

Chapter 6: The Real Historical Context

Introduction

On March 2, 2007, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe denied that the Japanese military had forced women into sexual slavery during World War II, saying, “The fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion.” (Wikipedia, “Historical Revisionism (negationism)”) In fact, there was evidence – plenty of it – so much so that the Japanese government in 1993 had made a formal apology to the women who had suffered at the hands of the military. However, Abe – and other Japanese leaders – found the historical evidence to be inconvenient. He wanted to rewrite history so that it was kinder to Japan.

“Historical revisionism” means reinterpreting, denying, or changing historical data so that it better fits one’s own ideas. Now, let’s be clear. Historical facts always need to be interpreted, and sometimes there are legitimate reasons for rethinking the traditional interpretations. For example, new historical evidence may be uncovered, or new perspectives may encourage us to view the existing evidence in a different way. That’s fine. However, on quite a few occasions the “revisionists” don’t just give a new perspective. They deny, cover up, or minimize inconvenient facts; or they deliberately misrepresent or misquote historical evidence; or they plant false evidence. They don’t just reinterpret the meaning of the facts, they twist the facts themselves for their own benefit or to promote their own agenda. That’s what happened in Japan in 2007.

The Bible is of key importance to the faith of billions of people; and the Bible is strongly connected to historical events. Because of this, quite a few people have tried to rewrite biblical history in order to push their own religious ideas or to attack the Christian faith. In the first centuries of the church’s existence, men like Marcion denied the accuracy of the Old Testament, and groups like the Gnostics invented their own “gospels.” However, the biggest push to rewrite biblical history has come in modern times.

Historical Criticism

As we’ve seen in the last chapter, Martin Luther and the other Reformation theologians wanted to set aside the allegorical interpretations of the Bible and focus on the “one literal sense” (the **clear, normal meaning of the words and language** in the Bible). They wanted to get back to the original meaning of each text, the meaning that the original, human authors had in mind. For this purpose, the **historical context** of each Bible passage is important.

After the time of the Reformation, the “Age of Enlightenment” (also called the “Age of Reason”) began. The Enlightenment was a movement of philosophers and thinkers which emphasized human reason and individualism and looked with suspicion on tradition and divine revelation. More and more people began to embrace “rationalism,” the idea that human reason is the supreme authority, capable of uncovering the truth in any situation. Many well-educated people felt that they had finally escaped from the darkness of the Middle Ages (with its traditions and superstitions) and were well on their way to the pinnacle of human development. The scientific method – which was originally founded on the Christian idea that creation follows the laws of its orderly Creator – ironically became an instrument for marginalizing the importance of God. The early scientists were so intent on discovering the laws of nature, they left no room for miracles or revelation. Charles Darwin was actually born just after the “Age of Enlightenment” was drawing to a close; however, his popularization of the theory of evolution reinforced the idea that the human race was constantly getting better, and that human reason was the only reliable source of knowledge.

In this setting, the **historical critical method** of biblical interpretation sprouted and grew. Historical criticism, like Luther and the Reformers, affirms the importance of knowing the historical context of a Bible passage. However, from the beginning historical critics were also influenced by the Enlightenment and doubted the historical accuracy of the Bible itself. For historical critics, tradition and divine revelation are suspect. Human reason is the only reliable source of knowledge.

Thus, the historical critics started revising and rewriting biblical history so that it would be “reasonable” and so that it would support the idea of continual human progress. The historical critical method is based on the following principles:

