From: Dillenberger and Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through its Development,* pp. 169-76.

Biblical Criticism

At the same time that Schleiermacher was completing his work, there appeared another important movement which was to exert a powerful influence in the development of Protestantism — viz., the elaboration and growing acceptance of the methods of "biblical criticism," or "historical criticism" of the Bible.

The term *biblical criticism* must be properly understood, for confusion as to the meaning of the word "criticism" has often led to wholly misguided opposition to "critical" views of the Bible. In popular English usage, "to criticize" usually means "to find fault" or "to attack." But this is not at all the intent of the biblical scholars. They are critics simply in the sense of the Greek *kritikos,* which means "literary expert." In general, biblical criticism can be described as the application to the Bible of the same kind of analysis that is applied to the works of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, and to other forms of literature.

A somewhat different kind of critical study of the Bible had long been accepted in the church — viz., "textual criticism," or what was frequently called in the nineteenth century "lower criticism." This was a study of all available ancient manuscripts of the Bible for the purpose of determining, as nearly as possible, the original text of the biblical writings, thereby eliminating errors which had crept into the text in its transmission (e.g., through faulty copying). Such criticism had been given strong impetus by the Reformation, which challenged the authority of the Latin Vulgate (the official version in the Roman church) and stimulated the study of Hebrew and Greek texts. Thus, Luther used a Greek edition of the New Testament published in 1516 by the great Renaissance scholar Erasmus. Textual criticism also played an important part in the King James translation of the Bible (1611),

in which a number of errors in the Vulgate version were corrected; and textual studies have continued to have a central role in subsequent translations, especially with the discovery of previously unknown and very early manuscripts.

The new criticism of the nineteenth century went far beyond the attempt to ascertain the original text of the Scriptures. Leaving aside, for the purposes of their study, traditional notions about the authorship or inspiration of the Scriptures, the critics now sought to answer afresh such questions as the following: what is the relation of the biblical books to each other? how were they written? by whom? when? what did the writers intend to say? were there historical causes which might account for the recorded developments in the Scriptures? what is the relation of the biblical record to other records of ancient times?

For the most part, answers to these questions were sought in an intensive study of the Scriptures themselves, using tools of analysis which were being developed in other literary study (though it should be noted that biblical scholars have contributed perhaps more than any other group to the origin and refinement of this kind of literary criticism). An example of such analysis is the work of the Italian Lorenzo Valla, who in 1440 had proved that the "Donation of Constantine" was a forgery (see Ch. I). The Donation was supposedly a decree of the Emperor Constantine, granting to the Pope temporal rule over the central states of Italy. Valla showed that the document referred to several events which had occurred centuries after the death of Constantine, and that therefore it must have been composed at a later time and attributed to the emperor.

Historical criticism of the Bible did not originate in the nineteenth century. It had been employed even in ancient times by some opponents of the church and by a small minority of Christian scholars. Moreover, developments in the Reformation and the Renaissance turned the study of the Bible increasingly in this direction. The reformers, especially Luther and Tyndale, had insisted on interpretation of the Bible according to the "plain meaning" of the text. This was in contrast to "allegorical interpretation" (i.e., the search for hidden or "spiritual" meanings), which had been a favorite method of dealing with apparent contradictions within the Bible. The reformers themselves did not altogether relinquish the method, but their stated opposition to allegory made it increasingly difficult to adopt this means of explaining the difficult passages. This insistence, together with the Protestant emphasis on the centrality of the Bible, helped to prepare the way for historical criticism.

Yet biblical studies in the church had continued to be largely insulated from literary criticism or defensive in reaction against it. There were important works of critics outside orthodox circles, such as Spinoza's study of the miracles and Old Testament sources (in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus,* 1670) and Thomas Hobbes's outline of methods for critical study of the Old Testament (in the *Leviathan,* 1651). But these began to receive sympathetic attention from Protestant scholars only in the late eighteenth century, in such men as Ernesti and Semler (see Ch. VII). Then in the nineteenth century, as theological leadership passed to the freer atmosphere of the German universities, historical criticism began to gain wide acceptance in the church and the methods of study were developed further. The goal of biblical study came to be historical objectivity: the task was to be purely factual and descriptive.

