Methods of Biblical Interpretation in Modern Times

• Introduction & some helpful images:
  – “Digging” as a Metaphor: Seeing the “Ground”
  – Triptych as a way to understand approaches to the Bible

• Seeing the Ground: The Church

• Seeing the Ground: Modern Approaches
  – Historical/Biblical Criticism (17th C → present)
  – Postmodern Criticisms (latter 20th C → present)

• Response & Conclusion
Focus: understanding modern approaches to Biblical study (worldwide)

Why examine it and its history?

Theological reasons

• Doctrine of Scripture (everybody uses one)
• Self-examination: Practicing what we preach

Missiological reasons

• Better understand our world:
  – why/how the Bible is viewed as just another religious book
  – “unearth” assumptions, prejudices, values that “undermine” a view of Scripture as God’s authoritative Word.
• Better engage our world (community, academy)
Handling the Word of Truth…

“Bumps in the Text”

- “contradictions”
- “surprises”

Do we assume…

- Harmony?
- Multiple theologies, ideologies?
“Digging” as a Metaphor

• How does a miner see the ground s/he digs in?
• How does an archaeologist see the ground s/he digs in?

  – **Purpose:** ore vs. civilization layers, artifacts
  – **Implications:** excavator vs. trowel & brush
    open-cut vs. stratigraphy

• How does the condition of one’s eyes affect what we see?
A Triptych
Another “Triptych”
“Digging” into the Word

• The Biblical Text = Bedrock, dependable
  – Inerrant
  – Clear & unified in its witness

• Digging through the “mud” & “silt” that “blinds” & “deafens”
  – the spirit of our age
  – my idols (cf. Ps 115; 135)

In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. (Isa 29:18)

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound… (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:16-21)
Seeing the Ground & “Digging” into the Word: the Church

• Metaphors have their limits!
  – We “hear” the Word (*Viva Vox Dei*), e.g.,
    – “heard”/“proclaimed” (Rom 10:14-16)
    – we are passive as God does His work in us (Law & Gospel)
    – “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16)
  – Scripture as “bedrock” (witness of prophets & apostles)
    – Church “built on” Christ & His Word (Mt 7:24; 16:16-18)
    – Christ the Builder & Cornerstone (Mt 16:18)
    – Prophets & Apostles = the foundation (Eph 2:19-21; 1Pet 1:21)
    – **Material Principle**: Christ (John 1:1-14)
    – **Formal Principle**: Scripture as testimony of Prophets & Apostles (Eph 2:20; 1Pet 1:21; Heb 1:1-2)

…but we still “dig”
By Contrast, *(Post)Modern* Views of the Ground...

- Culturally: just another “holy” book
- “**Unstable**” (like human language)
  - No such thing as a solid foundation
  - But you can still “play in the dirt”
  - Not reliable historical revelation
  - → occasion for present-day social issues

...erosion takes time & it’s been a while since the Enlightenment

- 17th-21st C: Historical Critical approaches
- 20th-21st C: Postmodernist, ideologically driven approaches
A Snapshot of the Landscape: **Society of Biblical Literature** (2014) “sections” according to…

- **Content:**
  - “Book of Psalms”
  - “Gospel of Luke”
  - “Pauline Epistles”

- **Ideology/Method:**
  - “African-American Biblical Hermeneutics”
  - “Gender, Sexuality, and the Bible”
  - “LGBT Queer Hermeneutics”
  - “Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible”
  - “Ideological Criticism”
What is “Historical Criticism”?

• aka “Higher Criticism” (vis-à-vis “lower” or “textual” criticism)
• Collection of diverse methods (evolved over 18th-20th Cs)
• So-called “assured results”:
  – Authorship (Pentateuch; Gospels; Pastoral Epistles); history
• “Historical”
  – (laudably) interested in historical context
  – (regrettably) deconstructs biblical texts
  – reconstructs history & “second-guesses” biblical chronology/events
    (modern historian’s “better” judgment)
  – (historical context of the interpreter?)
• “Critical”
  – critical thinking an indispensable tool (→ human argument)
  – Reason as “master” of Scripture, not “servant”
Some Characteristics of Historical Criticism and its History

• Richard Simon (17th C)
  – “Father of Higher Criticism”
  – Catholic Priest; discredit *Sola Scriptura*

