them one can find the power of religion especially operative.

15. The historical method has, furthermore, demonstrated the priority of religion to literature. The discovery of this truth militates against the idea of the authority which Protestants had attached to the Bible, and consequently indicates the untenability of the view that in the Church of the Apostolic age present-day Christianity is to find its ideal for imitation in doctrine and in life.

16. The historical method has also revealed that the modern Bible in its arrangement of the books of the canon has lost its historical perspective. The principle which was followed in the order found in the King James Version and Luther's translation was the systematic and typical. The order of the Biblical books in the translations just mentioned is not chronological. Thus Avey asserted: "The very structure of the collections, especially the Old Testament, shows that the present arrangement of the material is the result of an effort to bring old material up to date at a late period."<sup>16</sup>

The following gives an outline of the chronology of the Old Testament according to Dodd:

Century B. C.

XIII (or earlier?) Exodus from Egypt: Oral traditions (laws, legends, poems) preserved in later writings.

XII (?) Settlement in Canaan: Oral traditions (laws, legends, poems) preserved in later writings.

XI Wars with Canaanites, etc.: Oral traditions (laws, legends, poems) preserved in later writings.

Foundation of the monarchy (David, 1000 B. C.)

X Court chronicles begin (incorporated in later books).

IX Early laws and traditions written down: Judean collection ('J') and Ephraimite collections ('E'), later incorporated in Genesis-to-Joshua.

VIII Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah (fall of Samaria).

VII Josiah's reformation, 621. Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum

VI Habakkuk, Judges, Samuel, Kings (fall of Jerusalem)

V 'Priestly' laws and narratives of Genesis-to-Joshua ('P') written on the basis of earlier traditions. Malachi, Job.

IV Compilation of Genesis-to-Joshua (out of 'J', 'E', 'P', and Deuteronomy).

III Chronicles, Ecclesiastes.

II Book of Psalms completed (largely out of much earlier poems). Ecclesiasticus, Daniel

I Book of Wisdom and other Apocrypha.<sup>17</sup>

For the New Testament the chronological development according to Barnett was as follows:

49 Galatians

50 The Thessalonian Letters

53—55 The Correspondence with Corinth

56 Romans

(55) 60 Philippians

(55?) 61—62 Colossians and Philemon

65—67 Mark

75—80 Matthew

90—95 Luke-Acts

95 Ephesians

95 Hebrews

95—100 First Peter

95—115 The Fourth Gospel

110—115 The Johannine Epistles

125—150 James

125—150 Jude

150 Second Peter

160—175 The Epistles to Timothy and Titus<sup>18</sup>

17. Another important conclusion resulting from the application of the historical method is the claim that the Bible contains not only the record of great historical events, but also the author's interpretation of those events. C. T. Craig claimed the objective historian must seek to eliminate the interpretation of the Biblical authors if a true understanding of the religion of Jesus is to be obtained.<sup>19</sup> That is the great task which faces the historian and interpreter of the Gospels, namely, to distinguish between what Christ taught and did, and the claims made by His disciples and followers. It is necessary, according to Craig, to distinguish between history as "seen from the outside" and history as "seen from the inside." There is a great difference between one's own observation of history as an outside spectator or as a participant.

18. Those scholars employing the historical method, who make the so-called "life situation" approach the basic and governing principle of the historical method, contend that the experiences individuals have are in themselves creative and produce the type of literature of a given epoch. The religious experience of the Galatians was as much responsible for the Letter to the Galatians as was Paul's contribution in connection with it. The "Chicago School" of historians and interpreters has emphasized the great influence the social environment had upon Saint Paul's thinking and writing, and concluded from this type of reasoning that the old orthodox Protestant position, which held that the pure Word of God in the New Testament was diluted and perverted by the Christianity of the second and third centuries, is not in harmony with the facts.

