Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 9
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Historical Criticism

We’ve been looking at hermeneutics, now, we are beginning to look at it from the standpoint of the three aspects of communication: the author, the text, and then the reader. Beginning with author and historical center of approaches we looked at meaning as residing primarily behind the text or the focus of interpretation could be a better way to put it. The focus of interpretation is looking behind the text, that is, at the author, and the historical circumstances that produced the text. In introducing historical criticism, by the way remember that criticism or is not in terms of destructive judgmental, in a negative sense, but instead more positively, criticism as opposed to being gullible, criticism in terms of providing sound reasoning, sound justification for one’s beliefs.

When we looked at historical criticisms in the last session, we considered the fact that historical criticism developed as a specific way of interpreting the biblical text. In contrast to more theological tradition bound approaches to interpreting the Bible, a historical approach simply looked at the bible as a part of a historically conditioned text, in a sense. We saw that at least three principles or assumptions underlie the historical critical approach of interpreting the Bible. Number one, we saw the priority of human reasoning, the ability of reasoning and common sense in examining biblical text in their historical context. Second is the fact that the historical critical approach proceeds from the assumption that historical events and historical documents have to be understood in a closed continuum of cause and effect. Then finally, the principle or the assumption of analogy that history repeats itself. That for that which happens historically to be accepted as true it must have an analogy to what we experience in the modern day.

So the examination of Old Testament and New Testament documents under the historical critical method proceeded from these above assumptions. So, again, one of the options of this is therefore there is no supernatural, no room for unique
events. No room for resurrection, crossing seas, raising dead people and things like that. They must have explanations that are consistent with these principles operating under historical criticisms.

I would suggest, however, that when bracketed for these negative and anti-supernatural assumptions historical approaches to the Old and New Testament are valid and play an important role in biblical interpretation. In fact, if you go back to our understanding of the character of the Bible and our understanding of interpretation, in some sense historical critical approaches to the New Testament are indeed necessary because we saw that the Old and New Testament claim to reveal, claim to witness to and be a revelation of God’s redemptive acts in history. Since the Bible claims to record God’s activities in history and his relationship with his people in history in certain times and places; therefore it’s necessary to understand the Old and New Testament within its original historical context.

However, it’s also important to recognize along with that, that although they are not less than historical documents the Old and New Testament are more than just historical documents. They are both historical and theological. So I am rejecting the history/theology dichotomy that goes back to the dualism in Kant, for example. The Old and New Testament documents are more than just records of historical acts, but it is religious literature. Literature that continues to evoke a response of faith, but a faith that is rooted in history and can be defended and demonstrated. It’s faith not contrary to history or at odds with history, but instead faith that is not against historical reasoning but a faith that is rooted in and consistent with that. So I am advocating an approach that places the New and Old Testament documents in their historical environments and in their historical contexts and uses the method of historical inquiry but does not stop there. It’s more than that, the documents claim to be theological documents. They’re documents that claim to attest to the mighty acts of God in history, and continue to function as the revelation of God’s will to his people.
Now when we think about the historical approach in relationship to the Old and New Testament it might be helpful to divide the historical approach to the Old and New Testaments documents into two parts, that is, examining the history of the texts and also secondly, examining the history in the texts. So, examining the history of the text would ask questions related to the production of the text, who is the author, and what we know about the readers, and the historical circumstances that produced the text. The history in the text would refer to specific references within the text to historical persons or events, or cultural references or customs or things like that that need to be examined.

For example, let’s look at examples in the Old Testament very briefly but again I have to confess that most of my examples and the ones that I spend the most time on will come from the New Testament as that is my primary area of interest, research, writing and teaching. But I do want to illustrate with the Old Testament examples as well. So, looking at the history of the text, we ask questions, some of the traditional questions, that we often find treated in introductions, commentaries, biblical introductions or surveys related to what is the historical setting of a New or Old Testament book, who is the author, who are the readers, what problems are they encountering, what environments do they find themselves in, all of that with the hope of placing the documents within its historical context, and understanding how it grows out of that and addresses that.

So, for example, if one is considering the book of Isaiah, one wants to ask questions about the author and who the author was and his situation, one wants to ask the question of the situation of the Israelites as they found themselves facing exile because of idolatry and because of their sinfulness, facing a situation where they may be carted off to a foreign country as punishment for their refusal to keep the covenant that God had made with them, their refusal to keep the law, and to understand how the book of Isaiah is, for example, is a response to that situation.

