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Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part III)

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July 04, 2010

Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part III)

Some in the church have thought that they can safely use the tools of the “historical-critical method” (source, form, redaction, etc. criticism) without the skeptical presuppositions (rejecting as unhistorical anything, such as miracles, that cannot be established by means such as analogy or correlation) associated with them. Others reject this approach, claiming that the presuppositions are inherent in the tools. Here are some points of response, pulling together observations contained in my previous post:

1. Given that the Bible does give some information regarding its human authorship, a Christian who accepts the whole Bible as the Word of God can legitimately analyze this data regarding sources, forms, and editing/redaction, etc. much the same way a historical-critic would analyze it.
2. However, labeling this a “critical” approach is problematic because “critical” in this context commonly means “higher-critical,” a procedure with the goal of editing the biblical text. The research of a historical-critic may significantly overlap with that of an investigator who believes in the whole Bible, but their aims are different, just as similar technological procedures may be used for very different ends.
3. Also problematic is the fact that “critical” = “higher-critical”—employing its tools to go beyond solid biblical evidence.
4. Therefore, rather than attempting to convert and baptize the term “critical,” which is inevitably problematic or at least misleading, it is best to seek another label for our exegetical approach. Some have suggested alternatives to “historical-critical method,” such as “historical-grammatical method,” but the emphasis of this hermeneutical label seems to be narrower than the comprehensive range of disciplines, contexts, and backgrounds (including archaeology) relevant to the highest quality wholistic exegesis. “Historical-contextual method” or “wholistic (or “comprehensive”) historical method” would appear more fitting.

Attempts to alter the Bible’s message and authority by treating it as merely human through higher-critical literary approaches, which I have briefly (and therefore inadequately) described, are well known. But their bosom-buddy relationships to some other currently popular manifestations of what could more broadly be called “higher-critical thinking”—such as political correctness or science over the Bible—are less explored. We will get into these in the following posts.

Questions

- Why would it be attractive to a scholar in the church to refer to his/her approach as a form of “the historical-critical method”?

- Can you come up with a better term for the exegetical method employed by a scholar who believes that the whole Bible is the Word of God (accepting [2 Tim 3:16-17](#))?

In [Part IV](#) of this series, Roy Gane examines the effects of adjusting ones interpretation of Scripture to harmonize with science.

Posted by [Roy Gane](#) on July 04, 2010 in [History of Interpretation](#), [Philosophy of History](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

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Thanks Roy for reminding us that adequate biblical exegesis is more than an isolated grammatical analysis of individual biblical texts. It seems to me that the term “wholistic” could communicate our commitment to the whole Bible as the word of God and as part of the context for interpreting specific texts.

As I understand it, you also recommend that we should be open to the use of a “comprehensive range of disciplines”, as are historical-critical scholars. But unlike those scholars, we should reject the attribution of authority to these disciplines to function “beyond” (your point 3) or “over” or above (your final paragraph) what is revealed in Scripture. Further, we should not highlight the term “critical” since it has been so closely associated with faulty methods.

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [July 05, 2010 at 12:07 PM](#)

Roy, with regard to the name for an adequate approach to Bible study, the term “historical” may be understood to include some of the disciplines you mention (such as analysis of backgrounds). At the same time, the term “historical”, in relation to the term “pre-historical”, may itself be loaded with negative presuppositions with regard to the early chapters of Genesis.

Nevertheless, so far, we have seen fit to rehabilitate the term historical within the description of our method. However, I agree that there is value in avoiding the use of the term “critical” in the naming of our method.

At the same time, I think that it is important to rehabilitate the term within our description of what we do when we interpret the Bible. We should make it clear that we do not depreciate the use “critical thinking” in the sense of careful analytical thinking.

Similarly, I think there is a way to rehabilitate the terms correlation and analogy. We should reject the principle of correlation based on viewing history as a cause and effect system closed to divine intervention.

At the same time, our view of history as open to divine intervention does not make the word correlation a bad word in itself. It seems to me that the word typology communicates our concept of correlation where God’s earlier actions are correlated with his later actions.

It seems to me that the concept of typology also points the way to a possible rehabilitation of the term analogy. We should reject the principle of analogy which interprets the past on the basis of our views of the present. This means we should reject the conclusion that if we think that there are no miracles now then there could not have been miracles in the past.

At the same time, the Bible teaches a typological analogy whereby we believe that God will work miracles in the present and in the future because we believe that he has worked miracles in the past.

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [July 05, 2010 at 12:18 PM](#)

suggestions: Intensive Analytical or Embrasive Analytical?

Posted by: arlyn drew | [July 06, 2010 at 08:15 AM](#)

Hi Roy, I have appreciated your thoughtful series on Biblical authority and historical and contemporary challenges to that authority. Such a topic could engage multiple books, but your succinct overview gives one a quick study on the broader topic. I appreciate your balanced conclusions, that at times we may use the tools associated with the higher critical method, especially when there is Biblical evidence to support notions of sources and forms, but will avoid the method's pre-suppositions. I agree that we should avoid the use of the word "critical" because of its negative baggage.