19. This interpretation led both the "Chicago School" and the "Form Criticism" school to the position whereby Jesus Himself was supposed to have been influenced by His own social situation, and His teachings shaped and formulated by it. Many of Jesus' teachings, it is claimed, He borrowed from rabbinism. Many modern scholars have adopted the position with regard to the Gospels that the student cannot find a true picture of Jesus in them, but merely the interpretation of what Jesus meant to the Evangelists. This group of scholars explains the Gospels not as being lives of Christ written by the four Evangelists to various groups, but rather the result of Gentile communities to meet their own needs as they were struggling to maintain themselves in the cities of the Graeco-

Roman world. One of the results of the historical method has been the removal of the Fourth Gospel from consideration as a primary source for the life of Jesus, inasmuch as it is supposed to be a product of the second century, and thus many years removed from the time in which Jesus lived. This is claimed because the Fourth Gospel from beginning to end presents Jesus as the Messiah, the divine world-Savior, a portrayal different from the picture delineated by Mark.

20. Even though the historical character of many episodes and narratives has been questioned and shown to be fictitious or inaccurate, it is still the contention of the liberal advocates of the historical method that the spiritual values of these writings are not impeached, impaired, or invalidated.

#### IV

To a Bible-believing Christian and interpreter the majority of the conclusions and implications just enumerated are diametrically opposed to some of the most fundamental teachings of the Bible. In these deductions the devout believer and expositor sees nothing but the scuttling of miraculous Christianity, in which special revelation has been secularized and a spurious semi-Biblical theism was disseminated under the guise of a philosophy of religion. Does the use of the historical method of necessity lead to these conclusions? Can the Bible interpreter who accepts the hermeneutical principles set forth in the Word of God, employ the historical method and still be faithful to the literal teachings of the Scriptures? Can those who believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Ghost, with the miraculous events reported in it, such as the virgin birth, the miracles of Christ, the Lord's resurrection, and other teachings obnoxious to the liberals, be scientific and critical in their methodology? Liberalism and Modernism answer: No!

Only those subscribing to the anti-Biblical positions of the liberals are allowed by Modernists to lay claim to be scientific in their application of the historical method. The conservative and orthodox hermeneut, however, can be just as scientific, if not more so, than the liberal interpreter, because the scientific method is nothing more than the inductive method. The latter has been described in the following way: "Scientific induction means, in short, all the proc-

esses by which the observing and amassing of data are regulated with a view to facilitating the formation of explanatory conceptions and theories.”<sup>20</sup> The inductive method begins with the recognition of a problem whose solution is sought through a process of collecting data, which in turn, is so ordered that it may become the foundation for generalization pertinent to the problem. Wilbur White has epitomized the inductive method thus: 1. Observe exactly; 2. Describe correctly; 3. Compare justly; 4. Express cogently; and 5. Obey implicitly.<sup>21</sup> All these processes can be applied in the study of Biblical books without the interpreter’s being required to reach views on the Bible contrary to those expressed in the Scriptures and opposed to those held by Jesus. If, for example, the Christian expositor is interpreting the book of Isaiah, he need not deny that Isaiah predicted the return of the Children of Israel under Cyrus from the Babylonian Captivity, nor when exegeting the book of Saint Matthew, is he required to reject the account of the Virgin Birth, the miracles performed by Christ, and repudiate the resurrection and ascension of Jesus in order to be scientific in his exegesis? When Bower wrote: “The scientific method, quite as much as the findings of science, is opposed to a supernatural and static conception of the world and man,”<sup>22</sup> he was making a statement untrue to the facts, for the scientific method is not of necessity allied with any one particular philosophical system, whether it be deism, idealism, or naturalism.

An examination of the use of the historical method by the liberals in the 19th and 20th centuries reveals that certain presuppositions and assumptions undergirded their conception of the historical method. If these are understood, it will not be difficult to see how the conclusions set forth above were reached. Shailer Matthews described the difference between the Modernist and conservative use of the Bible as one not lying “in degree of loyalty or respect, but in the method of using it and *in the presuppositions with which it is studied.*”<sup>23</sup> (Italics are the essayist’s.) McCown has reminded the users of the historical method that in the exercise of historical criticism the orthodox as well as the heterodox interpreter depends “upon his theory of interpretation, his philosophy of history, and his theological ideas; and these, again, are partly determined by his sense of need and his judgments of value.”<sup>24</sup> What