• Baruch Spinoza (18th C), Johann Semler (19th C), etc.
  – “like any other literature”
  – Bible *contains* the Word of God, not *is* the Word

• Intrusion of (non-Biblical) worldviews under the guise of “objective” scientific scholarship
  – E.g. Julius Wellhausen’s & the “Father of Sociology” Auguste Comte’s evolving view of religion (“primitive” → “sophisticated”)
  – Making room for humanistic agendas; reading “against the grain”
The “Triptych”

Historical Criticism: eyes on CONTEXT
Redefine context, & text

- Spinoza (17th C), Semler (18th C), etc.: “any other literature”
- Text: product of religious evolution (History of Religions School)
- Text: product of human cultural milieu (social sciences)
“Assured Result” e.g. 1: Pentateuch (Gen-Deut)

How have Historical Critics “seen the ground”?

**Source Criticism**
- R. Simon (17th C)
- Jean Astruc (18th C)
- J. Wellhausen (19th C)

**Form Criticism**
- H. Gunkel (post-WWI)
- (Gospels: R. Bultmann [post-WWI])

(Tradition Criticism)
- G. von Rad [post WWII]

**Redaction Criticism**
- (post WWII)

**Canonical Criticism**
- B. Childs (later 20th C)

Priestly (P)
Deuteronomist (D)
Elohist (E)
Yahwist (J)

Oral traditions

→ narrative approaches (seeing the mound again)
“Assured Result” e.g. 2: Pastorals (1-2 Tim, Titus)

Why critical scholars think Paul did not write them?

- Differences in vocabulary vs. “genuine” letters of Paul
- “later” (2nd C) church organization (religious/theological evolution)
- David Meade: → how the theory might fit the Pastoral Epistles
  (i.e., not “proven”)
  Fabricated names, circumstances (e.g., 2Tim 4:9f) → air of authenticity & therefore authority

- Objections:
  - If a hat fits, it does not follow that it’s mine… & that’s a very big IF, because:
  - Creates more problems that it solves
  - Evolution of doctrinal/ecclesiastical “development” = speculative
  - Absence of 2nd C issues like martyrdom & state’s attitude to Christianity
  - Language vis-à-vis audience & occasion

What do James Bond and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang have in common?
Summing Up The Character of Historical Criticism & Some Implications…

- **Atomistic**: assumes contradiction, not harmony
  - Theologies of the Bible, not theology

- **Deconstructive**: skeptical of the Bible’s own testimony to theological history (Christ!)

- **Reconstructive**: revisionist “history of religion/doctrine”

- “humanity” of Scripture or a “humanistic” view of it?
  - Like “any other literature” (18th C: Spinoza; 19th C: Semler)
  - Product of a long history of redaction (editing) of sources
  - Product of religious evolution (Auguste Comte; History of Religions)
  - A practical denial of Divine revelation (e.g., Moses as mediator of Covenant/Torah = literary device, not historical reality)
A Surprising Thing? The Incursion of Historical Criticism in American Evangelicalism

American Evangelicalism:
- a traditionally high view of Scripture
- Instructive for us: how do critical Evangelical scholars persuade their fellow Evangelicals to embrace HC?

e.g., Kenton Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words*
- “believing criticism”
- “assured results” compel self-respecting scholars to accept historical criticism
- we know stuff “*adequately*” through language (“practical realism”)
- Legacy of Reformers (= Humanists)
- Analogy of Christ’s Divine & Human natures:
  “God’s Inerrant Word in errant human words”
“there is nothing unseemly or tragic about the limited perceptual horizon that God has granted to human beings. Our finite capacities are good aspects of God’s created order, in both its original (prelapsarian) and subsequent (postlapsarian) permutations. We are doubly blessed by these finite capacities, for they allow us not only to interpret adequately but also to notice and appreciate the profound difference between the divine and human viewpoints. Our mediated interpretations of reality contrast sharply with our Creator’s immediate knowledge of things…” (54)

“Is it therefore possible that God has selected to speak to human beings through adequate rather than inerrant words? …When all is said and done, I will strongly support a doctrine of inerrancy when it comes to Scripture.” (55)
Postmodern Criticisms: Seeing Unstable Ground

• Many and various “criticisms”:
  – Post-Colonial
  – Feminist
  – Gender
  – Deconstructive, etc.

