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The Impact of Modernity on the Study of the Bible

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Abstract: Since the reading and study of the Bible was an integral part of societal existence at least in the Western hemisphere, the general change of perception ensuing from modernity would undoubtedly affect the biblical field too. In fact, the critical study of the Bible in the last couple of centuries or so can be readily seen as closely linked to modernity. Careful analysis of the biblical text, untrammelled by the restrictions imposed by Church-authority, can be seen as a spin-off from the Protestant Reformation. In the early days of this critical effort, focus was mostly trained on the Old Testament books. Attention to the language of the OT (Hebrew) and the steadily spreading archeological discoveries in areas where the biblical drama was played out, gave momentum to the study of the Bible. The birth of the Historical-critical Method was another landmark development.

In time scholars would turn their attention to the New Testament. The search for Historical Jesus signalled the advent of the critical study of NT. Following on it were many inter-related developments, culminating in the application of the Historical-critical Method to the study of the NT by such stalwarts as Rudolph Bultmann and others.

Key words: biblical criticism, Reformation, documentary hypothesis, historical-critical method, historical Jesus, synoptic problem, Rudolph Bultmann, demythologizing.

Introduction

As a concept “modernity” is somewhat elusive. Commentators point out that a series of inter-related historical processes and cultural phenomena that took place in Europe in the post-traditional, post-medieval historical period contributed to its gradual emergence. Growing industrialization, steady growth of urban centres, the French Revolution, the rise of rationalism, the glorification of science, the development of the nation-state, the movement towards capitalism

and market economy and the increasing sway of secularization are but a few of the developments mentioned in this context. Despite being notionally amorphous, no one really doubts that modernity has been enormously influential in almost every aspect of human life, society and nature. Changes in the approach to the study of the Bible have to be seen against this backdrop.

One of the major results of the political and intellectual currents that intersected with the Enlightenment was the loss of certainty and the realization that certainty can never be established, once and for all.¹ Since up until then the Bible was seen as a major source providing certainty on many matters, the new development predictably affected the approach to that document. The guarantor of certainty was no longer God, the Bible or the Church, but human subjective judgment.²

Many scholars consider the Protestant Reformation as a kind of benchmark event while discussing the changed approach to the Bible. One of Martin's Luther's basic contentions was that the evangelical substance of the biblical faith cannot be contained in the habituated, accustomed and reductionist reading of the Church theology that made God simply an integral part of the Church-administered system of salvation. He insisted on emancipating the biblical text from Church interpretation. His characteristic affirmation of "sola scriptura" contained an insinuation that biblical interpretation had been too tightly controlled by the magisterium of the Church for its own ends, for defending dogmatic positions meant to serve the interests of an institutionalized Church. Many of Luther's followers in the subsequent centuries wanted to open up the treasures of the sacred writings without paying any attention to the restrictions imposed by Church authorities. The result was an enthusiastic pursuit of critically analyzing the text of the scriptures.

What one can affirm with a great deal of conviction is that the critical study of the Bible that has been carried out in the last couple of centuries is closely linked to the progress of modernity. Here "critical" need not be understood in the more common sense of "passing unfavourable judgment". "Critical" is best understood here as "involving careful analysis" of the biblical text with the help of literary tools designed by academic experts to study ancient texts.³

The ultimate aim of such study is to uncover all those circumstances that obscure the meaning of the biblical text so as to render it ever more comprehensible to the present-day reader.

Against that background what I shall attempt in the following pages is to provide a brief, if somewhat impressionistic, sketch of the strides made by experts in various fields related to biblical studies. Their collective effort has made the scientific study of the scriptural text ever more refined and ever more fit to serve its avowed goal of ensuring an enhanced understanding of the biblical word. That sketching will be done in two moments: first concerns the exegetical study of the Old Testament and subsequently the itinerary followed in the field of New Testament studies will be traced.

1. The Critical Study of the Old Testament

1.1. The Beginnings

The 46 books of the Old Testament have been in existence for well over 2000 years.⁴ Although from very early days of the Church there were individuals who pointed out that there were obvious discrepancies in the biblical narratives,⁵ not much attention was given to such views. Most people believed that the biblical books were of divine origin and what they contained was reports of events that were not affected by the culture and social setting of the places where they happened. Hardly any attention was paid to the role of individual authors in the composition of the books. It was around the middle of the 17th century that things began to change.

There are experts who point out that subsequent to the Reformation a number of fresh intellectual currents arose which directly or indirectly influenced an alternative approach to biblical studies. The overall impact of these currents was the conviction that the Bible can and should be subjected to careful analysis as a piece of literature produced by the human mind. This approach, however, did not always mean a rejection of its status as “Sacred Scripture” or ruling out that it was a vehicle of divine revelation. No doubt there were radicals who took that position, but the vast majority of those who tried their hand at the scientific study of the Bible continued to respect its defining character as God’s word in human language.

Any narration dealing with the progress of the critical study of the Bible will involve the listing of a series of names of scholars and their specific contributions. Those scholars put across what they discovered from study and research as hypotheses and theories. These were taken by their contemporaries and by succeeding generations of scholars as points of departure for further studies. Thus we have a continuum of views and positions.