- 1) **Human reason is the highest authority**, not the Bible. The interpreter needs to analyze the Bible and judge whether it is accurate or not. (Notice that this principle goes directly against the guidelines we’ve developed so far in this course.)
- 2) **The “hermeneutic of suspicion” is to be followed**. That is, the interpreter should not believe anything just on the authority of the Bible, or tradition, or church teachings. No one should believe anything “because the Bible says so.” On the contrary, one should only accept those things which are confirmed by human reason. Historical critics “suspect” every detail in the Bible unless it can be proved to be true by other sources.
- 3) **The Bible should be read like any other book**. That is, the Bible may contain errors just like any other human book. Historical critics believe that the Bible “contains” the Word of God but not that it “is” the Word of God. This principle was popularized by Semler.
- 4) **Miracles do not happen**. Most historical critics believe that God does not directly intervene in the world, since miracles go against the natural laws that God himself has established. When the Bible speaks about a miracle, it must be an error, a lie, or a “myth” (a story with fictional details that teaches an eternal truth).
- 5) **Biblical religion has evolved (developed) over the centuries**. The first historical critics believed that human religious ideas had evolved (just like humans themselves). In the beginning, people followed primitive religious practices along the lines of animism (the worship of local spirits and personified forces of nature). Later, they progressed to polytheism (the worship of many gods) and then to henotheism (worshipping one god in particular while recognizing that many gods exist) and then to monotheism (believing that there is only one god). Finally, in the Enlightenment and beyond, people reached the high point of having a moral religion dominated by human reason.

Today, historical critics no longer push this particular outline of human religious development. However, they still believe that each generation reinterprets and changes the previous religious traditions. They assert that the Bible is a collection of these reinterpretations and changes.

- 6) **The Bible itself has evolved over the centuries**. Historical critics believe that the Bible began as different oral traditions, passed down by word of mouth. Later, people started to write down some of these traditions. Still later, other people edited the traditions and added their own ideas and reinterpretations. This process continued over the centuries until the Bible as we know it finally came into being. Thus, according to historical critics, some information in the Bible might have some historical accuracy (because of the oral traditions) but most of it is simply ideas and interpretations that were added later.

Obviously, these historical-critical principles are all contrary to the authority and historical veracity of the Bible. The “biblical history” proposed by different historical critics very often contradicts the clear testimony of the Bible itself.

Example: the Book of Isaiah

Here’s an example of how the historical critical method treats the Bible. The book of Isaiah states directly that it relates the prophecy of a man named Isaiah, son of Amoz, who prophesied during the time of King Uzziah, King Jotham, King Ahaz, and King Hezekiah (see Isaiah 1:1). However, the historical critics believe that this is not in accordance with human reason. They feel that the book of Isaiah shows different styles of writing, and therefore must have been written by different authors. Furthermore, Isaiah predicts details of things which happened after the time when he supposedly prophesied. For example, Isaiah predicts that God will raise up Cyrus to be his instrument (see Isaiah 45:1-7). Cyrus the Great did indeed become king over the Persian Empire, and he allowed the Jews to return from their Exile. However, this happened centuries after Isaiah’s time. According to the historical critics, miracles like this just don’t happen. They prefer to think that if indeed a prophet named Isaiah actually existed, he only wrote some of the prophecies in this book. Later, an “Isaiah school” arose, and some of the members of that school added their own prophecies to the book. They also edited what already existed. This process went on until at least the time of the return from Exile (the time of Cyrus) – maybe later. Finally, after centuries of editing and adding, the book of Isaiah reached its present form.

Well, what historical evidence is there for going against what the Bible says and rewriting the biblical history in this way? None. Neither the Bible nor any other ancient document ever mentions an Isaiah school or later authors adding to the book of Isaiah. We have a number of very old copies of Isaiah, most of which show signs of carefulness in the copying process (that is, they have few or no erasures). All of those careful copies have the same material. None of them have an “earlier version” of Isaiah.

In other words, the historical critics made this stuff up. In fact, they can’t even agree on the details of this speculative history. Many historical critics believe that Isaiah 1-39 was written by a different person than Isaiah 40-66. They call them “First Isaiah” and “Second Isaiah.” However, some critics believe that there were three different “Isaias,” and others think there were six or more.

This is not “reasonable.” Even if you don’t agree that the Bible is the Word of God, at least you should acknowledge the biblical texts as ancient evidence. Historical critics have denied the historical validity of the existing evidence because it doesn’t fit with their unsupported speculations.