Reeves said many years ago about the liberal's use of the Scripture is still true: "It is their philosophy or world-view that is responsible for all their speculations and theories. Their mental attitude towards the world and its phenomena is the same as their attitude toward the Bible and the religion therein revealed."<sup>25</sup>

The entire liberal movement was the full-grown child of Rationalism, which sets up man's reason as the final canon of truth. Whatever did not measure up to the taste and opinions of the critics was rejected. The liberal's denunciation of the dogmatic and proof-text method is to be understood in this light. The doctrine of original sin, man's culpability, the existence of hell, and many other doctrines were repudiated as intellectually unacceptable. Verbal, plenary, or dynamic inspiration was rejected together with its corollary of authority residing in the Scriptures. Revelation came to be simply another term for human insight and discovery. In the new conception of authority, for some denoting the ethical teachings of Christ, for others, the Spirit of Jesus, there was no binding of conscience either to the letter (verbal inspiration) or even to the essential thought (dynamic inspiration) of the Sacred Writings.

Rationalism, the father of the modern historical method, has always rejected the supernatural, and consequently the miracles of the Old and New Testaments were either denied or reinterpreted to dovetail with the basic postulates of rationalism. Thus the miracles of the Bible are explained mythologically, or described as misrepresentations of natural events, or the fiction of a post-event author. Since the old conception of Old Testament prophecy must be placed in the category of the miraculous, the activity of the Prophets was explained in such a way as to deny the supernatural aspect of prophecy and harmonize it with the principles of rationalism.

The theory of evolution was made a component part of the historical method and became the moving force behind higher criticism. This philosophic concept of development was applied to the documents of the Bible, and the religion of the Bible was arranged according to the scheme through which all religions are supposed to have passed. Those who have been strongly influenced by the doctrine of evolution expect to find in all religions a slow

upward development, from animism, polytheism, henotheism, to monotheism. The introduction of the idea of evolution into the interpretation of Biblical religion led to the development of the "religionsgeschichtliche Schule" of interpretation. The emphasis of this school of interpreters was that a religion had a history and not a theology. The literature of the Old Testament and the Hebrew religion were studied in the light of the literature, religion, and history of its neighbors. Likewise, the New Testament, the Early Church, Jesus, and Paul were studied against their background. In this connection, special emphasis was placed upon Talmudic writings, apocalypses, and Philo, and upon the mystery religions current in the Roman Empire. The comparative-religion approach helped to rob Christianity of its claim to represent the absolute truth. Many interpreters who adhered to this viewpoint attributed to Christianity the honor of being the highest development in the history of the religious attainment of mankind. That, however, did not mean it could not be superseded in the future by something superior. In fact, evolution abhors finality and automatically demands that Christianity will be supplanted. Professor Dahl in describing the historical method said: "It is said to be critical, comparative, and evolutionary."<sup>26</sup> The distinction between canonical and uncanonical was overcome as a result of the adoption of the comparative method, with the result that uncanonical Christian writings, more or less contemporary with the books of the New Testament, were studied together and practically put on a par of equality with the canonical books.

Since evolution is not a proved fact, but merely a theory, the claim by many scholars that the liberals were objective in their approach to the Bible is not true. Rist admitted that historical or Biblical criticism has been influenced by the findings, conclusions, and methods found in other branches of learning.<sup>27</sup> For instance, the discovery of natural laws in the field of science led to skepticism in the field of Biblical studies. The working hypotheses of natural science were allowed to become the dogmas of theology.

The theory of evolution, however, has been challenged in other fields of learning. Thus in the domain of anthropology and in the history of religion, research has revealed that among primitive peoples, the existence of a "high God," the Supreme Being, is con-

sidered to be the Father and Creator of the world. It has been shown that from the earliest times *El* was the name for the High God among Semitic nations and existed before all lower and inferior spirits. Dr. Langdon, professor of Assyriology at Oxford, on the basis of his studies of the Sumerian, Babylonian, and other Near Eastern religions, became convinced that monotheism preceded polytheism. In consequence of his findings, he has rejected the modern theory of evolution as applied to Hebrew history and religion.<sup>28</sup>