It is held by many that the modern era of biblical criticism was initiated by the three-volume work of the French Oratorian priest Richard Simon (1638-1712), entitled *The Critical History of the Old Testament*. He suggested that unwritten traditions which circulated in communities as oral traditions were later made into written narratives. Although his views were severely criticized by many scholars of his time, his efforts were later evaluated as path-breaking. It was from his approach that a branch of biblical criticism known as “Textual Criticism” (applying of grammatical and literary standards to the biblical text) developed.

1.2. Attention Paid to the Language of the Old Testament

Focus on the literary and the grammatical features of the biblical text led to greater attention being paid to the Hebrew language. Earlier, Hebrew was considered as a unique and sacred language that is beyond the scope of critical analysis. But now scholars began to subject the biblical narratives to literary scrutiny. The monumental work of W. Gesenius (1786-1842) in this area has had great influence on 19th century biblical criticism. His chief contribution was drawing up a comprehensive history of the Hebrew grammar. He then published a Hebrew Dictionary in 1810 which was considered a landmark achievement. It went through 17 editions and still remains a valuable tool for the study of the OT.

Another German scholar who made a great contribution to the advancement of OT criticism in its early stage was J.D. Michaelis (1717-1791). He made use of his expertise in oriental languages, in philology, geography and archeology to give a more exact interpretation to biblical stories and offered it in a book of 13 volumes! It was around this time that a French physician, J. Astruc, came up with the groundbreaking proposal that variations in divine name in Genesis was the result of using two distinct set of notes as

sources for its composition. Although Astruc's proposal did not win much support among his contemporaries, it led to the eventual rise of the documentary theory (that several distinct documents lie behind the Pentateuch narratives) which remained the focus of OT studies in the 19th century centred on the Pentateuch.

1.3. Differing Approaches

There were two distinct tendencies existing side by side in this early stage of OT criticism. There was in the first place the approach of scholars who looked at the OT narratives with a critical eye yet retained the orthodox viewpoint that the biblical books are indeed the storehouse of genuine spiritual values. There was, on the other hand, those who espoused a more rationalistic approach in looking at the biblical text—although containing elements of divine revelation—as a product of human effort. It was against this background that another prominent German scholar, J.G. Eichhorn (1752-1827) attempted a synthesis between orthodoxy and rationalism with his idea of historical-critical analysis. This approach caught the imagination of many scholars of the time and eventually became the method that dominated the next two centuries of biblical studies. His point of emphasis was that the OT was a unique source of information about antiquity. In his view theological preoccupation in interpretation had severely restricted the full understanding of much of what the OT offered. He used the historical and geographical factors to evaluate the text and draw out the spiritual values of the doctrines the book presented. His pioneering work, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (original in German), became a trend-setter. In this three-volume work, Eichhorn discussed in detail the contents, redaction and the authenticity of the text.

His main focus was on the Pentateuch and his research into these books paved the way for the famous documentary theory (that the historical books of the OT resulted from the combining of materials from various sources or documents) which in the following centuries was further refined and re-stated.

1.4. Birth of the Historical-Critical Method

The increased attention paid to the literary and the historical aspects of the text came to dominate the OT research towards the end of

the 18th century. This gave impetus to the development of the renowned “Historical-Critical Method” in the 19th century. Many consider the German scholar W.M.L. de Wette (1780-1849) as the real founder of this method. He envisaged the method as a combination of literary and historical criticism. Essentially it meant answering the basic question: how did the biblical stories come into existence and how did they assume their particular literary form? So, the attempt was to study the content of the text under the aspects of language, composition and origin. By using auxiliary sciences such as philology, archaeology and geography, the method tried to uncover the author’s life, ideas and milieu, thus looking at the sacred text as any other historical document. De Wette considered two steps as essential to study the biblical text. Firstly, use all possible grammatical and rhetorical tools to uncover the message of the text. Secondly, look into the historical circumstances—the milieu of the author, the ideas, thoughts and concerns that weighed on him—to establish the text’s origin. He also insisted that true exegesis must keep clear of dogmatic assumptions because a priori theological or dogmatic positions, according to him, will affect the objectivity of the analysis.

Philosophical ideas of the time also contributed to the progress of the historical-critical method. Notable among such ideas was the dialectical analysis of history promoted by the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). The thesis-antithesis-synthesis pattern which Hegel proposed as the operative paradigm of human progress influenced the thinking of the exegetes of the historical-critical school. However, Hegel’s position that Christianity is the absolute religion or the final stage of the dialectical process led to the OT being seen as a secondary text, inferior to the NT.

The historical-critical approach was further advanced by the efforts of the German orientalist, philologist and theologian H. Ewald (1803-1875). His highly regarded work in German, *History of the People of Israel* (1843-55), attempted to unlock the history of Israel with a secularistic key. The point he tried to establish was that among all ancient peoples, it was the people of Israel who tirelessly strived after the goal of achieving a true and perfect religion. Hence, he maintained, that the history of the people of Israel is a religious history.

1.5. The Documentary Theory

Thinking along these lines J. Wellhausen (1844-1918) proposed a comprehensive theory to explain the composition of the historical books of the OT. It was called the “Documentary Theory”. His proposal had far-reaching consequences as it influenced all fields of biblical research and continues to affect discussions on biblical matters even to the present. Wellhausen maintained that there were four main documents that functioned as sources for the narratives of the first six books of the Bible (the Hexateuch). These are called J (for Jahwist), E (for Elohist), D (for Deuteronomist) and P (for Priestly traditions, in that order for their antiquity. Wellhausen also contended that the material of the prophetic literature was in existence before the historical books took shape as distinct compositions. The Documentary Theory received wide scholarly approval and it was enthusiastically taken up as a tool for further research.

