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AN APPROACH TO THE HISTORICAL- CRITICAL METHOD

The historical-critical method is one way of interpreting the Bible, regarding which there is significant division among Adventist scholars.



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Is it possible to develop a framework of understanding within which differences can be profitably addressed?

I believe it is possible if we identify points on which we can agree, define areas of disagreement, and raise specific questions for discussion over which we have humble dialogue.

Areas of agreement

Most Adventist scholars agree on the following:

1. Our hermeneutics is based on faith in what the Bible teaches about itself. This teaching includes deductive assertions that claim inspiration for the whole of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; cf. 2 Pet. 1:21) and inductive evidence that explains and qualifies the nature of inspiration and helps to define the boundaries of canonical scripture.

2. Balance is crucial for hermeneutics. On the one hand, emphasis on "all scripture is inspired" (2 Tim. 3:16, NRSV) without adequate consideration of the nature of the text itself and the

human role in its production leads to unwarranted assumptions regarding the inerrancy of Scripture. On the other hand, fixating on the human dynamics of the authorship of the Bible without giving due weight to its divine source undermines confidence in the authority of Scripture.

3. We need to interpret the Bible. Paul urged Timothy to interpret the word of truth properly (2 Tim. 2:15).

4. Proper interpretation must get its meaning out of the text. This is exegesis, as opposed to eisegesis, which is reading one's own ideas into the text.

5. Interpretation of the biblical text should be contextual in the broadest sense. This involves taking into account and weighing carefully any textual, historical, archaeological, and cultural evidence that may be relevant to a given passage.

6. Culture does not affect the principles resident in a biblical law or divinely inspired message, but it may affect application of the principle.

7. Formation of inspired scripture involved written and oral sources, literary units of various genres that related to various situations in ancient life, and editing. If we refer to these things with historical-critical terminology, we can say that biblical authorship included sources, forms, and redaction. There is plenty of evidence for these. For example, Luke states that he investigated sources telling of Jesus' life in order to write his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). Scholars who believe in the basic Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch acknowledge the probability of anonymous editing/redaction in a number of places, such as the account of Moses' death (Deut. 34).

8. Transmission of the biblical text has resulted in variations among manuscripts. This creates a need for the discipline of textual criticism, which involves study of manuscripts and relationships between them.

9. Scholars who deny the overarching, unifying inspiration of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16) often use historical-critical disciplines such as source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and tradition history in ways that detract from respect for the whole of Scripture as the Word of God. They employ these disciplines as instruments for dissecting the Bible into a noncohesive patchwork of differing and often conflicting human viewpoints, thereby destroying the unity of scripture and undermining faith in its divine authority. They impose human criteria on the Bible, such as restricted views of causality that rule out supernatural intervention in human history. In their quest for information regarding the human factor in the authorship of the text, they often operate without valid methodological controls and go beyond solid, verifiable evidence.

10. Commentaries and other biblical resources by historical-critical scholars who deny the inspiration of the whole Bible can be unsafe for untrained Adventists. True, the historical-critical scholars have greatly expanded our understanding of the Bible and produced many of the best resources available. These works can be mines of valuable information for those trained to

distinguish between solid data and subjective interpretation. But to the unprepared, the same mines may be land mines.

Disagreement

At the heart of the disagreement among Adventist scholars is the question: Can we use the historical-critical method without denying or at least diminishing the inspiration of Scripture?

Some would answer No. They see the method as including and inseparable from the rationalistic worldview that

Can we use the historical-critical method without denying or at least diminishing the overarching inspiration of Scripture? It depends on what you mean by "historical-critical method."

results in dissecting the Bible in a way that damages its divine unity and authority.

Some would answer Yes but would define their historical-critical method as limited to a group of exegetical "tools," such as source-, form-, and redaction-criticism, that are ideologically neutral and can be put to positive use without employing an unbiblical ideology.

Yet others would answer Yes without any particular limitation. To varying degrees these scholars would accept the rationalistic worldview that often guides historical criticism, with the qualification that they would generally affirm the possibility of supernatural elements such as miracles. Such

individuals would presumably have difficulty with at least some of the ninth point of general agreement I have stated above.