Already in 1928 Ernst Scott called the attention of his fellow critics in the field of New Testament studies to certain limitations connected with the application of the historical method to the New Testament. Thus he asserted: "Much of the recent work which has been done in the name of the historical method has served only to darken counsel."<sup>29</sup> He enumerated a number of weaknesses of the method then apparent to him. Of those mentioned by Scott, the following are important: 1. The historical method has concerned itself with origins, with the process by which some institution or belief came into existence, and concludes that because of this analysis it now understands the result. 2. The historical method, which discovered a number of similarities between the New Testament, the mystery religions, and the rabbinical writings, was made to support the position that Christianity borrowed from its surroundings, a conclusion unwarranted. The besetting sin of the historical method has been the building up of a theory on some chance coincidence in language or idea. 3. The principal defect of the historical method has been the emphasis on genetic relations while failing to take into account the profounder origins of religious ideas and beliefs.<sup>30</sup> The school of thought which endeavored to explain everything in terms of the genetic method, according to Scott, had no perception whatever of the true origins of Christianity. In fact, in his judgment, the historical method in the hands of many became "little more than a specious excuse for loose and indolent criticism."<sup>31</sup>

Aside from these deficiencies, one of the major weaknesses of the modern conception of the historical method is its failure to find any meaning and significance in the Biblical message for the twentieth-century student of the Bible. Thus Enslin declared: "These writings, which eventually came to be called the New

Testament, were written for purely practical purposes: to meet specific needs felt in those days. They were not prepared to edify or to instruct subsequent generations which might desire historical insight into the past.”<sup>32</sup> Rist portrayed the objective of the historical method as consisting in determining what meaning the Biblical books had for their first readers. In recent years a host of scholars, who cannot be classified as conservatives, have come to recognize this fundamental deficiency of the historical method. Scott warned Biblical scholars that there can be no true criticism which does not take into account the permanent message of a Scriptural book and is only concerned with determining sources and affinities. Dodd of Cambridge, in a number of his publications, has depicted the scholarly revolt that has been taking place in recent years in regard to the historical method, because it was leading to barren results. He described this as a revolt against “historicism” (*Historismus*) and maintained that it was necessary to place renewed emphasis upon Christian dogma and on a theological approach in the interpretation of Scriptures.<sup>33</sup> Cunliffe-Jones averred that the historical study of the Bible had erred by looking at the books of Scripture with a detached eye, seeing them from a natural standpoint. It is not sufficient merely to see the Bible as a historic achievement, but the interpreter must study the books of the Bible from the standpoint of the Christian faith. Although the books of the Bible are regarded to be historical documents and the result of a historical process, the Biblical interpreter must nevertheless take into consideration the Bible’s content in terms of the completed revelation it is.<sup>34</sup> According to Lowe, the employers of the historical method went astray in two main directions. In the first place, the rationalistic and humanistic tendencies of many scholars became a fixed bias resulting in a distortion of what the Scriptures actually contained. Everything which could not be explained in terms of their interpretation of events was ruled out in advance. The rejection of the supernatural became an axiom with them. In the second place, the liberals misused the historical method by diluting the theological contents of the Bible in the process of interpretation. The theologian became a philologist and was re-enforced by more professional philologists who were not theologians, with the result that theological students did not get a knowledge of theo-

logy, but instead were well indoctrinated in the critical method, mastered the so-called assured results of higher criticism, and surveyed the pronouncements by the authorities in critical studies.<sup>35</sup> Manson, as one of the Edward Alleyn Lecturers in 1943, spoke of "The Failure of Liberalism to Interpret the Bible as the Word of God." In this lecture he showed how liberalism, accepting the hypotheses of natural science as proved dogmas, rejected the teachings of historical Christianity and reduced the Gospel to a message about God instead of accepting it as God's revelation of Himself to the world. Christianity was transformed into a religion of humanism. By distinguishing between the passing and the permanent, the husk and the kernel, they were able to water down the contents of Christianity to such a degree as to make it impossible for the original writers, were they to return to this life, to recognize their literary products.<sup>36</sup>