Basing himself on the findings of Wellhausen, B. Duhm (1847-1928) took up the prophetic literature for study and analysis. His book, *The Theology of the Prophets* (1875), proved to be greatly influential for the research on prophets in the following years. His point of emphasis was that the generations of prophets progressively introduced the concept of ethical monotheism into the religious thinking of Israel. According to Duhm, morality was the force behind the development of Hebrew religion.

1.6. The “History of Religions” School

A related development that had much bearing on the biblical research of the 19th century was the search for the history of ancient religions. The discipline that dealt with this matter came to be known as “history of religions”. Basically it was an effort to look into ancient religions detached from theological premises and from supernatural revelation. Rationalism, that climaxed during the period of Enlightenment, was the inspirational force behind this move. The goal was to unearth facts unaffected by philosophical or theological interpretations. Like the rest of the religious phenomena of ancient times, biblical religion also was subjected to such analysis. Advances in the fields of archeology, anthropology and ethnology along with the discovery of fragments containing religious literature of the Near East provided great impetus to this branch of studies. One of the positive results that the fervour to study the ancient religious phenomena generated

was that it provided new insights into the intellectual, cultural and religious exchange among the peoples of the Near East, including Israel, thereby providing a more accurate picture of the context in which various elements of the biblical faith took shape.

When we look at the balance-sheet of the 19th century biblical studies, what emerges as a major element is that the historical-critical method of analyzing the Bible had established itself firmly in scholarly circles. However, there also were scholars who raised voices of caution against certain positions adopted by the protagonists of this method. For instance, the purely rationalistic approach to the interpretation of the biblical text was resented by many. So too, many found the complete sidelining of the supernatural element in the stories of the Bible overly radical and untenable.

As mentioned above, the field of biblical research was almost exclusively dominated by Protestant scholars well up to the end of the 19th century. A few Catholic scholars such as R. Simon, J. Astruc were known for their early initiatives. But the Catholic preoccupation with submission to the authority of the Church made the Catholic scholars to remain with marginal issues and safe questions, failing to deal with the essential biblical problems that were being raised by other exegetes. A major departure from this trend was made by the work of the French Dominican M.J. Lagrange (1855-1938). He boldly sided with many of the positions adopted by the leading exegetes of the period and insisted on the legitimacy and relevance of studying the Bible using the historical-critical method. The work of A. van Hoonacker (1857-1933) also had landmark significance as far as the history of Catholic biblical research is concerned. Such events as the publication of Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1892) and the establishment of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (1909) provided new impetus to Catholic biblical scholarship.

1.7. The Form Criticism

Despite its wide acceptance in scholarly circles, many researchers were becoming increasingly aware of certain inherent inadequacies of the historical-literary approach to the study of the Bible. The approach had succeeded in parcelling the narratives of the Bible into their component parts, but towards the end of the 19th century, analysis had come to a kind of standstill. It was against this

background that the German scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) came up with the method known as form criticism. Gunkel readily granted the contribution of the literary method and was appreciative of it, but his contention was that its focus was exclusively trained on the written stage of the sacred texts, whereas in reality these texts had a long pre-literary stage. This early stage and the developments during this stage had to be subjected to serious analysis in order to arrive at a more accurate interpretation of the biblical stories.

According to Gunkel the aim of exegesis should be to understand the sacred writers and their work. This can be attained only by supplementing the literary analysis of the written text with an in-depth study of the pre-literary and oral traditions from which written documents eventually emerged. He was realistic in admitting that it was impossible to ascertain beyond doubt the authorship and the dates of composition of the OT books. Yet, he maintained, one must distinguish between the secondary context in which an author gave a written form to a particular text and the original context in which its pre-literary form took shape. The Hebrew people were used to expressing their thoughts in formal, conventional categories or genres like dirges and folk legends. To determine the form in which a story originated, it was necessary to know the life situation in which it arose.

Gunkel's efforts offered a corrective to the literary-historical method and remedied certain of its deficiencies. What he proposed was an exegesis that did not stop with a detailed analysis of the text, but one that offered insights into the complex process that led to the composition of a written text in the particular form in which it is available in the biblical books. He emphasized the fact that biblical books are expressive of a sublime religious experience. As against the dominant position of the majority of 19th century scholars who denied the scientific reliability of the biblical books and who maintained that myths were all over the pages, Gunkel held that although the sacred authors made use of mythical elements, there were no pure myths in their writings. For him myth applies more to the manner of expression than to the contents.

In a certain sense the method of Form Criticism that Gunkel initiated gave new direction to biblical studies of the 20th century. The emphasis on oral tradition and the employing of the findings from archeological and literary research of the Near East were greatly helpful in arriving at the life situation that gave birth to much of the OT narrative material. The groundbreaking work of great scholars such as M. Dibelius and R. Bultmann in the area of New Testament was in a certain sense built on the efforts of Gunkel.