It is easy to see why scholars who answer Yes have been alienated from those who answer No. From the perspective of those who say No, scholars who use the historical-critical method are dissecting Scripture in a way that contradicts what the Bible teaches regarding its inspiration, so they are automatically out of line regarding one of the fundamental tenets of Adventism. Their claim to be loyal Adventists who affirm biblical inspiration is viewed with suspicion.

Mutual understanding

In talking with friends on both sides of the question, I have discovered that, to a significant degree, we seem to be talking past each other without an adequate degree of mutual comprehension. This seems so because the historical-critical method means different things to different people. To illustrate: Let me tell you what the historical-critical method has meant to me and why.

I have associated the historical-critical method with speculative dissection of the Bible motivated by an obsession with identifying the human factors involved in its production. When the human production of a portion of scripture can be hypothetically explained, God's seminal role as the Inspirer of that scripture is often left out of the picture. The human being, rather than God, becomes the center of functional authority. This kind of thinking is in accordance with the prevailing philosophy of our age that generally pervades study of the humanities.

Behind my view is my background. As an Old Testament exegete, I have read a large quantity of historical-critical research in my field. An exchange with Moshe Greenberg, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, illustrates why I associate the historical-critical method with dissection of the Bible. In a 1982 graduate exegesis seminar at the

University of California, Berkeley, he mentioned a range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel.¹ The most conservative (Fohrer) accepted two-thirds of the book as the words of the prophet. The most radical (Hölscher) accepted only about ten percent and regarded the rest of the book as unauthentic. I asked Greenberg where his Anchor Bible commentary on Ezekiel would fit in the range. He replied that his commentary would not fit there at all because it would not be regarded as a "critical" commentary, due to the fact that he does not regard it as the task of a commentator to edit the text of scripture.

Greenberg's reply reveals what "critical" in the context of "historical-critical method" means to many contemporary scholars, at least in the area of Old Testament. It is not criticism simply in the sense of appreciation and analysis, as in "art criticism," "rhetorical criticism," or "critical thinking." But it is criticism as it uses analytical tools as extensions of rationalistic ideology to edit the text of scripture in the sense of

separating inspired materials from lesser materials that seemingly reflect human thoughts. In the process, the Bible is treated as a conceptual archaeological site where treasure going back to a prophet who had a direct "pipeline" to God is retained as the Word of God and other material is discarded or at least devalued.

Because the word *critical* means something to me, and to many others, that I cannot ignore or change, I am not comfortable with placing my work under the heading of the historical-critical method. Why should I identify myself with and indirectly lend the support of my influence to an ideology that I reject?

The historical-critical method and inspiration

Now let's return to the question: Can we use the historical-critical method without denying or at least diminishing the overarching inspiration of Scripture? It depends on what you mean by "historical-critical method." I have tended to answer No because I have

thought of the method as including "tools" plus ideology. However, I do not deny that it is possible to investigate the human authorship of Scripture, to the extent that solid evidence allows, for the purpose of understanding the divine message and without devaluing divine inspiration in any way. For example, I believe that Moses was the basic author of the Pentateuch. At the same time, I acknowledge the probability that some kind of editor/redactor reported his death (Deut. 34) and also his incomparable meekness, which at least on one occasion kept him from speaking up for himself (Num. 12:3).

My recognition that the Pentateuch includes some editorial work has arisen from a desire to understand the text. I would not naturally think of it as redaction-criticism unless I were systematically studying editorial insertions to reconstruct the prehistory of the text, working toward isolation of a hypothetical "original" text by identifying a later, less important, editorial "layer." In other words, I would not tend

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to see my work as historical-critical unless I included a "critical" component in the sense of dissecting the Bible in a way that involved finding degrees of inspiration within it.