Or, looking at the history in the text, we said examining the history in the text is to look at a biblical text and to note specific references to historical persons,
historical places, historical examples, historical events, references to certain cultural values, or, references to certain historical personages or places that may have an impact, or an author’s assumptions are going to be known, in order to understand the text.

For example, this is particularly in the Old Testament, prominent in narrative literature, where you frequently find references to individuals and historical events, customs, values, or places. One cannot read through the book of Ruth, for example, and try and understand it without coming to grips with some of the unique history in the text, references to historical or cultural events, values, and things like that. Again my intention here is not to give a detailed explanation for all of this, but simply to raise issues and questions.

For example, how is one to understand the reference in chapter three, verse four of Ruth, “uncovering Boaz’s feet,” what is meant by that idiom, “to uncover one’s feet.” Some think that has sexual connotations, others do not, but certainly to understand the text, one must understand what is meant by that reference. Or what is a kinsman-redeemer, to use the common, English translation of a term found throughout Ruth, chapter four. What is a kinsman-redeemer? What is the significance of that? What role does one play in the history and culture of the Israelite people, and how does that shed light on our interpretation of Ruth chapter four.

We can give numerous examples from other Old Testament texts, especially narrative texts, that again refer to historical persons, events, places, even geographical references can sometimes be included, or references to cultural values, or ways of doing things that may be very foreign to us, or very different from us, but which we need to consider in order to place the text within its historical context.

**Historical Setting of Colossians**

To give a couple examples in the New Testament, one interesting text, when we consider the history of the text, that is, when we start asking questions
about authorship and historical background, and who the readers were, what the situation was that gave rise to a text, is the book of Colossians in the New Testament throws up a number of intriguing examples. For instance, Colossians is one of the books where the authorship of the book is indeed questioned. While I don’t want to spend a lot of time on the issue of pseudonymity, that is, writing in someone else’s name, some who approach the New Testament documents from a historical, critical perspective would suggest that pseudonymity was a valid phenomenon in biblical text. That is, pseudonymity was simply a common approach to writing in the first century, and that biblical authors may even choose to follow that approach. Some have argued that Colossians was not written by Paul himself, but perhaps a later disciple of Paul who is simply passing on the Pauline traditions, who is writing perhaps what Paul would have written, if he would have been present, and therefore writing in Paul’s name. However, others have, I think, mounted a convincing case that Paul indeed was the author, that there is nothing in the Colossians, however different some of it may be from Paul’s other books. There is really nothing in the book of Colossians that Paul could not have written. So, most evangelical scholars would accept the attribution of authorship in Colossians, to Paul as the author.

More difficult to determine is the background situation, or crisis, that precipitated the writing of the book of Colossians by Paul. Who were the readers, and what circumstances surrounded them? We know a little bit about the city of Colossae, and it’s situated in the Lycos valley in the western part of Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. One of the things that we know about the city, is that is was one of the least significant cities that Paul probably wrote a letter to, but we also know that Paul apparently did not establish this church in Colossae himself. But this is one of the rare examples of Paul writing to a church that he did not have a direct knowledge of, as far as actually establishing the church in the city.

But more difficult is to determine is why Paul writing a letter to the city. What difficulty or situation prompted him to do so? It is recognized that most
letters were not simply written out of thin air, but were what scholars often call, occasional. We’ll talk more about this when we look at genre criticism, and the literary genre of an epistle. Most letters were called occasional, they were produced in response to very specific occasions, or very specific circumstances. So in understanding a letter like Colossians, not only do we have to understand something about the author, and maybe a little bit about the city and the region, but we also need to understand who are the readers. What most likely was the situation, problem, or issue, that caused Paul to sit down and write this letter? With Colossians, there’s quite a bit of debate as to what that situation might have been.

One of the main issues is like some of Paul’s other letters, like Galatians, for example, and perhaps a couple of his other letters and some of the other New Testament documents such as 2 Peter or Jude or again Paul’s letter of 1 Timothy, which were all apparently written in response to some kind of a deviant or false teaching that had either infiltrated or was beginning to infiltrate the church, or was in danger of infiltrating the church. Should we include Colossians within the that group of letters? Should we see Colossians as a response to some type of a false teaching, is the first question.