But wait a minute. What about the different literary styles that people see in the different parts of Isaiah? Doesn’t that indicate that different authors wrote different parts of Isaiah? Not at all. First, the differences are not as marked as they are made out to be. (The critics can’t even agree on how many different authors there are!) Secondly, any human author uses different word choices and different ways of expressing himself (or herself) on different occasions. Ian Fleming, the famous author of the James Bond spy novels, also wrote a children’s book. His style is very different in these two types of book. Please remember that Isaiah had a very long ministry (possibly up to 60 years long) under very different circumstances. He ministered under good kings and bad kings. He saw the northern kingdom (Israel) conquered and taken into exile. He saw the southern kingdom (Judah) saved miraculously. Anyone who thinks Isaiah couldn’t vary

his style a bit over that length of time is not being “reasonable.” In fact, if you were to compare my own writing style today with the first sermons and Bible studies that I wrote as a seminary student, you would think that two different authors were involved there, too.

What about the fact that Isaiah’s prophecies include details that weren’t fulfilled until long after Isaiah’s death? Let me just say that if you think that God can’t work miracles or inspire true prophecies, then you have a very small idea of God indeed. And that idea of God doesn’t fit with the Bible’s picture of what God is like.

Source Criticism

There are several types of **historical criticism**, each with its own particular focus. The first is **source criticism**.

Historical critics believe that every book of the Bible (with the possible exception of some of the New Testament epistles) is a heavily edited collection of traditions which came from different **sources**. These sources might be an oral tradition or a written document. **Source criticism** uses human logic together with the historical critical principles to try to figure out what those original sources were. Source criticism also wants to know what details in the Bible were from the original sources, and what details were added by later editors.

For example, where did the story of Jesus’ baptism come from? All four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) at least mention the baptism of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate the story itself, using similar words and phrases. Yet each gospel also has some differences. Most source critics believe that the gospel of Mark was written first, since Mark’s accounts are usually shorter and simpler. According to them, the authors of Matthew and Luke then added more details to the stories. Some critics think that there was an even simpler collection of “Jesus stories” that existed before Mark was written. They call this collection “proto-Mark.”

So, where did the story of Jesus’ baptism originate, according to the source critics? After Jesus’ birth and death, stories about him circulated among the Christians. These stories were shared by word of mouth. Some of them were collected and written down. One of these collections was proto-Mark. The book of Mark was based on proto-Mark. The books of Matthew and Luke took the baptism story from Mark (or from proto-Mark) and each added other details. These details might have come from other sources, other collections of Jesus stories. Some source critics believe that Matthew and Luke each had at least one other big source of Jesus stories apart from Mark. Matthew’s source is called “M” and Luke’s source is called “Q.”

Well, this is all rather complicated, and again, it is based on pure speculation. No biblical “source” is ever mentioned in any ancient document. No examples of “sources” have ever been found. Furthermore, each source critic has his or her own ideas about the details. They argue over how many sources were used, where the sources came from, and which verses (or parts of verses) belong to which source. In this case, “human reason” seems to have produced a lot of contradictory interpretations based on speculation without any documentary evidence.

Examples of Source Criticism

Here are two brief, simplified examples of source criticism at work:

The Book of Genesis

Traditionally, the book of Genesis was thought to have been written by Moses. Source critics don’t give that tradition any weight. Instead, they believe that in ancient times there were a lot of stories that were passed down orally. Those stories were embellished over time. At some point,

an editor collected a lot of those stories and wrote them down. Many years later, a second editor added more stories and perhaps made some editing changes in the first group of stories. Still later, a third editor added still more material and made his own changes. This process continued over the centuries until the book of Genesis reached its final form.

Source critics differ on the details, but in general they agree that there were at least four major editors of the first 5 books of the Bible:

“J” (the first editor, who preferred to use the name “Jehovah” or “Yahweh” for God)

“E” (the second editor, who preferred to use the name “Elohim” for God)

“D” (a later editor who wrote the majority of the book of Deuteronomy)

“P” (a later editor who was closely associated with the Priests and the Temple)

Julius Wellhausen popularized this “JEDP” outline, and others have refined it and added their own ideas.

If you read a commentary on Genesis written by a source critic, you can expect him or her to spend a lot of space talking about the different sources, which words and phrases belong to which source, how the source was edited, and so on. Source critics want to uncover the original source of each part of the story, and figure out what, if anything, is historically accurate.

For example, most source critics believe that Genesis 1-2 combines two different creation stories (creation “myths”) from two different sources. Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 came from a story collected by editor “E;” Genesis 2:4-25 came from a different story collected by editor “J.” Several details were then added by “D” and “P.” Although the editors did their best to connect the two stories, they still show significant differences because they came from two different sources. These stories of creation may convey some spiritual lessons, but according to the source critics, they are not historically accurate at all.