Form Criticism was enthusiastically embraced by a number of outstanding scholars who came after Gunkel. The names of H. Gressmann (1877-1927), G. von Rad (1901-1971), M. Noth (1902-1968) and A. Alt (1883-1956)—all Germans—deserve special mention. By applying themselves to areas such as the influence of the Near Eastern neighbours of Israel on its religious tenets (Gressmann), the irreplaceable relevance of key events such as the exodus, the conquest of the land and Sinaitic covenant on the preservation of oral traditions and their eventual conversion into written narratives (von Rad), the centrality of the Israelite tribal federation for the positing of the OT history (Noth) and the composition of the biblical legislative material (Alt), they made stellar contributions to the advancement of the scientific study of the OT in the 20th century.

1.8. Biblical Criticism beyond the German Borders

Although for most part the dominant part in biblical criticism was played by many generations of German scholars, there also were experts from other language groups who made substantial contributions. There were French and British scholars who took the critical study of the Bible beyond the German borders. Here it becomes relevant to mention the Scandinavian School of OT criticism. Although basing themselves on the findings of scholars such as Wellhausen and Gunkel, the members of the Scandinavian School opened up new pathways in the scientific study of the Bible.

1.9. Two Approaches: Historical and Theological

When we look at the state of OT criticism as it progressed in the 20th century, two approaches can be perceived. Continuing with the historical proposals of the 19th century, some scholars focused

on the history aspect. They tried to present the OT literature as reflecting the history of the development of its core religious experience. Archaeological discoveries were very helpful for the confirmation or otherwise of many of the positions biblical researchers adopted. Although some scholars insisted that biblical narratives cannot be reliable sources of history, even they acknowledged the fact that sacred traditions did contain historical information. One important scholar who deserves special mention when discussing the historical approach to the OT is W.F. Albright (1891-1971), an archaeologist of great brilliance. He maintained that although scientific history is not to be found in the biblical records, when evaluated in the light of archaeological findings, they can provide historical information about the Hebrew people.

The second approach that is discernible in the scholarly efforts in the field of OT study has its focus trained on its theology. In a certain sense we can say that while in the 19th century studies history dominated, in 20th century the focus was shifted to theology. Different researchers tried to present the theology of the OT from different perspectives. The Belgian Catholic scholar P. van Imschoot, for example, tried to lay out the OT theology using the framework of the traditional categories of dogmatic theology such as God in himself, God in relationship to human beings, their nature and destiny, sin, salvation, etc. On the other hand, the German scholar, W. Eichrodt, insisted that it is incongruous to fit OT theology into the framework of dogmatic theology. His contention was that the concept of covenant provided organic unity to the theology of the OT books. The notion of an alliance between Yahweh and Israel, which actually goes back to the days of Moses, lies at the heart of Israel's religious faith. Others like G. von Rad maintained that restricting the OT God-talk to a single centre is not a sustainable approach. His view was that many theologies can be found in the OT narratives.

1.10. The Involvement of Catholic Scholars in OT Criticism

Evidently the field of biblical study was dominated by Protestant scholars. The Church's vehement stand against what was described as "the heresy of Modernism" effectively blocked the Catholic scholars from pursuing the study with equal enthusiasm as their

Protestant counterparts. However, there were some genuine efforts at critical study on the part of Catholic exegetes.

The publication of Pope Pius XII's encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), is considered a landmark event in the scientific study of the Bible by Catholic scholars. Before the trailblazing encyclical, commendable efforts were made by scholars such as J. Touzard, who, taking up Wellhausen's lead in the area of documentary theory for the composition of the first six books of the OT, offered an outstanding study on this part of the biblical literature in 1919, and A. Bea, who, through his painstaking research on the sources and traditions used in the composition of the first five books of the Bible, produced a book on the Pentateuch in 1933. Bea became a strong defender of using critical methods for the study of the Bible as well as of the freedom of Catholic scholars to engage in such scientific study.

Mentionable along with the work of such eminent individuals also are some events. First among them is naturally the founding of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome under the mandate of Pope Pius X in 1909. The Institute's starting of three scientific journals in 1920, namely, *Biblica*, *Orientalia*, and *Verbum Domini*, provided a forum for scholars involved in critical research to publish their findings and related views. Similar literary ventures came into existence also in France and Germany. For the English-speaking world, similar opening was made by the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* of the Catholic Biblical Association of USA, a periodical established in 1938.

Close on the heels of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* came another important document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1948. In the wake of the publication of these two documents, there was a radical change in Catholic approach to the study of the scriptures. They provided great impetus to the scientific study of the Bible using methods perfected by the relentless research work of committed scholars. Deserving special mention in this context is the work carried out by the scholars associated with the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. Catholic research into the OT was greatly enhanced by the Dominican scholars like F.M. Abel, L.H. Vincent and R. de Vaux. Perhaps the best known achievement of the Jerusalem

School is the publication of the monumental translation known as *La Sainte Bible* (in French) and its English version *The Jerusalem Bible*.

Through such efforts Catholic scholars were now able to get rid of the image of backwardness that was seemingly associated with their exegetical work in the world of biblical scholars. In fact as things stand at present, in the area of the scientific study of the Bible, Catholics occupy the same place of honour as Protestants.