Early on, there were a handful of interpreters New Testament that thought that Colossians was not written in response to any specific crisis. There was not a specific false teaching that was behind Paul in the letter to the Colossians that engendered the writing of the book. But instead, Paul may just be addressing some of the general pressures and general circumstances that Christians in Colossae faced.

However, it is more popular, I think, today among New Testament scholars and students of the New Testament, to see that Colossians was indeed written in response to some type of a false teaching, and the reason that this is usually thought to be the case is based primarily on some of the things that Paul says in the second chapter of the book. For example, in chapter two, verse eight, Paul
says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world, rather than on Christ.” So this would seem to suggest that Paul is warning against the possibility that some will be, or maybe some already have been led astray and deceived, taken captive, by this hollow and deceptive philosophy.

But even more specifically, when you get over starting with verse sixteen of chapter two, you find the section that many are convinced reveals a definite deviant or false teaching that Paul may be responding to, that he is concerned that some of his readers have already, or have perhaps, may be tempted to give into. So starting with verse sixteen, “Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to religious festival or new moon celebration, or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things that are to come. The reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you from the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind props him up with notions. He has lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body supported and held together, by its ligaments and sinews grows as God causes it to grow. Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of the world, why as though you still belong to it, do you still submit to its rules? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings such regulations indeed out the appearance of wisdom, with their self imposed worship, with their false humility and harsh treatment of the body, but they lack value in restraining essential indulgences.” The question that I would simply ask is does that sound to you that Paul is addressing a specific problem? Namely, a specific teaching, some kind of deviant teaching from the Gospel that had been proclaimed to the Colossians, that now he fears might supplant that, or might begin to push that aside. At least as I read it, I would conclude in the affirmative, that I think this text particularly reveals that Paul is responding to a specific problem. Maybe it is not as dire of a problem, as for
example in Galatians. Maybe it has not yet impacted a large group of people, maybe the teaching is not even trying to evangelize or infiltrate the church. But maybe it’s very existence poses a threat or temptation Paul suspects to some of the Colossians. I’m not sure, but as I read chapter two, I would side with those New Testament students that think that Paul is responding to a rather specific false teaching.

The question that perhaps is even more difficult to answer is what is the nature of this teaching? What was this teaching that Paul was responding to? And what is interesting, even today this question has not yet been settled, when you look at all the proposals, one scholar at one period of time, it is probably more than that now, but one New Testament scholar early on said that there were at least forty-some proposals for who these teachers were. That might suggest to us that we might have no hope in determining the nature of the teaching, if no one else can agree. But, for example, very early on some thought that Paul was responding to Gnosticism. However, because Gnosticism did not become a full blown system of thinking in religion until the second century, many have abandoned that, or at the very least some would say Paul was responding to issues and beliefs that later on emerged and crystallized into full blown Gnosticism. Others have suggested other religious beliefs or movements like Stoicism was the main problem in teaching that Paul is addressing, or other pagan religious beliefs. But some have shied away from that because of some of the clear Jewish references. Notice one of the verses I read in verse 16, “therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to religious festivals, a new moon celebration or Sabbaths.” Especially that reference to Sabbath, and the fact that earlier on in chapter two, Paul refers to circumcision. That would suggest that whatever this movement is, it has some Jewish element in it.

So some have actually come up with, one of the more common explanations for the teaching that lies behind Colossians, again when we are trying to reconstruct the historical situation by the book, one of the most common
proposals is that Paul is responding to some kind of synchronistic religious belief, that is, that this is a combination of Jewish elements along with other pagan religious beliefs, or folk religious beliefs perhaps. In addition to that the strong emphasis on Jesus Christ throughout this, for example, the section where the author said, “this person has lost connection with the head, which is Jesus Christ, from whom the whole body support and hold together grows as God causes it to grow.” So the other corollary is it is often suggested that this is a Jewish/pagan religious belief or a combination of syncretism of Jewish and Greco-Roman belief, or folk religious beliefs that are actually devaluing and denigrating the person of Jesus Christ, and so that’s why Paul emphasizes the sufficiency or Jesus Christ, throughout this book.

So those are some of the proposals with the most common being kind of a synchronism or combo between Jewish and Greco-Roman religious beliefs, again in trying to reconstruct the historical background, the history behind the text of Colossians.