By contrast, interpreters who are not source critics see Genesis 1-2 as one, integrated story inspired by God. Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 gives the overall picture of creation as a whole; Genesis 2:4-25 gives details of the creation of humans in particular. The message is that God is the origin of everything good, including the material world, our lives and our marriages.

The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)

According to the source critics, the gospels were not actually written by the disciples named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. On the contrary, for many, many years there circulated different collections of stories about Jesus. These collections included what the critics label “proto-Mark,” “M,” “Q,” and others. Some anonymous editors selected and redacted stories from these collections in order to put together the gospels as we know them today. According to the source critics, a lot of the stories about Jesus probably didn’t really happen the way they are portrayed in the Bible. On the contrary, the stories were embellished over time, and more stories were added as the legend of Jesus grew.

Perhaps you have read in the news about the “Jesus Seminar.” This is a well-known group that holds regular meetings to discuss which parts of the gospels “really” reflect what Jesus actually said and did. The members of the “Jesus Seminar” look at each detail, using the principles of source criticism. Then they vote on whether they think that detail about Jesus is true, or if it was something added later on.

For example, the “Jesus Seminar” believes that Jesus couldn’t possibly have spoken the words “Upon this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The church didn’t exist until after

Jesus' death, so Jesus couldn't possibly have been thinking about it during his lifetime. In the same way, according to the "Jesus Seminar," Jesus couldn't possibly have prophesied the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24:2, 24:15-22), because that prophecy was not fulfilled until 70 A.D., long after Jesus's death. According to the source critics, that prophecy must have been added after Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. As you might expect, the "Jesus Seminar" does not believe that any of the miracles attributed to Jesus actually happened (unless of course there is some kind of natural explanation).

As you can see, source criticism is not very helpful for interpreting the Bible. First of all, source criticism ignores the evidence that contradicts its theories. For example, Papias (an ancient church leader) specifically states that John Mark (an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry) wrote the Gospel of Mark. There were no oral traditions and collections of legends which were edited centuries later. However, source criticism rejects this sort of evidence in favor of speculations which have no documentary evidence.

Secondly, source critics spend so much effort looking for imaginary sources, they have little or no energy left for exploring what God has to say through the biblical text as it stands. Source criticism was extremely popular for a time, but has proved to be a dead end.

Form Criticism

Historical critical interpreters believe that different social settings gave rise to the different sources. Some interpreters, dissatisfied with simply looking for the original sources, began to focus on the social situation which gave birth to the stories, poems, laws, prophecies, and so on. According to these interpreters, different situations require different **forms** of communication. A "form" is a genre or kind of oral or written communication. It is a pattern, governed by specific conventions. Today we might call it a "format."

Each of these "forms" or "formats" has its own vocabulary, style, and structure. For example, a song has a much different form than a law code. A poem has a different form than a sermon.

Form criticism asserts that the interpreter needs to understand the situation in which each "form" arose. This situation is called the *Sitz im Leben* (that is, the "life situation," the social setting).

On the one hand, this idea is helpful. In order to understand a Bible passage, we need to take into account its genre, its type of literature. (We'll look at this in more detail in later chapters.) For example, the book of Deuteronomy is very similar in format to the political treaties that were made in ancient times. We could say that the book of Deuteronomy has the same "form," the same characteristics, as a political treaty. However, instead of being a political treaty between two countries, Deuteronomy is a "treaty" between God and his people Israel. If we understand how ancient treaties were set up, we'll better understand "God's treaty," his covenant.

Nevertheless, the form critics all too often are not content with investigating the genre of a Bible passage. They, like the source critics, do not accept that the Bible is historically accurate. Therefore, they use their human reason (and their imaginations) to reconstruct the "real" social context that gave rise to a given Bible passage. In effect, they invent a social setting and interpret the biblical texts in accordance with that invented *Sitz im Leben*.

