

CHAPTER 10

The Historical-Critical Method in Biblical Studies

Its History, Potential, and Limitations

Armin D. Baum

The expression *historical-critical method* is ambiguous. Not just one but (at least) two different methods of analyzing a given text are called “historical-critical.” Therefore, I will first look at this somewhat confusing terminology.

Most influential books on New Testament methodology usually give much more room for exegetical than for historical method. For this reason, I will describe both the exegetical and the historical method. In due course, I will not only highlight their strengths but also point out their limitations.

Regarding both methods, the question arises about what difference it makes whether exegetes or historians interpret biblical texts as Christian believers. This pneumatic or spiritual dimension of biblical studies is often omitted in textbooks on New Testament method. I will deal with it in relation both to exegetical and to historical interpretation of the New Testament.

Finally, I will look at the relationship between the historical-critical method and *a priori* criticism of the miraculous. What is the main difference between a dogmatic or absolute and an open-minded approach to the supernatural elements in the biblical texts?¹

1. As a German scholar, I write this text from a German perspective, but I will also include some

As a New Testament scholar, I discuss various aspects of the “historical-critical method” significant for New Testament studies but am quite confident that my observations and explanations also apply to Old Testament studies.

TERMINOLOGY

The English word *method* derives from the Greek word *methodos*, which generally means “following after, pursuit” and can refer specifically to “pursuit of knowledge, scientific inquiry, investigation, method of inquiry.”² The Latin word *methodus* also refers to “a mode of proceeding.”³ Accordingly, our modern word *method* means “procedure” and refers to a systematic procedure for obtaining knowledge.

Different objects require different methods. This also applies to biblical studies. Biblical scholars use an exegetical method and a historical method.

EXEGESIS AND THE EXEGETICAL METHOD

The English word *exegesis* derives from the Greek word *exēgēsis*: “the explanation and interpretation of a text which is not easily comprehensible.”⁴ The *exēgētēs* is an “expounder, interpreter,”⁵ among other things of law and poetry. In Latin, the word *interpretatio* means “explanation, interpretation.” The *interpres* or *interpretor* is “one who explains or expounds,” “interpreter,” or “expositor.”⁶ The exegetical method is thus a systematic procedure to explain the meaning of a text.

Already in pre-Christian times, Greek exegetes applied different methodological tools. They defined the meanings of words, analyzed syntactical structures, explained historical backgrounds, formulated paraphrases, and determined the scope of their texts. In addition, already in ancient times the principle of explaining Homer from Homer (Porphyrius) or explaining Hippocrates from

important English titles. However, due to the limited space in this chapter, I will focus on the classical and most influential contributions to my topic. Cf. my article, “Die historisch-kritische Methode in der Bibelwissenschaft: Ihre Geschichte, ihre Leistungsfähigkeit und ihre Grenzen,” *Biblisch erneuerte Theologie* 3 (2019): 53–87. I would like to thank Martin Webber for his help with the English version of this article and for many helpful suggestions.

2. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), s. v.; cf. J. Ritter, “Methode,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. J. Ritter, K. Grunder, and G. Gabriel (Basel: Schwabe, 1971–2007), 5:1304–5.

3. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), s. v.

4. H. Schreckenberg, “Exegese I (heidnisch, Griechen u[nd] Römer),” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950–), 6:1174.

5. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s. v.; *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s. v.

6. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s. v.

“historical” method represented by Troeltsch is another “historical” method.⁹⁰ Representatives of both historical methods agree that even the biblical scholar can only make historical probability statements and that no area of history may be removed from historical research. The essential difference between them is that the historical method defended by Troeltsch starts from an absolute philosophical prejudice, while the historical method advocated by Schlatter, Heim, and others refrains from absolute presuppositions not only in historical but also in ideological terms.

| A Closed Historical Method | An Open Historical Method |
|---|---|
| 1. Criticism (only probability judgments) | 1. Criticism (only probability judgments) |
| 2. Analogy (miracles impossible) | 2. Openness (miracles possible) |
| 3. Correlation (only ordinary history) | 3. Correlation (only ordinary history) |

A Closed and an Open Historical Method

CONCLUSION

In modern biblical studies, both the exegetical and the historical method are called the *historical-critical* method. The roots of this language go back to antiquity. Since the nineteenth century, the adjective *critical* has also been used in the sense of *a priori* miracle criticism. Since that time, *historical-critical* has also come to mean “historical and miracle-critical.”

The exegetical method consists of synchronic and diachronic textual analyses. Exegetes of the limited number of biblical texts must be especially aware of the danger of overinterpretation. However, even if the exegetical method is applied carefully, it cannot offer existential access to the biblical texts. This can only be achieved by pneumatic experience, which of course must never restrict the exegetical method but must complement it.

The historical method consists primarily of external and internal source criticism. The historian must beware of methodical suspicion and the hypercritical evaluation of his sources that results from it. However, as Lessing rightly claimed, even if the historical method is applied perfectly, it cannot produce absolute certainty, only probability judgments. Nevertheless, for Christians, the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, which presupposes the strong historical

90. Cf. Wilckens, *Historische Kritik der historisch-kritischen Exegese*, 354–84.

evidence of the New Testament sources, reaches beyond the limited possibilities of historical research.

The criterion of philosophical miracle criticism was introduced into biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century and promoted successfully by (David Friedrich Strauss and) Ernst Troeltsch. Critics of this philosophical kind of miracle criticism consider the application of such absolute theological preconditions inappropriate and prefer a methodical openness that encompasses their conception of God.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Bruce, F. F. *Understanding Biblical Criticism*. Edited by D. Capes. Nashville: Kingsley, 2017.
- Grant, R. M. *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought*. Amsterdam: North Holland, 1952.
- Lessing, G. E. "On the Proof of the Spirit and on Power." In *Lessing's Theological Writings: Selections in Translation*, edited by H. Chadwick, 51–56. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956.
- Lucian. *How to Write History*. In Loeb Classical Library 430, translated by K. Kilburn, 1–74. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959.
- Maier, G. *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*. Translated by E. W. Leverenz and R. F. Norden. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977.
- Marincola, J. *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Marrou, H.-I. *The Meaning of History*. Translated by Robert J. Olsen. Baltimore: Helicon, 1966.
- Momigliano, A. "Biblical Studies and Classical Studies: Simple Reflections upon Historical Method." In *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, 3–10. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.
- Reiser, M. *Bibelkritik und Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift: Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese und Hermeneutik*. WUNT 217. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007.
- Theissen, G., and A. Merz. *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*. Translated by J. Bowden. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998.
- Troeltsch, E. "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology." In *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Search for the Jesus of History*, edited by G. W. Dawes, 29–53. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000.
- Yarborough, R. W. "Adolf Schlatter's 'The Significance of Method for Theological Work': Translation and Commentary." *SBJT* 1 (1997): 64–76.

THE BIBLE THROUGHOUT THE AGES

ITS NATURE, INTERPRETATION,
AND RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

THE SCRIPTURE COLLECTIVE SERIES

LYDIA JAEGER AND
CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW, EDITORS

 ZONDERVAN
ACADEMIC