The method and significance of historical criticism can best be illustrated by some of the problems with which the scholars were concerned. One was the relation of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) to the Gospel of John. There are certain striking differences between the Synoptics and John which have to be accounted for in some way. The chronology of the life of Jesus is different. To cite only one example: according to John, Jesus twice celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem, the first being the occasion of the cleansing of the temple and early in Jesus' ministry (Jn 2:13ff.), the second at the time of the crucifixion (Jn 11:55ff.). The Synoptics record only one trip to Jerusalem for the Passover, at the end of Jesus' ministry, and the cleansing of the temple is placed there (see Mk 11:15ff.). Equally important is the remarkable difference between the Synoptics and John as to the form of Jesus' teaching. In the Synoptics we find Jesus speaking usually in short, pointed sayings or parables; in John we find him speaking in long, involved discourses. In the Synoptics, Jesus says very little about himself; in John he talks at length about his own person and his relation to the Father. Moreover, the latter gospel often seems confused about the geography of Palestine.

On the basis of these and many other considerations, the biblical critics concluded that the Gospel of John was a less reliable source than the Synoptics for accurate information about the events of Jesus' life or his actual teachings. It was rather a later theological interpretation, which sought to set forth the meaning of the events, without primary regard for historical accuracy, and which ascribed to Jesus much that he did not actually say (though the speeches recorded might be the author's expansion of certain of Jesus' sayings).

What then of the relation of the first three gospels to each other? A careful comparison of these gospels showed that nearly all of Mark, the shortest gospel, is included in Matthew and Luke — not only that the events and the sayings in Mark are related in the other gospels in the same way and order, but also that the language of the accounts is frequently identical. This was not a new discovery, but now a new interpretation was placed on the evidence. It was suggested, contrary to the tradition that Matthew was the earliest gospel, that in fact Mark was written first and the writers of Matthew and Luke had drawn on

Mark for their portraits of Jesus. This was the simplest explanation and the one which would be given for any other three documents which were similarly parallel.

When this relation of the first three gospels was accepted, a further question arose from the fact, that there are substantial portions (about 250 verses) of Matthew and Luke which are the same, and practically identical in language, but which do not appear in Mark. These parallels consist entirely of sayings of Jesus. The logical conclusion is that in addition to Mark, the writers of Matthew and Luke had another common source of information which each one incorporated into his gospel, together with the material from Mark and information which each had secured from other sources. As to what lay behind these written sources, subsequent analysis led to substantial agreement with a suggestion of Schleiermacher, that the gospels ultimately consist of a large number of fragments, more or less artificially connected.

Another closely related result of historical criticism was the conclusion that the various parts of the New Testament reveal distinctive "points of view," and that these show the particular background and interest of the writers and also indicate the existence in New Testament times of different and sometimes antagonistic wings or parties in the church. Thus the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes the continuity of Christianity with Judaism (Jesus as the fulfillment of the law) and this gospel is seen as a product of a Jewish Christian community. Luke, however, stresses the abrogation of the Jewish law, in line with Paul's view of Christ as superseding and making unnecessary obedience to the Jewish law; this was a gospel directed to the Gentiles.

So far, we have been speaking only of the study of the New Testament. Historical criticism had been applied even earlier to the Old Testament, and here there were some even more acute difficulties. If it was true that the gospels were composite writings (i.e., that they were not simply the products of individual writers but were compilations from various sources), this was even more true of the Old Testament. One important example is the book of Isaiah. By a thorough analysis of references in the book to the social and political environment, and to the religious situation of the Hebrews, it was concluded that the prophecies attributed to Isaiah were the work of at least two men, who lived centuries apart. Most of chapters 1 to 39 came from a man who prophesied in the kingdom of Judah between 740 and 700 B.C. Chapters 40ff. were largely the work of a prophet during the exile in Babylonia, specifically about 540 B.C. Moreover, Old Testament prophecy in general could no longer be understood as specific prediction of details in the life of Christ, but only as expressions of the general hope of the Hebrews for a Messiah, and thus perhaps as a general preparation for the revelation in Christ.