However, another possible proposal that I would suggest, and one that I have actually seen catching on in a number of recent studies on the background of Colossians, is that the Jewish references throughout this book, the reference to circumcision earlier in chapter two and the Jewish references throughout this book, the references to the new moons and Sabbaths, and by the way, interestingly, the reference to the festivals, new moon and Sabbaths, that three-fold categorization or phrase is found in other Old Testament texts, especially the reference of the Sabbath is a dead giveaway to the Jewish nature, I think, to this teaching. All of this suggests that probably, this teaching is a Judaism of some type, and there’s no need, to look outside of the Judaism of the first century, as providing the background for this teaching that Paul is addressing. But, its important to realize that Judaism in the first century was quite diverse, so that we don’t need out think that the Judaism, the Jewish teaching, that Paul is addressing in Colossians is necessarily of the exact same type as the Judaism that he is
addressing in the book of Galatians. In fact, we see a number of features that seem to stand outside of that. Especially, the reference in verse eighteen, “don’t let anyone who delights in the false humility and worship of angels disqualify you from the prize.” Such a person goes in to great detail about what he has seen, suggesting some sort of a visionary experience, or some kind of a mystical experience. You don’t find that kind of language in Galatians characterizing the Judaism that Paul is addressing. But, the first thing to recognize is that Judaism was diverse so that we don’t necessarily need to see Paul addressing the same kind of Judaism here as he may have been in Galatians or Romans or even in Philippians chapter three, where he addresses Judaism as well.

Instead, is it possible that Paul is addressing the Judaism that might fit with a more apocalyptic type of Judaism, for example. That is, the type of Judaism that produced apocalypses with books similar to Daniel and to Revelation. We have a whole host of apocalypses available, we have English translations of those apocalypses, outside of the Old and New Testament, that basically record a visionary experience of someone and often that visionary experience included strict observance of the Old Testament Law, avoiding, for example, certain food, fasting in preparation for the visionary experience. As I’ve already mentioned in verse sixteen, this mention of new festivals and new moons and Sabbaths occurs throughout the Old Testament several times so there’s really no need to look outside of Judaism. Perhaps it is a mystical or a apocalyptic type of Judaism, that would account for the reference in verse eighteen of worship of angels, a particular Judaism often labeled Merkabah Judaism, is known for visionary experience, where the visionary ascends throughout heavens and often the goal is to get to the final heaven and often there are angelic beings in the different heavens, and the goal is to worship with the angels, or often sometimes angels may be the objects of worship, but It is possible that this type of Judaism accounts for the teaching that Paul is addressing, or even to be more specific, that phrase “new moon festivals and Sabbaths,” is also found a couple of times in the Dead Sea Scrolls.
Furthermore, interestingly, verse sixteen says, “therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink,” most people assume that this is probably referring to Old Testament prohibitions about food and drink, although it is very difficult to find specific prohibitions against drink. However, what is interesting, is in the Dead Sea Scrolls, when one wanted to become a member, one was often required to abstain from certain food and drink, as they underwent a period of judgment. They were judged “according to food and drink may reflect something like that. Initiates into the Qumran community, which we talked about earlier, often underwent a period of judgment where they had to abstain from food and drink. Only when they passed that period, were they allowed to participate in the food and drink.

Furthermore, it is interesting we have a number of texts that may account for what we find in verse eighteen, “don’t let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify,” such a person who goes into detail about what they have seen. We have a number of texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls called the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. What they were is they were accounts of worship that would take place on successive Sabbaths. What is interesting is in a couple of them, there are rather detailed descriptions of the heavenly temple. It appears that one of the goals of reading these texts was that the congregation would almost undergo a mystical experience of joining the angels in worshipping God in his heavenly throne room.

Another interesting text is one that is called 4Q491, and the 4Q basically means it was found in the 4th cave. You remember the story of the Dead Sea scrolls found in various caves, and the caves were numbered. And cave number four, and the 491 is just the number of the fragment or document to distinguish it from the others. In one of the documents called 4Q491, there’s an account of a human being apparently, perhaps, a priest, who has ascended to heaven, witnessed the heavenly realms and angels, and now he comes back to earth and boasts about what he has experienced, and what he has seen. So, whether the Dead Sea Scrolls
lie behind what is going on in Colossians is impossible to say, but is it possible
that Paul has in mind a similar type of Judaism, that is found in apocalyptic types
of Judaism that produced apocalypses based on their visionary experiences to
heaven? Or perhaps Paul is addressing a Judaism that is similar, or maybe an
offshoot or identical to the Dead Sea community, the Qumran community. That
would account for what Paul is addressing.