Lynn Hough has pointed out yet another weakness in the modernists's conception of the historical method. He asserted already in the early twenties that the modern period of interpretation had as its keynote "history rather than interpretation." The historical method, he felt, was brilliant in its analyses, in the method by which it established the composite authorship of books and made comparisons with other Oriental religions, but while there was painstaking and microscopic research, there was no synthesis.<sup>37</sup> Higher criticism in his opinion only produced a catalog of unrelated facts. Many scholars have come to recognize the extreme atomism and stress on variety resulting from the critical and analytical approach which was responsible for a great loss in the understanding of the larger message of the Scriptures. Thus the April, 1951, issue of *Interpretation* was dedicated to the fact of the unity of the Biblical books. Those who take the New Testament Gospel seriously, so Filson contends, must find unity in the Bible. In the New Testament the Christian exegete finds the completion, the realization, and the fulfillment of that which God revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament cannot be understood without the New Testament; the New Testament presupposes the message and contents of the Old Testament.

The findings of the historical method have robbed the Biblical books and the message contained in them of their uniqueness and

singularity. The living God, say the Scriptures, broke into a people's life and by mighty acts performed his wonders in their behalf. It was not Israel which chose God, but God who chose Israel. It was Jehovah who elected the sons of Abraham to be the chosen people of God from whom eventually the Savior of the world would come. The uniqueness and singularity of the Old and New Testaments has been well expressed by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the Prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, whom He hath appointed Heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds" (1:1-2). The uniqueness of the Bible is to be found in the fact that Christ is the center and goal of the Bible. This gives the sixty-six books of the Bible a perspective in which Jesus Christ is seen both as the fulfillment and the end of the Law.

Finally, the application of the scientific-historical-critical method has been responsible partly for the neglect and the disuse of the Bible among the educated, especially by those indoctrinated to question the inspiration and authority of the Bible. William Bower listed the use of the critical-historical method as one of the factors contributing to the neglect of the Scriptures by young and old.<sup>38</sup> Cunliffe-Jones accused the misuse of the historical method as responsible for the widespread decay of the Bible-reading habit and the falling into desuetude of the expository type of preaching, which has always nourished Bible reading. The critical-historical method has, furthermore, led to the destruction of "the old common believing use of the Bible."<sup>39</sup> Some modern users of this method, represented particularly by "the criticism by social environment" group, were led eventually to a thoroughgoing skepticism. Thus in 1926 Bultmann wrote: "I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist."<sup>40</sup> Shirley Jackson Case, who wrote a biography of Jesus, came to the conclusion of the impossibility of writing a biography of Jesus in a very real sense. A tree can be judged by its fruitage, declared Jesus.

It has thus been shown that the so-called modern historical

method with its appeal to scientific methodology, in the name of classic liberalism, allied itself with Darwinian evolution and adopted a documentary reconstruction of the Bible. This was supported by an appeal to philosophic immanence in the name of which it felt warranted in resisting the miraculous and the view that the true essence of religion was to be found in Christianity alone. The liberal's and Modernist's conception of the scientific-historical-critical method with its implications as outlined in this essay must be rejected. The repudiation of the modern-historical method should not, however, be construed as a rejection of the place of historical interpretation in the exegetical process. Since the Word of God originated in a historical manner, it cannot be adequately understood or considered except in the light of history. To the extent that the contents of the Bible have been historically determined, to that extent must its explanation be found in history. Thus the science of hermeneutics of necessity must also include historical interpretation. The latter, however, is not to be confused with the accommodation theory of Semler, even though he dignified it with that name, nor, as Berkhof warned, "with the present-day historical-critical method of interpretation."<sup>41</sup> It will mean that textual or lower criticism, philological or grammatical criticism, literary and historical criticism, will be used. The preparatory efforts of the humanist historians of the past are not to be undervalued nor allowed to remain unused, yet Christian interpretation must demand that an entirely different category of historical interpretation is required for the understanding of God's revelation. Only those who are born again by the Holy Spirit can understand the meaning of that history in which God has revealed Himself. Those who merely depend upon a historical approach, without divine enlightenment, essay a task for which they are unqualified.

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#### FOOTNOTES

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