1.11. Recent Developments

There have been further developments in the study of the OT in recent years. The emergence of new methods such as rhetorical criticism, structural analysis, canonical criticism and the study of the Bible from the perspective of social sciences have opened new frontiers for OT study. To be seen along with such efforts is the feminist interpretation of the OT.

2. The Critical Study of the New Testament

2.1. Early Attempts

If we understand NT criticism as “careful analysis” of the books that form part of it, or more comprehensively as the scholarly study and investigation of biblical writings that seeks to make discerning judgments about these writings, we have to admit that it was in practice from the very early days of the Christian community.⁶ For instance, Marcion, a second century heretical archbishop, insisted that all books of the Old Testament were Satanic in origin and so were not part of the Bible! He put together a Bible for Christians which was made up of an edited version of the Gospel of Luke and 10 letters of Saint Paul. His effort, although a gross distortion, can be seen as a critical approach. Then we have the Church Father Origen (ca. 185-254) who offered helpful hints for the better understanding of the biblical books. Another great name of this early period was the brilliant theologian of the West, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), whose comments about the synoptic Gospels remained very influential for centuries.

2.2. The Beginning of the New Era

The real turning point in the scientific study of the Bible, as discussed earlier, was the 16th century event of the Reformation. Starting in

the wake of Reformation, it slowly gathered momentum. Enlightenment rationalism greatly influenced scholars in the 18th century. It was in the shadow of this development that the historical criticism of the Bible took shape. Basically historical criticism means the study of the Bible as a historical document, a body of literature that originated in a particular time at a particular place. The first scholar to use this method for the study of the NT was a French Oratorian priest by name Richard Simon (1638-1712). His three-volume work in French, *Critical History of the New Testament*, was a pioneering effort.⁷ Following him, the German scholar J.D. Michaelis (1717-1791), advanced the method further and wrote the first historical-critical introduction to the NT.

One very important name in the history of NT criticism is that of H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768). It was he who first proposed the idea that there is to be a clear distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the Gospels, who became the object of the Church's preaching. Reimarus was profoundly influenced by rationalism and its rejection of the supernatural. The famous quest for "Historical Jesus", which remains vigorously alive even today, was initiated by this German scholar. Obviously his position that the historical Jesus was a failed Jewish revolutionary out of whom the Church made the "Christ of faith" by inventing such doctrines as resurrection and parousia was arrived at through a historical-critical analysis of the NT writings.

2.3. Nineteenth Century Advances

The lead given by these early scholars was taken up by several biblicists in the 19th century. Two directions were perceptible in the research work of this period: establishing the historical value of the NT and clarifying its theological content. Among the many who advanced the study of the NT during that period there stands out a particular group called the "Tuebingen School". The name comes from the University of Tuebingen in Germany where many outstanding scholars taught and did research. The founder of the school was F.C. Baur (1792-1860). He applied the philosophical paradigm of thesis-antithesis-synthesis proposed by G.W.F. Hegel to the analysis of NT history. According to him, Paul's concept of freedom from law and the universality of salvation represented the

thesis. The antithesis was the position of Peter and the apostles who held on to the primacy of Judaism. There was intense contestation between these two groups resulting in much conflict and from it finally emerged as synthesis, the Catholic Church and the NT canon, around the middle of the second century. Although many of Baur's proposals were gradually abandoned, his influence on the study of the NT was immense. His student, D. Strauss ((1808-1874) was another brilliant representative of the Tuebingen school. In his *Life of Jesus* he gave a radical reinterpretation of the Gospel accounts of Jesus. To the already existing orthodox position of the supernatural dominating the life of Jesus and the rationalistic stance of ruling out the supernatural element, Strauss added the mythical dimension. According to him a very slim historical kernel of the life of Jesus was transformed and embellished by the faith of the Church.

The positions proposed by the Tuebingen School led to a kind of polarization among the NT scholars of the 19th century. There were people who adopted the orthodox view of accepting the Bible as sacred literature and hence opposing critical study of it and there were others who accepted the conclusions of the Tuebingen scholars uncritically to consider the claims of orthodox Christianity as mere fables. From this situation arose a moderate position among Britain's Cambridge scholars J.B. Lightfoot (1828-1889), B.F. Westcott (1825-1901) and F.J.A. Hort (1828-1892). They questioned many of the radical conclusions of Baur and others to establish a more balanced view of early Christianity and the composition of the NT literature. Among the three, Wescott and Hort are particularly known for the singular achievement of publishing a critical text of the NT, basing themselves on sound principles of textual criticism they had developed.

The refining of the Tuebingen position was carried out in Germany by A. von Harnack (1851-1930) and A. Schlatter (1852-1938). These scholars essentially proposed an approach that was less radical and so more appealing to the majority of NT researchers and students of the Bible in general.