Two crucial distinctions should be made here. First, recognition of probable editorial work in the Pentateuch can be distinguished from "critical" dissection of scripture in the sense described above. The possibility of such editing was recognized long before development of the historical-critical method. Second, since the language of the Bible is that of its human authors, literary "tools" may detect some distinguishing characteristics of those authors, but such "tools" cannot identify the divine element of inspiration that influenced the minds of the authors (2 Pet. 1:21). The supernatural element in scripture is a matter of faith; it cannot be proven or disproven by analytical application of human reason. Judgments regarding degrees of inspiration result from attaching assumptions to analysis. For example, literary analysis may indicate that a verse was written by an editor rather than a main author, such as a prophet. By itself, this says nothing about whether the verse is inspired. But a scholar who assumes that main authors were inspired and editors were not can conclude that the verse in question is not inspired.

Assumptions are the root problem with the historical-critical method as it is often practiced. The scholar's preconceptions, often shaped by earlier critical scholarship, determine what is regarded as divine and what is not. The use of literary "tools," shaped by assumptions, generally lead to the conviction that the assumptions were right. Subjective human reason judges the Bible in a circular process, with conclusions shaped by presuppositions. This is unscientific by any standard.

One of the basic assumptions of many historical critics is the idea that to be scientific a scholar must employ criticism and approach investigation from a position of doubt. That is, something must be demonstrated through human analysis before it can be believed. True consistency with this

approach would judge as unscientific a scholar who claims inspiration for even a small part of the Bible because inspiration cannot be demonstrated by human analysis.

Narrowing the gap

The basis of disagreement between Adventist scholars who reject the historical-critical method and those who say Yes to a limited form of the method is definition of the method. Those who reject it define it as "tools" plus unbiblical ideology. Those who accept a limited application of the method define it as "tools" alone. While I have favored the first of these definitions, I can see the rationale of the second definition, at least in theoretical terms at this point. However, I cannot understand the thinking of Adventist scholars who seem to accept a full-blown "tools" plus ideology historical-critical method.

If we work together on questions such as the following, some of which overlap, I believe we can narrow the gap between us.

1. What do we have in common on biblical inspiration and hermeneutics?

2. How do we define the "historical-critical method"? Do we view it as necessarily including a philosophy that diminishes divine inspiration and authority or not? What influences have affected our orientations?

3. How do we interpret specific passages of scripture, especially difficult passages, according to our respective hermeneutical approaches? What are the advantages and limitations of our methodologies in actual practice?

4. What potential do historical-critical "tools" have for making a positive contribution to biblical interpretation?

5. Where do we draw the line between proper and improper use of historical-critical "tools"? How can we prevent use of historical-critical disciplines from becoming a "pipeline" for unbiblical influences flowing into our scholarship and thus into the essential faith of our people?

6. Since a number of us have powerful negative associations with the term "critical," could we agree to use

other terminology for an approach that is in harmony with our concept of inspiration? For example, could a "historical-contextual method" include certain kinds of "source-, form-, and redaction-analysis"?

7. How is our role as interpreters of Scripture affected by our responsibility to the teachings and worldwide membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

As we move with care toward dialogue, we should watch for some distracting factors. First, exegesis that is flawed by deficiency of knowledge, unsound reasoning, carelessness, or bias could mistakenly be taken to arise from basic hermeneutical presuppositions. Neither side of the historical-critical issue has a monopoly on bad exegesis, and invalid support for church doctrine can do as much damage as a direct attack.

Second, attaching labels to individuals is natural and convenient, but it can be divisive, misleading, and unfair. Labels and litmus tests are simplistic. Even when they are applied carefully, they cannot do justice to the complexity of real people. This is particularly true in the area of hermeneutics, due to the relatively wide range of thinking on some issues. For example, labeling scholars as those who accept the historical-critical method does not tell us whether their approach is "tools"-only or "tools" plus ideology. Labeling scholars who reject the historical-critical method does not tell us whether they have a balanced view of inerrancy. In either case, the result of labeling can be guilt or innocence by association.

As an Adventist scholar, I desire a safe and friendly environment in which to frankly and profitably discuss loaded questions such as the historical-critical method. We can all afford to learn from each other, and growth through communication does not necessitate compromising our principles. ■

¹ See Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, Anchor Bible Commentary Series (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), 20, 21.