I come to similar conclusions in my recent AUSS article dealing with epistemology, hermeneutics and Adventism. AUSS v. 47, No. 2, p. 241. There, I suggest that the name "Wholistic Biblical Realism" could be used to describe our epistemological approach to the Bible. I like the term you propose "wholistic historical method," as it captures the notion of wanting to deal with all the evidence regarding the Bible's historicity, which we should be unafraid to do.

I do think that "historical grammatical" perhaps has been connected with too narrow an approach, as though history is only concerned with aiding our grammatical understanding. But perhaps we should just argue that the grammatical-historical method should be understood more broadly than it is at times. It may be too late a date to try to create a new term that everyone will now struggle to define.

Anyway, thank you for your thoughtful commentary on this topic.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [July 07, 2010 at 11:46 AM](#)

Martin, Arlyn, and Nick: Thanks for your thoughtful and helpful comments and qualifications regarding what I said. Regarding a term for our epistemological approach, I thought of "wholistic historical method" for two reasons: (1) it expresses concern for historical questions, as does "historical-critical method", and (2) Moshe Greenberg (who died a few weeks ago) advocated "holistic" exegesis in his Ezekiel 1-20 Anchor Bible commentary. By this he means comprehensive exegesis that does not presume to edit the biblical text, so I agree with his approach, to which I was exposed in 1982 in his seminar at the University of California, Berkeley.

I don't think the term "historical-grammatical method" is so widely accepted or deeply entrenched that a better alternative could not or should not compete. I am dubious whether we can successfully make clear to everyone who needs to know that "historical-grammatical" means a lot more than what its words imply at face value, i.e., that it is a technical term for something much bigger, more compelling, and attractive.

Posted by: Roy E. Gane | [July 07, 2010 at 02:41 PM](#)

Good points, Roy. I actually meant to clarify that my article tries to name an Adventist/Biblical epistemological understanding, but your piece is more concerned with a hermeneutical approach, rather than epistemology per se. While these two things are related, they are different. Thus, I would propose that we use "Wholistic Biblical Realism" to describe the epistemology implied by Biblical text, and your "Wholistic Historical Method" to describe the hermeneutical approach that best flows from, and into, Scripture.

I accept your observations on the limitations and lack of permanence of the historical/grammatical method.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [July 07, 2010 at 02:54 PM](#)

Nick, you bring up a crucial and fascinating topic: the relationship between epistemology and hermeneutics. We need to pursue this a lot more. It is true that the "Historical-Critical Method" and alternatives such as "Historical-Grammatical Method" or "Wholistic Historical Method" (my suggestion) are hermeneutical. But the different presuppositions on which they are based belong to competing epistemologies. I like your published proposal for "Wholistic Biblical Realism," describing an Adventist/biblical epistemology. We are definitely on the same page, and it is interesting that we independently came up with the term "Wholistic." Now it would be interesting to explore further the epistemological roots of hermeneutics and the hermeneutical implications of epistemology, to which we have not devoted adequate attention, perhaps due to a chronic Adventist fear of engaging in philosophy.

Posted by: Roy E. Gane | [July 08, 2010 at 02:22 PM](#)

I sat in on an in-person debate between Chappel Hill's Bart Ehrman and Walla Walla's Carl Cosaert (while completing his PHd in NT languages at Chappel Hill) at Chappel Hill a few years ago. It illustrated the contrast between higher criticism and a direct reading of the Bible where "all scripture is given by inspiration from God" and where "holy men of old moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God".

Carl gave good historic evidence for the reliability of the book of Acts. Whie Ehrmann appealed primarily to the idea that no historian accepts miracles. (A point that could be debated all by itself).

in Christ,

Bob

Posted by: BobRyan | [July 14, 2010 at 07:54 AM](#)

Roy makes an excellent point, that "historical-grammatical" implies an approach so much narrower than the reality of many "historical-grammatical" exegetes - the "grammatical" implies to the outsider (even an academic from a different discipline, such as myself) that scholars who use it are overly focused on narrowly linguistic points. Scholars like Roy, or Gerald Klingbeil or Sigve Tonstad, to name but three SDA examples, are doing work that is conceptually so much broader!

However, "wholistic historical" or "wholistic Biblical realist" will never catch on except among those who practice it, because it is a loaded term. Using "wholistic" implies it is the right way to do it.

Historical-contextual seems, accurate, and more likely to win acceptance, perhaps among those who practice it, as well as those who don't.

Posted by: David Trim | [July 26, 2010 at 04:47 PM](#)

Thanks for your observations, David. Yes, "wholistic" implies that everyone not doing it this way is practicing a method that is partial and therefore defective. So it could be taken as a kind of value judgment, which would be good for those who accept it.

Posted by: Roy E. Gane | [July 27, 2010 at 04:54 PM](#)

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