• Seeing the ground:
  – **Text** as a whole (“final form,” not sources)
    ▪ disinterested in historical questions (contra HC)
  – **Text** as ideological **battleground** (in their sights: “male dominated,” “Pro-Western” academy & its “agenda”)
  – **Text** as **human** word/ideology (“winners write the history”)
  – Purposefully viewing the Text through an ideological lens
The “Triptych”: eyes on READER
Combatting “oppressive” interpretations

- Text: doesn’t exist except in Readers’ experience/use of it
- HC Interpreters’ (mis)use of Texts to justify “oppressive status quo”
- Postmodern Critics’ ideological framework supplants the theological agenda of the Biblical Text (e.g., “sin-grace;” Law-Gospel)
Example 3: Post-Colonial Criticism

- Postcolonial critic’s “lens”: The West versus the “Rest”
- Bible: among the “Western ‘documents’ of power”

“Postcolonialism is a critical theory that tries…to critique knowledge acquired and influenced by…[racism, the superiority of the West over the Other]…and to retrieve and construct the knowledge of the Other that has been distorted, neglected, or suppressed in the West.” (Kim, 164)

- Book of Judges: e.g., 2:11-15
  - Postcolonial take:
    - The “Other” = The Canaanites, construed as “enemy”
    - Text: “to justify the conquest and ownership of the land” (Kim, 175)
    - Text: human, political word
    - Western Interpreters: to justify West’s conquest of the Rest
  - Ideology of the Reader vs. Theology of the Text
    - Us: idols; seeking what is “right in our own eyes”; repentance
    - God: judges the living & the dead; faithful to covenant promises
Postmodern Approaches: disgruntled “children” of Historical Criticism:

• John Collins, on David Clines’ ideological criticism:
  “All of this, it seems to me, can be construed as pushing historical criticism to its logical conclusions, in a way that historical critics have historically failed to do. The skepticism and suspicion that Clines directs towards the Biblical text are analogue of the suspicion of contemporary philosophers towards Enlightenment ideals, or towards any ideals for that matter.” (Collins, *The Bible after Babel*, 25)

• Radical Skepticism (vs. radical appreciation)

• Practicing a belief in the (corrupt) humanity of Scripture (vs. Divine and Human natures of Scripture held together)
Who “deconstructs” whom?

- **Historical Critic** seeks to deconstruct the Biblical Text
- **Postmodern Critic** seeks to deconstruct:
  - Ideology of the Text
  - Ideology of the Interpreter & status quo
- **Scripture**:
  - Law: “deconstructs” us/ids → KILLS
  - Gospel: “reconstructs” us → MAKES ALIVE
A Few Brief Reflections on “Mining” Historical Critical and Postmodern Work for “gems”…

- Focus on “final form” of Biblical Books → helpful (despite some questionable assumptions along the way)
  - Canonical Approaches
  - Narrative Approaches
  - Form criticism for, e.g., individual psalms

- Work of Postmodern (& Historical Critical) scholars:
  - Often make good observations
  - Rationalistic or ideological agendas/worldviews
Old, Fight-Hardened Contender vs. The New Kid(s) in the Ring
An Opportunity…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To the Historical Critic:</th>
<th>To the Postmodernist:</th>
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<td>“Thank you for pointing out all sorts of interesting features in the Biblical text. But listen to the voice of Another, The Holy Spirit, which you mistake for a mere phenomenon of human religiosity.”</td>
<td>“Thank you for keeping us aware of the “other” in the text. But Listen to the voice of Another, The Holy Spirit, which you would reduce to a mere perspective amid a sea of relativity.”</td>
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An Opportunity to see how modern approaches:

• Offer a smorgasbord of interpretive options
• Often very speculative
• Often parrot the philosophical values and ideologies *du jour*
• Proceed from faith too, e.g.:
  – *faith* in the evolution of religion/theology
  – *faith* in a different story of Israel’s history
  – *faith* in a Gnostic Jesus who married and had kids
  – *faith* in my own objectivity and critical judgment
  – *faith* in the philosophical or social winds that blow in our current day

Not *faith* or reason, but *faith* and reason
in proper relationship (& with faith’s proper object)
But most of all, an Opportunity to...

- See the ground as Christ shows it
- Practice what we preach
- Repent of our idols, resist temptation, & self-examine

Bedrock

Christ the Chief Cornerstone

Prophets & Apostles (Scripture) the foundation