A development that would prove to be very helpful to the study of the NT occurred around the middle of the 19th century. A number of papyri and manuscripts of ancient times were discovered

in this period. The analysis of these documents was capable of throwing new light on various aspects of the biblical question. One momentous discovery of this type was that of C. von Tischendorf. In 1859 he discovered in a monastery of Mount Sinai a very ancient biblical manuscript, including a complete set of NT books. In the following decades several papyri were found in Egypt. These were mostly popular writings written in *koine* (the common form of the Greek language spoken in NT times). The pioneer scholar who applied the knowledge gained through the study of these documents to the field of biblical research was A. Deissmann (1866-1937). Alongside with this, deepening knowledge of the world in which the NT originated, that is, advanced information on such factors as its history, geography, forms of government, religions, thought-forms and literary forms afforded immeasurable help to the project of the scientific analysis of the NT literature. At around the same time many scholars turned their attention to the study of apocalyptic literature. Today this type of writing is hardly used, but during the period in which the NT books were composed, the Jewish world was thoroughly influenced by the apocalyptic thought forms and literature. A scholar by name R.H. Charles (1855-1931) made a crucial contribution to NT studies by making exegetes aware of the various aspects of the apocalyptic form of literature.

Towards the end of the 19th century scholarly attention was turning to two crucial questions: the Synoptic Problem and the question of historical Jesus. These two were to become paramount concerns for the NT researchers of 20th century. The Synoptic Problem essentially treated the issue of similarities and dissimilarities among the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. The scholar who drew particular attention to this fact was J.J. Griesbach (1745-1812). He pointed out that the material in the first three Gospels could be arranged in a synopsis. The historical Jesus question dealt with the reliability or otherwise of the NT accounts of the life and death of Jesus.

One scholar who made a great contribution to the clarification of the Synoptic question was K. Lachmann who proposed that Mark was the first among the written Gospels and that it functioned as a source for Matthew and Luke. C.H. Weisse tried to build on Lachmann's proposal and suggested that in addition to Mark, Matthew

and Luke used another common source, a very early collection of the sayings and teachings of Jesus. It was subsequently named as the “Q” source. It was from the insights of these two scholars that the classic “Two-Source Theory” would be formulated. What it establishes is that Mark was the first apostolic document. Matthew and Luke used it as a source along with “Q”. Although of such crucial significance, unfortunately no copy of the “Q” document has survived. The researchers who gave the final refinement to the Two-Source Theory were H.J. Holtzmann (1832-1910) and B.H. Streeter (1874-1937).

Another issue that became an important subject of research was the linguistic origin of the NT material. Scholars were largely in agreement with regard to the Semitic and Greek influences on the NT. Continuing research on the Gospels revealed that behind the Greek text lay much that was of Aramaic character. The outstanding contributor to the findings in this area was G. Dalman (1855-1941). His contention was that Jesus most certainly spoke in Aramaic and so behind his words we can detect the original formulations in the Aramaic language. That position was affirmed by another scholar by name C.C. Torrey (1863-1956). Two other scholars who drew attention to the influence of the Aramaic factor were J. Jeremias (1900-1979) and M. Black (1908-1994).

2.4. New Surge in NT Criticism

The various approaches initiated and pursued earlier were vigorously continued in the 20th century. But what dominated the concerns of biblical scholars was the historical problems involved in the Gospel presentation of the figure of Jesus. Ultimately the question that sought an answer was: how far did the early Church’s faith and proclamation colour the presentation of Jesus that we find in the Gospels?

As the Two-Source Theory of Gospel composition received wider and wider acceptance, the conviction that by carefully sifting through the information provided by the two primitive sources (Mark and Q)—which were very close to the earliest stage of the Jesus tradition—a more reliable figure of the historical Jesus could be arrived at. This led to the resurgence of the quest for the Jesus of history and a number of books on the life of Jesus began to appear already starting from the closing years of the 19th century. This

meant a revival of the quest for historical Jesus because with the great German scholar W. Wrede (1859-1906) and his strong intervention on the question had come to a kind of standstill. Wrede was the one who introduced the famous concept of “Messianic Secret”. His contention was that the Gospel of Mark, despite its claim to being the earliest document of the type, was still a profoundly theological thesis and not a reliable historical narrative. Mark wanted to show not how human Jesus was, but how divine he was. Wrede contended that Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah, and the Messiahship was something that came to be attributed to him by the early Christian community after his death. Because Jesus was never recognized as the Messiah by his immediate followers, much less by the Jews, the early Church had to find an explanation for it. They found the answer for it in the concept of the “Messianic Secret” (that Jesus deliberately kept silent about his Messianic identity which would be revealed only after his death and resurrection). Mark took up this concept and developed his Gospel story along these lines. Hence, Wrede concluded, we can never reconstruct the story of the historical Jesus from Mark or any other source. This was what brought about the stalemate.

It was the research of A. Schweitzer (1875-1965) that brought the quest for the historical Jesus out of the corner it had got into. Schweitzer insisted that the Messianic Secret was not an invention of the early Christian community but a conviction of Jesus himself. He demonstrated that what dominated the life and teachings of Jesus were the elements of the eschatological and the apocalyptic. In his reconstruction of the life of the earthly Jesus he found him to be a deluded fanatic who embraced his death to facilitate the imminent end of the present world order. Although Schweitzer’s proposals about the life of the historical Jesus never won much scholarly support, his efforts led to a general recognition of the apocalyptic background and framework of the teaching of Jesus.

One particular school of thought that exerted much influence on NT study was the so called “History-of-Religions School”. Basically it proposed that Christianity was one among the many religious phenomena in the Roman Empire. This school tried to establish that the doctrines and the cultic practices of early Christianity were profoundly shaped by the popular mystery religions of the East.