It is interesting, too, that asceticism, some have said they notice the
asceticism in “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch,” and they attribute that to
some gnostic, or ascetic, or Greco-Roman type religion. But interestingly, the
Dead Sea Scroll, the Qumran community for them the Pharisees weren’t even
strict enough in their observance of the law. So in terms of the law, certain Jewish
groups, such as the Qumran community, could be seen as highly ascetic. So is it
possible that the false teaching, the deviant teaching that Paul has in mind behind
the book of Colossians that Paul is addressing. It is a Judaism, perhaps an
apocalyptic type of Judaism, or another mystical type of Judaism such as one finds
in the Qumran community.

This by itself provides the background, the historical context and
background, for Paul's writing of Colossians. If this is the case too, most likely this
false teaching did not devalue Christ, this false teaching of Judaism, unlike
Galatians, this Judaism was not a messianic or claimed to be a Christian Judaism,
but instead the Christological emphasis throughout Colossians is Paul’s own
response. It is not his response to the false teaching, it is Paul’s own correction in
order to combat this Judaism that emphasizes ascetic keeping of the law, visionary
experience, and worship of angels, in response of that, the correction is Paul’s
emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ. Perhaps Paul saw this Judaism, this
teaching, as in danger supplementing or supplanting Christ, life in Christ, and Paul
wanted to demonstrate, “No, this Judaism cannot provide an alternative to life in
Christ. The only way to restrain sensual indulgences,” chapter two ends, “is not by
what this Judaism has to offer, but only life in Christ.” Chapter three goes on,
“since you have been raised with Christ, set your heart on things above, seek the things above, not the things on earth,” is Paul’s response. Life in Christ is the only alternative, is the only response to what this Judaism is probably offering the readers of Colossians.

So, again, given all of the variety of proposals, absolute certainty, most likely will evade us. But at the same time, it is necessary to come up with some understanding of what the teaching was that Paul may have been addressing in a book like Colossians, and how that affects the way that we read and understand the text.

**Historical References in the Text: Samaritan woman in John 4**

To give just a couple of examples from the second facet of historical criticism and historical approaches that is the history in the text, that is, examining historical and cultural references within the text. Those references often refer to a shared understanding between the author and the readers, and we need to examine those and unpack those to understand how that might contribute to interpreting the biblical text. Just to give a couple of very brief examples, from two sections of the New Testament that we’ve already referred to, one of them finds it’s significance in at least two places, but also other places, but two in particular that we’ve touched on: Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, and the parable of the Good Samaritan.

We’ve already mentioned that a failure to understand the background for this reference to a Samaritan can actually result in misunderstanding, in that we have, at least in the twentieth and twenty-first century American culture, we have domesticated this Samaritan so that I am afraid that when we read the label “Samaritan,” we may fail to grasp the biblical text as the author intended, and as the original readers may have understood it’s historical context.

It is important to recognize that when Israel was taken off into exile, that the result was that some of the Israelites were actually allowed to remain in Samaria which was the capital of Israel at the time. You remember the nation of
Israel, the kingdom of Israel, was divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom had its capital in Samaria, the Southern Kingdom, Judah had its capital Jerusalem. Some of the Israelites were allowed to remain in Samaria, and the foreigners that took them into exile actually took over the city and interbred with the Israelites remaining there. The product being, what was seen by most Jews, as half breeds, or of those who were not purely Jewish.

Furthermore, not only that but there was a long history of conflict, even beyond that event, there was a history of conflict between most Jews and the Samaritans that resulted in a number of bad relationships and no love being lost between Samaritans and other Jews. So, when Jesus sits down with the Samaritan women, not only the fact that she was a woman, but primarily a Samaritan, would have been rather shocking.

When the hero of the parable of the Good Samaritan is a Samaritan, this history going back to the days of the exile, and this history of conflict and bad relationships between other Jews and Samaritans would have informed the way that this parable would have been read. It would have been shocking to have a Samaritan, perhaps today the closest analogy would be a homosexual with AIDS being the hero of the parable, and the story. Historically that analogy will probably change.