Examples of Form Criticism

Here's an example of form criticism being used in a helpful way:

Responsive Readings in the Psalms

Hermann Gunkel applied the ideas of form criticism to the Psalms. Some Psalms are hard to interpret because they abruptly change their point of view. In one verse, it seems that the psalmist (a human being) is speaking; in the next verse, it seems that God is speaking. At one point, the Psalm begs for help in time of desperate need; then suddenly the Psalm starts to give thanks to God for his blessings. An example of this can be found in Psalm 42:10-11:

*As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me,
While they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. (ESV)*

Gunkel pointed out that many Psalms were composed for use in worship services. These Psalms follow the pattern (the "form") for responsive readings in a public worship service. The different parts of the Psalms (with their different points of view) were spoken by different people. For example, the worship leader (a priest or Levite) might have spoken Psalm 42:10, and the congregation might have responded with verse 11.

Is Gunkel correct? None of the Psalms directly say that they are supposed to be spoken responsively. However, we know that the Psalms were used in that way on many occasions in worship services down through the centuries. (Even today we still read or sing Psalms responsively in the Sunday liturgy.) The Bible gives one example of responsive speaking when the Law was read (see Deuteronomy 27:14-26). Psalm 118:2-4 seems to invite different groups at the worship service to respond. Psalm 136 repeats the same phrase at the end of every verse; it is hard to understand why, unless it was meant to be spoken responsively. Thus, there is some evidence to support the *Sitz im Leben*, the social setting, that Gunkel is proposing.

Here is an example of form criticism being used in an unhelpful way:

An "Enthronement Festival" as the Setting for the Psalms

Sigmund Mowinckel clashed with Hermann Gunkel on several occasions; however, he also tried to interpret many of the Psalms in accordance with the setting in which they arose. Mowinckel associated many Psalms with a great New Year's Festival in Israel. According to Mowinckel, during the New Year's Festival, Israel would celebrate a key ritual in the Temple in Jerusalem. During this celebration, Yahweh (Jehovah) would be ceremonially "enthroned" as the true King. Mowinckel felt that this festival was a high point of the Israelite calendar. The Psalms that came out of that enthronement ritual included particularly the "Enthronement Psalms:" Psalms 24, 47, 93, and 95-99 (perhaps also Psalm 100).

Was there really an "Enthronement Festival" in Israel? Mowinckel noted that many Psalms have to do with either the earthly king or with God as a heavenly King. He argued that with so many Psalms dealing with kingship, surely Israel must have had a festival to go with them. Also, in ancient times Babylon celebrated a yearly festival in which their god was "married" and then "enthroned" in the presence of the earthly king. Mowinckel felt that Israel must have done the same.

It is true that on the first day of the New Year, the Israelites held a day of rest, proclaimed with a trumpet blast. (See Leviticus 23:23-25. Note that although this was the first day of the year in the

civil calendar, it was the first day of the seventh month in the religious calendar.) However, this special day was in preparation for the Day of Atonement. It was a time of repentance, not “enthronement.” In reality, the Bible never mentions any “Enthronement Festival.” All the other festivals are described, but not this one. Furthermore, outside of the Bible there is no record of this festival ever being celebrated in Israel. Babylon may have held this festival, but that doesn’t mean that Israel did.

Unfortunately, the “Enthronement Festival” exists only in the imagination of Mowinckel.

If the form critics would just limit themselves to studying the different genres and relating them to the historical settings actually described in the Bible, their conclusions would be helpful. Regrettably, they invent social situations (settings) without solid documentary evidence to back them up.

Tradition Criticism and Redaction Criticism

As we’ve seen, according to the historical critics, the Bible that we have today passed through a long, long period in formation. At first, there only existed some stories and poems and other things that were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. These traditions were collected and edited and modified with the passage of time. Finally we ended up with the Bible in its current form.

Tradition criticism and **redaction criticism** seek to discover the history behind the formation of the books of the Bible. They ask themselves: When were the changes made? Why were they made? How did each editor reinterpret and rework the sacred traditions that he inherited, so that the old stories and poems and such would speak to the people of his own time?

Tradition criticism is applied to the Old Testament. Critics believe that the Old Testament stories were passed down from generation to generation as long-lived traditions that changed little by little over the centuries. **Redaction criticism** is applied to the Gospels in the New Testament. Critics believe that the writers of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) used collections of the stories and sayings of Jesus. These stories had been handed down from person to person, but not for as long a time as the Old Testament stories. The authors of the Gospels edited or “redacted” the stories and sayings that they chose to include.

