

**A Critical Method:** Textual criticism, source criticism, and more recently *Tendenz*, *Sach*-, *Canonical*, and *Editorial* criticism are terms which characterize the HC method. It is called "critical" because it uses reason to study the material at hand. Supposedly this should lead to greater objectivity than was attained by the earlier methods.

Yet often the goal is not attained. Even the most competent exegetes sometimes seem to be swayed by their doctrinal positions or life situations. And some have even begun to ask if the exegete can or should work with pure reason. The difference between *exegesis* and *eisegesis* is clearer in theory than it is in practice. Does being "neutral" mean that one is "objective?" Is not such a position already an opinion? "Exegesis" and the "exegete" do not exist; there are individuals who do exegesis. Dissenters from the system wonder if we aren't always a little subjective. Intuition, sensibility, and imagination can have their importance. Some wished to demythologize the Bible in the name of reason. Now we are learning to appreciate myth, for it too can attain truth and reality. Exegesis is an art as well as a science, and we know that pure reason can never comprehend art.

Finally, biblical texts were written in a perspective of faith and for believers. Therefore, it seems impossible to comprehend these religious texts using a purely rational criticism. For many this is the greatest weakness of the HC exegetis.

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## What is the Objective of the HC Method?

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The HC method wishes to reconstruct the historical context in which the biblical texts had their origin. It looks for the historical meaning; the question it asks is: "What did the author want to say?"

**Diachronic vs. Synchronic:** The terms *diachronic* and *synchronic* were first used by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. "Throughout the nineteenth century, linguists were very much concerned with investigating the details of the historical development of particular languages and with formulating general hypotheses about language change. The branch of the discipline that deals with these matters is now known, naturally enough, as *historical linguistics*.... A *diachronic* description of a language traces the historical development of the language and records the changes that have taken place in it between successive points in time: 'diachronic' is equivalent, therefore, to 'historical.' A *synchronic* description of a language is non-historical; it presents an account of the language as it is at some particular point in time," (Lyons:35).

The HC exegete approaches a text with a certain distrust. In view of the antiquity of the texts and their long period of transmission, he suspects that the text has been

corrupted. He therefore sets out to reconstruct the original text by means of textual criticism. Discerning disharmonies in the text (gaps, lack of logic, repetitions and other irregularities) he seeks to delineate the different levels of the texts or the additions which may have been made. Hence the theory of the four sources of the Pentateuch and the two sources for the synoptic gospels. Even a single source may be subdivided and impressive reconstructions have been elaborated. In short, the genesis of the text is studied. The vision of the HC method is clearly diachronic.

The synchronic approach came to the fore in the general study of literature in the form of "New Criticism," which strongly emphasized working with the text as we have it rather than with its antecedents, background, and other related matters. Gradually, the principles of New Criticism began to be applied to the interpretation of biblical texts.

James Barr reacted strongly against the etymological approach of Kittel (TWNT) which seeks to determine the so-called "original" meaning of a word. Barr maintains that to determine the meaning of a word, we must confine ourselves to the actual use of the word in its particular context. A synchronic approach to the Bible would be equally possible. It would no longer concern itself with the genesis of the text but with the text as we have it today. *Redaktiongeschichte* is a step in this direction, yet it does not become truly synchronic. It is still much concerned with distinguishing redactional material from the traditions which are being passed on, and to that extent is still inclined to disintegrate the text. But a true literary criticism has been steadily gaining ground.

It is interesting and helpful to know that different sources have been combined in the creation and deluge accounts, but a synchronic approach can show that those texts, just as we have them, are full of meaning. Some exegetes begin the study of the Bible with the Exodus, since it is at that point that Israel gained consciousness of Yahweh for the first time. The study of the Bible is then carried out in chronological order, Genesis 1-11 is done toward the end of the Old Testament. The Bible has even been edited *as it should have been published*. The undertaking somewhat resembles the now abandoned attempts at lives of Jesus and at gospel harmonies. Moreover, there is much to be gained by taking the Bible *as it was published*. That the Bible begins with Genesis 1-11 is not without its importance for the comprehension of the scriptures as a whole.

**Author vs. Text:** The HC exegete, therefore, sets out to find the meaning intended by the author. But the diachronic approach has made this exegete realize how complex the question of the author of a text is. Since the text has had a long history, which author are we talking about? The one at the very beginning, or those who may have added elements in the course of the tradition, or the one who made the final redaction? For a large number of texts, the