The most revolutionary conclusion of Old Testament criticism had

to do with the composite character of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), which even before the time of Christ had been considered the work of Moses. This in spite of the fact that in one of these books, Deuteronomy, Ch. 34, the death and burial of Moses are described and it is stated that "no one knows the place of his burial to this day." The phrase "to this day" clearly suggests that it was written at a later time. Close analysis of the style of the writing, of the use of different names for God, of the duplication of narratives (e.g., two stories of creation and two interwoven accounts of the flood), of the variation in religious conceptions, etc., led to the theory that these five books of the Bible were the product of at least four different writers or schools of writers. The final form of the Pentateuch was held to be the work of a group of "editors" who, probably after 550 B.C., combined: 1) two ancient traditions about the origins of the world and of the Hebrew people — these were commonly called "J" and "E" writers, because they used the names Jahweh and Elohim, respectively, for God; 2) a law code, now comprising most of the book of Deuteronomy; 3) some other early snatches of poetry and legend; and 4) their own interpretative pattern and amplification of the laws. A similar composite character was discovered in other historical books of the Old Testament.

These illustrations make clear the crucial problems which biblical criticism introduced for Christian thought. The reliability of the Old Testament record was seriously questioned, not only as regards the stories of creation but even with respect to the history of the Hebrews. In some cases the traditional view of Israel's development was exactly reversed: the great law codes did not come before but after the prophets. Moses was not the author of the laws; indeed it was not clear that much of anything could be known for certain about Moses. In the case of the New Testament a similar embarrassment concerned the gospel records. Considering that the earliest was written a generation after Jesus' death, considering their uncertain authorship and the points of view or "biases" evident in the writings, could one be at all sure of their accuracy in reporting the life and teaching of Jesus?

In spite of these questions, most scholars at the end of the nineteenth century could speak of "the assured results of biblical criticism." The more extreme negative theories had been thoroughly discredited (such as the notion that Jesus never lived). The critics were confident that while many traditional conceptions of the Bible had to be given up, it was now possible to know truly the Jesus of history, to distinguish the words and character of Jesus from the interpretations that the church later placed on him and his work. It should be noted, however, that the confidence of the late nineteenth century in the success of the "quest for the historical Jesus" was due for some rude shocks.

By the turn of the century it was being seriously questioned whether the evidence is at all adequate to provide a biography of Jesus in the modern sense. As one scholar, Martin Kähler, put it, historical science uncovers only "a vast field strewn with the fragments of various traditions," out of which no sure account of the development of Jesus' life can come. Others, such as Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, were to contend that the authentic teaching of Jesus was not all that comfortable for modern minds to hear, because of its inseparable connection with his preaching of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. It became clear that in some cases the conclusions of historical criticism were shaped more by "scientific" assumptions or by cultural, philosophical, and theological presuppositions than by objective analysis. Thus, the miracle stories were often rejected as inauthentic or mythical simply because "miracles can't happen." Moreover, Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God was frequently set aside as a later addition or an unessential element in his teaching that he merely took over from his contemporaries, or the idea of the kingdom was similarly construed more in terms of nineteenth-century thought than in the thought-forms of the first century. Further, at the very end of the nineteenth century, the so-called history of religions (*religionsgeschichtlich*) school of criticism began to show clearly how deeply imbedded were both the Old and New Testaments in the other religious traditions of the ancient Near East. The biblical stories of creation, for example, had to be seen in relation to Babylonian creation myths by which they were influenced. The New Testament affirmations about Christ had to be set in connection to other current kinds of ascriptions of deity and even to the ancient myths of dying and rising gods.

What is important here, however, is that in spite of uncertainties and debate, biblical criticism was in principle firmly and irrevocably established by the end of the nineteenth century and continued to flourish in new and sophisticated forms in the twentieth. The decisive issue was not the specific interpretations of historical criticism, but lay at a deeper level — viz., at the level of the *significance* and *authority* of the Bible as a whole (i.e., precisely in the giving up of traditional conceptions of biblical revelation). The acceptance of biblical criticism meant the abandonment of the belief that the Bible is an infallible record of divine revelation. There might be much in the Bible which is inspired, much that is divine, but there is also much that is human and even in error. The Bible is not a book delivered to us from on high and preserved from all error, so that we might trust it absolutely. It is instead a very human book, including widely differing understandings of God and of God's will, and including not only valuable historical documents, contemporary with the events they recorded, but also legends and even fiction, which often contradict each other and known historical facts.