According to their theory, the doctrine that Jesus brought about human salvation by his death resurrection was patterned on the Gnostic redeemer myth. R. Reitzenstein (1861-1931) was one of the chief representatives of the school. His linking of the ideas of Hellenistic and Eastern mystery religions on the one hand and Christian theological positions on the other had a deep effect on the subsequent research of scholars who studied the NT literature. The most influential scholar of the History of Religions School was W. Bousset (1865-1920). In his monumental work, *The Lord Jesus*, he traced the development of Christian thought up to the Church Father Irenaeus (ca. 130-202). According to him, Paul and his followers succeeded in transforming the primitive Christianity into a mystery cult. The History or Religions School is particularly relevant for the substantial influence it exerted on R. Bultmann and his followers.

In the 19th century scholars had made a great contribution to the study of the NT by throwing light on the sources that were used for the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. The identification of Mark and Q as the original sources and the formulation of the Two-Source Theory were great breakthroughs. But somehow NT research got stuck with this development as no way forward was immediately found. It was against this background that in 20th century the method of Form Criticism gained prominence. The question that led to this new method was: Is it possible to get behind the written documents, to the period between the events narrated and the first written records, the time when these stories circulated in the communities as oral traditions? Form Criticism deals precisely with this stage and the developments that took place then. It attempts to investigate and analyze the pre-literary, oral traditions that lay behind the written Gospels.

The inspiration for NT Form Criticism came from the great OT scholar H. Gunkel, whose efforts in the field of OT research was outlined above. Gunkel's insights were applied to the Gospel narratives by NT scholars. They distinguished three levels of life situations that influenced the shaping of the Gospel stories and their preservation in the written Gospels. First, the situation in the earthly life of Jesus; second, the situation and the specific needs of the early Church in which these stories were shaped and preserved; third, the context of a particular saying or story in the Gospel itself,

meaning what the author wanted to convey by including a particular episode or saying in his Gospel. In fact, one of the guiding principles of this method of NT study is that Gospels do not simply yield a consistent picture of the life of Jesus, but rather what they place before us are the reflections of the faith and life of the early Christian community.

The era of NT Form Criticism is believed to have been inaugurated by the publication of a landmark book, *The Framework of the History of Jesus*, in 1919. Its author, K.L. Schmidt (1891-1956), thus became a kind of pioneer in this field of research. His contention was that the Synoptic Gospels were mosaic-like compositions, made up collections of short episodes from the life of Jesus, which circulated in early Christian communities in independent form as oral traditions. The individual evangelist collected such stories and made them into continuous narratives, taking into consideration among other things, the particular needs of the community for which he was writing.

2.5. The Work of Rudolf Bultmann

The greatest protagonist of Form Criticism, however—and indeed the most influential figure of 20th century NT criticism—is the German exegete R. Bultmann (1884-1976). He taught at the University of Marburg in Germany, which because of him, became identified with the latest in NT research in the early second half of last century. His prolific research career, spread over nearly 50 years, inspired several generations of NT scholars, who took up positions both pro and contrary to his own. The dominant points of Bultmann's theory are: the concept of myth as the key to the interpretation of the NT; the non-Messianic character of the life of Jesus; the creative genius of the early Christian community and the pervasive influence of Gnosticism on the NT world. For him the evangelists had no interest in the earthly life of Jesus and so the Gospels have no merit as historical records. In any case—Bultmann would say—the Christ of faith proclaimed by the kerygma is the crucial fact. The historical Jesus was simply irrelevant to Christian Faith.

Building on the proposals of earlier scholars Schmidt and Dibelius, Bultmann gave further refinement to Form-critical method in his landmark volume, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (German

original in 1921). Another of his works of enduring value is *The New Testament and Mythology* (1941), the publication of which provoked a fierce controversy in scholarly circles. Bultmann's position on mythology in the NT was born out of his burning desire to devise a relevant hermeneutic for deciphering the message of the Gospels. By myth the great scholar did not mean an imaginary story or a fairy tale, but the use of imagery to express the supernatural in the language of this world. Bultmann's call for demythologizing the NT was inspired by a deeply pastoral concern, i.e., to make the saving message of the NT meaningful to the people of today.

2.6. Reaction to Bultmann

Bultmann's views attracted wide-ranging reactions, both positive and negative. Indeed, the extent of comments that his exegetical efforts generated is a clear indication of their immense popularity. Obviously the fundamentalist conservatism rejected him out of hand, while a good number of liberal and middle-of-the-road scholars found his views refreshingly helpful for the study of the NT.

In Germany itself, a number of scholars offered correctives to Bultmann's often unacceptable extreme scepticism with regard to most NT facts and the rejection of the historical element. Among them deserving of mention are such names as K. Barth (1886-1968), O. Cullmann (1902-1999) and W. Pannenberg (1928-). Similarly, British biblical scholars such as E. Hoskyns (1884-1937), V. Taylor (1887-1968), R.H. Lightfoot (1883-1953) and C.H. Dodd (1884-1973), while mostly accepting the positive contributions of Form-critical analysis of the NT, took a more conciliatory path and advanced the study of the NT.

