
HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CRITICISM: A Theological Response

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As a theologian, I welcome Father Stock's call for reappraisal of the role historical criticism has played in biblical studies. I will, first, take this opportunity to place historical criticism in theological perspective, noting its contribution to theology and the promise recent forms of historical criticism hold for theologians. Second, because Stock speaks for a substantial movement among biblical scholars in his call for more attention to literary criticism, I will try to frame a couple of questions such criticism might raise from a theological perspective, while also pointing out one line of contemporary literary criticism not mentioned in our author's survey.

Historical Criticism: A Theological Appraisal

Those for whom Stock speaks wish to make the biblical text more accessible to contemporary readers and to correct imbalances created by methods that have been one-sidedly historical. This is all to the good. But to make an accurate appraisal of historical criticism, it is well to bear in mind a pedagogical point. In the learning process, we often reach a stage where we need to forget or discard details painstakingly learned. We forget and discard such details, not because they have no value, nor because learning them was unnecessary, but rather to focus on the task of synthesizing and communicating the meaning of all we have learned. What has been learned is seen at this stage to be more than a matter of individual details or even the sum of them all. This general pedagogical procedure applies to preachers, teachers at various levels and even to ordinary readers. To ask how many or how often preachers employ the conclusions of historical criticism in their preaching, or even in their immediate preparation for preaching, will not help us to assess the value of historical criticism, because it overlooks this pedagogical reality.

At varying levels of complexity, exposure to historical exegesis has served theological readers, pastoral readers and lay readers by making them more competent readers. Confronting them with perceptions, values and modes of communication located in a time other than their own, historical criticism has had the cumulative effect on this varied array of readers of awakening the expectation that the text has more to disclose than they might otherwise have presupposed. Reader-centered approaches to interpretation must take into account the nature and impact of the reader's personal and cultural baggage. The ever

elusive "mind of the author" has undoubtedly served more to prevent the foreclosure of the reader's mind than any other purpose.

The contemporary pastoral significance of this contribution of historical criticism can scarcely be overstated. Quite apart from statements directly crafted by historically oriented biblicists, in contemporary religious statements from church leaders, pastors, teachers and theologians we find a sensitivity to historical conditioning and development unheard of only a few decades ago. We have been lucky that the first generation of lay Catholic readers of the Bible have had the opportunity to acquire rudimentary historical competence, for this may indeed have spared us from biblical fundamentalism.

But, even more significantly, historical consciousness has been the almost indispensable means by which the contemporary church has coped with the pluralistic context in which biblical and other religious texts are received today. We need to recognize that this pluralism is the inevitable result of the virtually universal literacy which has provided so many new readers for our texts. We need to take into account the fact that not only do many more read, but also that reading public for the Bible and other religious texts is in an unprecedented way heterogeneous in both social status and cultural background, coming from all sectors of the church and world. In this light, it becomes clear that the pre-modern naively synchronic reading of the tradition was itself somewhat peculiar, that is, one to be expected only in an historical situation where virtually all the readers represented a miniscule minority, clerics who spoke the same Latin language and shared roughly the same lifestyle. Only for such a homogeneous group, or for the reader isolated from the great variety of today's potential readers, can the text be seen apart from considerations of time, place and cultural perspective. At the pastoral level, it has undoubtedly been less important to know the historical context than to have gained the conviction that it made a difference. With such a conviction people have been able to move forward relatively untroubled by fear of losing really foundational rather than historically conditioned elements of their faith community's tradition.

To the pedagogical and pastoral contribution must be added a third practical achievement. The fact is, historical consciousness, exemplified in and realized by historical criticism, was very largely the means by which biblical studies and theology became distinct disciplines, a status necessary for serious consideration of their subject matter within the academic community. So long as readers of the