According to tradition criticism, for example, the stories of the Old Testament sometimes had their beginning in a historical event. Even if they didn’t reflect a real event, they had some purpose that made sense to the people living at that time and place. However, the stories were not just narrations of events; they were also interpretations of the events. As they were handed down from generation to generation, they became traditions. Each new generation reinterpreted the traditions according to its own situation. Furthermore, the new generation often combined different traditions, and in this way gave a new meaning to the old stories. In the end, the original event got buried under the weight of so much interpretation and reinterpretation. In fact, according to the critics, what is important in the Bible is not the original event, but the interpretation, because the interpretation is where we find the theology.

Some tradition critics and redaction critics believe that God had his hand in this whole process of developing and reworking traditions. They consider that the Word of God includes not only the original stories but all the additions and changes. Other critics believe that this process of development represents humans of different settings trying to make sense of spiritual things. For them, the Bible records not God’s Word but man’s search for God.

Now, it is true that the Bible presents not just historical events, but also interpretations of the meaning of those events. In this, tradition/redaction criticism is correct. It is also true that in some cases, the biblical authors included information from other sources. For example, the author of Luke states that he investigated the events of Jesus' life and interviewed many eye-witnesses (Luke 1:1-4). Also, the author of 1 and 2 Kings mentions other books which related more details concerning the reign of each of the kings of Israel. If Moses did write the book of Genesis, it is possible that he included information about the Creation and about the Patriarchs that had been written down by earlier authors. God may have directly revealed some things to the biblical authors, but they may also have known other things from other writings.

However, there is no basis for this whole idea of biblical books being pieced together from multiple traditions which were constantly rewritten and revised over many years. No ancient document mentions this kind of editing of traditions. There are no scrolls or tablets with earlier versions of the "traditions" found in the biblical books.

If there is no hard evidence, where do tradition/redaction critics get these ideas? From their own imaginations. Tradition/redaction critics look for certain things in the biblical text – for example, breaks in the narration, discontinuities and discrepancies – which they take as indications that two or more traditions are being combined. They overlook the fact that every ancient document from the Middle East shows these same characteristics. This was simply the accepted way to tell a narrative at that time and place. In fact, today's story-telling styles are not all that different. If a tradition critic were to use the same criteria to analyze a novel written today, he probably would conclude (wrongly) that it, too, was the result of a long process of combining and editing traditions.

Example: Tradition Criticism

The Story of Jacob

Walter Rast, a tradition critic, believes that the story of Jacob (in the book of Genesis) is in reality a combination of several traditions. According to Rast, the fight between Jacob and Esau came from one tradition, while the relationship between Jacob and Laban came from an entirely different tradition. At first, these traditions served the purpose of preserving the memory of a tribal ancestor. (In fact, it is probable that originally each tradition came from a different tribe and referred to a different person.) However, as the traditions were passed from generation to generation, they were reinterpreted. Different tribes came together to form Israel, and so the traditions were combined and modified. In its final form, the story of Jacob came to have a spiritual meaning, the promise of God to preserve his people in the midst of very difficult situations. This theological meaning didn't exist at first, according to Rast. It was only developed after the extensive reworking of the traditions so that they fit the situation of new generations.

Rast is correct in that the story of Jacob does show God's promise and God's protection. However, inventing an imaginary history of supposed traditions does nothing to help his interpretation. You can sometimes find worthwhile ideas in the tradition/redaction critics' commentaries. You just have to sift through a mountain of unfounded speculation first.

The Historical Grammatical Method

As we have seen, *historical critical interpretation* affirms the importance of the historical context of the Bible, but does not accept that the Bible itself is historically accurate. Instead, historical critics imagine what they think the historical context must have been, and then interpret the Bible in accordance with their imagined history.

Many Bible interpreters rejected the speculations of the historical critics, but still wanted to pay close attention to the historical context. They formulated what is known as the **historical grammatical method of interpretation**.