Bultmann's views were vigorously pursued in scholarly circles by his disciples and followers. In fact, there is a phase in the history of NT exegesis that is known as "post-Bultmannian". They carried out research work on the various aspects of Bultmann's exegetical views. One area that was pursued with particular interest was his theoretical scepticism about the quest of the historical life of Jesus. For instance, a prominent disciple of Bultmann, E. Kaesemann, would counter his master's contention that the kerygmatic nature of the Gospel precluded any attempt to reach the historical Jesus from the Gospel confession of faith in the risen Christ. In Kaesemann's opinion if we separated the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, we run the risk of reducing Christianity to a non-historical myth.

Other scholars like G. Bomkamm, H. Conzelmann, J.M. Robinson and G. Ebeling continued this line of thinking. Among these, Conzelmann is especially mentionable for the fact that he took the Form-critical approach to the next stage. In his *Theology of Saint Luke* (German original 1954), Conzelmann elaborated the whole idea of the embellishment and reinterpretation brought about by the individual evangelists.

2.7. Catholic Involvement in NT Criticism

What is described above as NT criticism has been almost exclusively the work of Protestant scholars. There were some Catholic initiatives taken to enter the field of critical study of the Bible by such scholars as M.J. Langrange (1855-1938) and A. Loisy (1857-1940) who made remarkable contributions to the discipline, but their lead was not seriously followed by other Catholic scholars. Indeed, the time between the career of these two stalwarts and the publication of the epoch-making encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), is known as “the dark days of Catholic biblical scholarship”. As pointed out earlier, the magisterium’s uncompromising stand against Modernism had severely restricted Catholic scholarship’s engagement with the critical questions. The encyclical truly gave a boost to the biblical research among Catholics. But even stronger impetus was given by two other documents: the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s “Instruction on the Historical truth of the Gospels” (1964) and the II Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965). Vatican II surely had a revolutionary impact on the approach to the Bible in Catholic circles. Some are of the opinion that many of the radical positions embraced by the Council, even in fields other than what concerns the study of the Bible, were made possible because of the subtle influence exercised by the enhanced knowledge on the biblical questions that came about through earlier critical study.

In the decades following the Council, the Catholic branch of the critical study of the Bible grew in leaps and bounds. The lead was given by the French school because French scholars had the formidable legacy of great minds like Lagrange and Loisy to draw inspiration from. There was then the help of the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem and the journal *Revue Biblique* to count on. Belgian exegetes working from the University of Louvain also made substantial contributions. In Germany, too, Catholic scholars emerged from the shadow of backwardness in scriptural studies

and made their presence felt in an impressive way. Outside continental Europe, North American biblical scholars also became active and in a question of decades were able to stand shoulder to shoulder with their Protestant counterparts.

2.8. Contemporary Situation

NT criticism is hugely popular even in our times. While scholars continue to bring out new insights, students and other interested parties avidly receive them. Established methods such as *Textual Criticism*, *Source Criticism*, *Form Criticism* and *Redaction Criticism* continue to be used by innumerable researchers; new pathways are opened by such methods as Canonical Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, Narrative Criticism, Socio-scientific Criticism and Feminist Biblical Criticism.

Another much discussed area of NT research today is the revived historical Jesus research. There are two tendencies in evidence. The first may be more aptly called the study of Christology. The attempt to attribute an explicit Christology to the lifetime of Jesus won much following in the late 20th century and many scholars continue to occupy themselves with research on it. The second tendency has received much media attention in our days. It represents a more radical approach to studying materials relating to Jesus and is known as *The Jesus Seminar*. A group of about fifty to seventy-five scholars under the leadership of American theorists R. Funk and D. Crossan are the pioneers of this initiative. As a result of their study they have established most of the Gospel material about Jesus as simple embellishments by the early Christian community.⁸

Conclusion

Living in a period that constitutes the early years of 21st century, we can say that Biblical criticism is at its flourishing best. The menacing onslaught of secularism has in no way reduced the growth of research on the biblical world, or on the person of Jesus and the earliest testimonies about him preserved in the NT books. It is true that the critical study of the Bible has induced needless scepticism in certain circles. Yet it has been enormously beneficial for a great number of people. Enhanced understanding of the biblical word—which responsible criticism almost always entails—can undoubtedly help the followers of the religiosity proposed by the Bible to live their calling in a more meaningful and committed way.

Notes:

1. Cf. Gerard Delanty, "Modernity," in George Ritzer (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Maldon, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) ad loc.
2. Relevant in this context is the enormous influence of Rene Descartes' revolutionary approach of "methodic doubt".
3. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York, etc.: Doubleday, 1997) 20; also idem, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) 3.
4. The reference is to the Catholic version. For the Protestant version the number is 39. I have taken the main points of the following narrative from Alexa Suelzer and John S. Kselman, "Modern Old Testament Criticism," in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1113-1129.
5. Such as the two different accounts of creation (in chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis), two different names used for God (Elohim and Yahweh), an account of Moses' death appearing as part of a narrative purportedly written by him (Deuteronomy 34), etc.
6. For the main arguments followed in this section of the essay, cf. John S. Kselman and Roland D. Witherup, "Modern New Testament Criticism," in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1130-1145.
7. Cf. Brown, *Introduction to the NT*, 4.⁸ For a brief yet incisive evaluation of the "Jesus Seminar" initiative, cf. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 819-829.
8. For a brief yet incisive evaluation of the "Jesus Seminar" initiative, cf. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 819-829

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