
THE LIMITS OF HISTORICAL-CRITICAL EXEGESIS

Augustine Stock, O.S.B., Conception Abbey, Conception, MO 64433

Historical-critical exegesis was somewhat late in winning acceptance in Catholic circles. *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) is usually cited as official recognition of the method in the Catholic world. In the following decades Catholics were so preoccupied with mastering the new method that not much attention was given to the fact that the new method was itself becoming the object of criticism, and not just in fundamentalist circles. These criticisms multiplied and gained strength in the early seventies. Scholars reaffirmed their faith in the method, but the criticisms continued and soon there was talk of a "crisis," the "end of the system," "bankruptcy," and some were clearly ready to abandon ship. In the late seventies the criticisms became sharper and other methods were improved and began to seek attention.

The historical-critical method needs no defenders as far as its merits and achievements are concerned. Here we shall dwell only on the limits and the weaknesses of the method. We shall consider what the system is, its goal, and its results, both in the historical context and in its prospects for the future (Vogels:175).

What is Historical-Critical Exegesis?

The term historical-critical exegesis embraces a number of approaches or methods, all of which have this objective: to reconstruct in a critical way the historical context in which the biblical texts had their origin. The critic sets out to discover the historical meaning of the text—the meaning that the text had for the community for which it was destined. We can, therefore, speak of a *method* which is *historical and critical*.

A Method: One among a number of methods, in its time historical-critical exegesis supplanted other methods. The earlier methods were characteristically spiritual, religious, or dogmatically theological, while reason and history came to reign supreme in its own field. But in our own time, the late sixties and seventies, we experienced a rebellion against reason and history as exemplified by the hippies and flower children. It seemed that modern people wished to free themselves from the past, institutions, and authority, and so be able to construct a new world. The present decisions of the individual became more important. There was a strong protest against all that is determined once for all, against everything that is static. The present moment, the "here and now," supersedes

"history." While in the past the superiority of "reason" had been emphasized to the point of depreciating the body, corporal values were now accentuated, including nudity and sexual license. More attention was given to feelings, which formerly had tended to be ignored or suppressed. Theory is less important than the practical, the lived. Behind these popular movements stand systems such as existentialism, Marxism, Freudian depth psychology, and several other approaches which have a bearing on our present concern.

By the time of the student uprising in 1968 the historical-critical method had long since been supplanted by structuralism in French universities. Sensing a tie between structuralism and the establishment they had come to despise, the students cried: "Structuralism is dead." As one commentator put it, the french university was like structuralism: a language sufficient unto itself, devoid of goals or meaning. The cycle of studies was reduced to a pure code, to which the students could make no contribution; all had already been decided (Gardner:215).

A Historical Method: The impact of history on the HC method is evident from its methods and technical vocabulary. It asks: what is the history of the text, its *Formgeschichte*, *Redaktiongeschichte*? Then, to fix the text in its milieu, history is appealed to again. The exegete must know the history of Israel, of the ancient Near East, the history of religions, archaeology, and the *Sitz im Leben*. Finally, for the content and the message of the text, appeal is made to the *Heilsgeschichte* and to the historical Jesus. All this manifests how historical concern has influenced exegesis.

But in our time previously unknown human sciences have gained attention and they sometimes find application in the interpretation of the scriptures. Ethnology, sociology, anthropology, psychology: any of these can bring to light things that would remain hidden to the historian. In recent years great developments have also taken place in linguistics and literary theory. While scripture departments offered courses in history, geography, and archaeology, until very recently they offered nothing in these fields. The exegete and the literary critic understand two quite different things by "literary criticism." For the exegete it means criticism of the sources, while for the literary critic it means the appreciation of the literature as artistic production. For the exegete *Sitz im Leben* is something outside the text. The literary critic insists that the first *Sitz* is its *Sitz im Buch*.