In short, it was all up with the dogma of the inerrancy of Scripture. This was perhaps the most important development in nineteenth-century Protestant thought, even more far-reaching in its implications than the influence of the new scientific theories. The result of the new understanding of the Bible was a revolution in thought comparable to the Reformation itself. The reformers had challenged the absolute authority of the church and tradition and had insisted that final authority rested in the Scriptures alone. True, Luther had stoutly insisted that Christ is supreme over the Scriptures and could label some of the biblical writings as of lesser value than others; and by no means all of Protestantism had been committed to the rigid view of biblical inerrancy developed in Protestant scholasticism. The destruction of the notion that the Bible is from cover to cover a recording of divinely revealed truths was in part a return to the classical Protestant view. But none of the reformers had envisaged so radical a questioning of biblical authority as this.

It has often been said that biblical criticism was far more disturbing to Protestantism than to Roman Catholicism, because the former had relied exclusively on the Scriptures. This is true in the sense that biblical criticism came to be generally accepted in Protestantism and led to basic reorientations of thought. In Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, the authority of church and tradition could be appealed to in defense of the authority of Scripture, and the church steadfastly set its face against the new views, notably during the pontificate of Pius X, with the condemnation of "Modernism" in 1907.[7] Not until well into the twentieth century did biblical critical methods become commonplace in Roman Catholic scholarship.

We have spoken thus far of biblical criticism as posing certain problems for Christian thought. This does not mean, however, that the new conception of the Bible which came to characterize Protestant liberalism originated simply as a reaction to the discoveries of historical criticism. In fact, the situation was more nearly the reverse. It was new conceptions of religious authority and of the meaning of revelation which made possible the development of biblical criticism. One of these was the religious philosophy of Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), which influenced several of the leading biblical critics of the first half of the century. According to this philosophy, the essence of Christianity lay in the great ideas which were enshrined in such doctrines as the Trinity and the Incarnation. The truth of these was not dependent upon the historical accuracy of the Bible; therefore the findings of

[7] In 1906 the Vatican Biblical Commission declared that the arguments against Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch were worthless, and later affirmed that the Gospel of John was equally reliable with the Synoptics as a historical source. Pius X specifically forbade Roman Catholic scholars to use the methods of "secular" historical analysis on the Bible.

the critics did not at all compromise the truth of the faith. The Hegelian interpretation was, however, relatively short-lived except in certain types of the philosophy of religion. It was quickly seen that Christian faith cannot be indifferent to the historical facts of its origin.

A far more important reinterpretation of religious authority had been suggested by Friedrich Schleiermacher — and it was along this line that there developed the characteristic view of liberal Protestantism which made possible a ready acceptance of historical criticism. Schleiermacher had insisted, we recall, that at its root religion is neither belief nor obedience to a moral code, but an immediately experienced relation to God. All Christian doctrines, creeds, and confessions are human interpretations of the experience of redemption through Jesus Christ. Not any external authority, Bible, or creed, or church, is finally normative, but only the living experience of Christians.

This insight led to a new understanding of the authority of the Bible — not the authority of a purely objective and external revelation, delivered by God for acceptance by believers, but rather the authority of a record of religious experience. As a product of the overwhelming experience of the earliest Christians, the New Testament has immense significance and authority for all subsequent understandings of the Christian gospel, and it serves to communicate the experience to later generations. But interpretations in the New Testament as to the meaning of Christ do not have to be taken as infallible divine deliverances. The central fact to which the New Testament points, the presence of God in Christ, is of all-embracing import, but differences in interpretation and in the reporting of events are to be expected. No longer is it necessary to tortuously explain away discrepancies in the accounts, or differences in point of view. The Bible is a human and fallible, albeit inspired and inspiring, record of the response of human beings to the revealing work of God. Biblical criticism does not destroy the religious value of the Bible; it enhances that value. In the New Testament it enables us to penetrate behind the documents to the central facts of the life of Christ. In the Old Testament, through the distinguishing of the various layers of tradition and their dates, it reveals to us the gradual development of Hebrew religion into the ethical monotheism of the great prophets.

Such was the general understanding of the Bible which emerged from the reinterpretation by Schleiermacher and his successors and from the new biblical research. Theological leadership was centered in Germany throughout the nineteenth century, but the movements which began there spread rapidly to France, Britain, and America, so that by the end of the century the new patterns of thought were rapidly becoming dominant throughout Protestantism.