The historical grammatical method accepts the importance of the historical context of each Bible passage. However, historical grammatical interpreters do not accept the philosophical rationalism which led historical critics to discard the Bible's historical truths and give free rein to their own human imagination. On the contrary, the historical grammatical method is built on principles that are diametrically opposed to those of historical criticism:

- 1) **The Bible is the supreme authority**, not human reason. Human logic may help us to understand certain parts of the Bible, but it is not in a position to judge which portions of the Scripture are (or are not) original, authentic, inspired, and acceptable as the Word of God. The historical grammatical method believes that the Bible is generally trustworthy in the historical data it presents.
- 2) **The “hermeneutic of faith” is to be followed**. That is, the interpreter trusts that the historical details in the Bible are accurate, unless there is some strong evidence to the contrary. This is in direct opposition to the “hermeneutic of suspicion” followed by the historical critics, which doubts every detail of the Bible unless there is some strong, confirmatory evidence.
- 3) **The Bible is different from other books** in that it is the Word of God. On the one hand, it is true that the Bible can and should be read using the same techniques used to read other books. The Bible is written in human words, after all. It can be analyzed and studied. Human reason may help us to understand it. However, in the end the Bible presents what God himself wants to communicate. It is not full of errors and mistakes.
- 4) **Miracles can indeed happen**. It is true that God often acts through the natural laws, for example, when a doctor prescribes a certain medicine that heals someone. However, from time to time God also acts outside of natural laws, for example, when someone is healed as a result of prayer even though the doctors have given up hope.
- 5) **God is the same yesterday, today, and forever**. On the one hand, “progressive revelation” does exist. That is, over the centuries, God has revealed more and more about himself and about his plan of salvation. For example, the people in the Old Testament knew some things about the promised Savior, but they didn't know as much as Jesus' disciples who witnessed his death and resurrection.

However, God did not fundamentally change over the centuries; he just revealed more information. The biblical religion did not start out in primitive animism and progress to monotheism. On the contrary, the people of the Old Testament knew very well that there was just one God.

- 6) **The Bible has not evolved** as the historical critics allege. It is possible that some biblical authors consulted outside sources. For example, the author of 1 and 2 Kings may have consulted the royal archives, the chronicles that each king kept. Also, it is clear that the biblical authors did not just list historical facts, they interpreted the events in light of their faith in God. They saw the hand of God in what happened. However, this is a far cry from imagining a tangled mess of different traditions undergoing repeated editing for centuries.

Thus, for example, **historical grammatical** interpreters reject the more extreme conclusions of the historical critics:

- 1) Contrary to the claims of the *source critics*, the book of Genesis does not owe its existence to centuries of editing different “sources.” The author of Genesis (very possibly Moses himself) may have had some earlier histories in hand; however, he put them together under God’s guidance. There is no hard evidence to indicate that the author of Genesis (or any supposed “editors”) changed historical details to suit his own ideas.
- 2) Contrary to the claims of the *form critics*, there was no “Enthronement Festival” in Israel. It simply does not appear in the list of festivals or indeed anywhere in the Bible. There are, of course Psalms that affirm that God is King, but that is far from having an imaginary festival.
- 3) Contrary to the claims of *tradition critics*, the history of Jacob probably occurred just as the Bible relates the events. It is certainly not the case that completely separate traditions were combined and continually rewritten until the historical event was lost and only theological interpretation remained.
- 4) Contrary to the claims of the *redaction critics*, the Gospels were written very close to Jesus’ lifetime, when the apostles were still alive. It is true that each Gospel has its own perspective and its own favorite themes. In this sense, it is helpful to compare the Gospels and see what details each one chooses to relate. However, the redaction theories have no supporting documentary evidence. Without such evidence, we must rely on the evidence we have, and assume that the events happened just as the Gospels relate them.

Conclusion

So, what is the real history behind the Bible? Is the Bible itself trustworthy in the historical events it portrays? Or should we ditch the biblical evidence and trust the historical revisionism of the historical critics?

Personally, I think that speculation and imagination have led the historical critics to go too far. The only hard, written, historical evidence we have from ancient times is the Bible – along with a very few scrolls and tablets outside the Bible. The history presented by the Bible itself is supported by objective evidence; the revisionist history of the critics is all subjective. Perhaps it’s time to apply the “hermeneutic of suspicion” to the historical critics’ theories!