**Prodigal Son in Luke 11**

Another example is found in Luke 11, again the parable of the prodigal son, we’ve already referred to this, but first of all, a couple of historical references that might be overlooked is it’s intriguing that the parable begins by the son asking for his share of the inheritance from the father. A number of commentators have suggested that, given the historical background, this would have been tantamount to the son wishing his father were dead, because it would have only been upon the death of the father that the son would have received the inheritance. So this at the
very least, this would have been an extreme insult to the father who was probably a wealthy and respected individual within the community.

A second interesting reference is the fact that the father runs out and greets the son. That simply was not done in the first century. For a father to run, perhaps, but especially to run out and greet a son who had insulted him in the way that he had, was extremely undignified, and was extremely humiliating. To add to that as I have already mentioned when I discussed this parable before, perhaps we should not see this as taking place out in the middle of nowhere on some ranch where there were no neighbors around, and they were simply isolated from family or a community. Instead, what if this is taking place within a typical rural village, Middle Eastern rural village, so that everyone not only knew what the son did to the father, how the son treated the father, but now everyone is watching, everyone knew the son was approaching, and everyone is watching, and sees the father in an undignified, humiliating manner run out to meet the son.

All of a sudden this becomes a parable, not just about the prodigal son, but about the humility of the father, the undignified and humiliating depths to which this father would stoop to accept the son. Now, one might read the parable and say, well that doesn’t happen, no father in their right mind would do this, and that was probably true. But perhaps that is some of the shock value of the parable, maybe a human father wouldn’t do that, but that’s exactly what God did.

So the point of the parable is not only about the prodigal son and his repentance and return to seek the father’s forgiveness, but it’s also about the humility and the humiliation of God, the father, whenever he stoops down to receive someone who has insulted him, and treated him with indignity by sinfulness and by rejection. Whenever someone returns, someone who has been insulting, someone who has sinned against God the father, whenever they return for repentance, the father much like the human father in this parable, God the Father humiliates himself and acts with indignity when he stoops down to accept back the one who comes to him in repentance.
Final Thoughts on Historical Criticism

So, often the historical, critical approach to interpreting the New Testament and the Old Testament texts often reveals insight that might be missed, at best will be missed, at worst might be misconstrued or misunderstood when we fail to grasp the historical background of the biblical text. Two final notes on the historical, critical method, although the next couple sections will continue to examine methodologies and criticisms that still come under the umbrella of historical approaches and author-centered approaches to biblical text going behind the text. Two other observations related to historical critical approaches: First, we’ve already said, historical approaches to interpreting the Old and New Testaments are indeed necessary because God has acted in history to redeem his people. The Old and New Testament claim to witness to, and to be revelations of God’s activities within history, God’s historical acts of redemption on behalf of his people, that ultimately climax in the human person of Jesus Christ. He enters history to redeem his people in the political and historical context of the world that God comes to redeem. So, therefore, historical evaluation is indeed necessary to do justice ultimately to the biblical text.

But my second observation, by way of qualification, one of the dangers is we need to be careful about not making our historical reconstruction the primary object of our interpretation. We’ve seen that what is inspired is the biblical text itself. The text itself is the product of God speaking. The text itself is the word of God. So the primary locus of my interpretive activity, my interpretation, is the biblical text itself, not the reconstruction of historical background. But, having said that, though, as we’ve seen the historical background in the biblical documents assume and depend on knowledge of historical events, historical reconstruction of events, and historical references is necessary for illumining the biblical text. But as I understand, the interpreter is always walking, in a sense, a tightrope between only interpreting the biblical text in finding in the text the primary place of our interpretive activity. Yet, at the same time, not ignoring the
historical background that helps illuminate that. But on the other hand, the danger is that my interpretation will primarily be about my historical reconstruction and the background. So it is simply a call for a balance that the biblical text itself is the primary focus of our interpretation, it is the biblical text itself that is God's word to his people, and is the place of our interpretive activity. However, at the same time, because God's word is rooted in God's act, rooted in history, it is necessary to understand the historical context, to reconstruct the history of the text, and the history in the text, to help illumine and help us to understand the meaning of the text that we interpret.

**Introduction to Source, Form and Redaction Criticism**

What I want to do is just briefly introduce another method specifically, a series of methods, that all fall within the broader umbrella of historical criticism. The three criticisms that I have in mind that we’ll examine in the next couple of sessions, are source, form, and redaction criticism. Again, these are part of the broader discipline of historical criticism in that they all, in some respect, an attempt to go behind the text and ask historical questions about the historical influences on the production of the text. They ask questions about the author, and the author’s intention in writing the biblical text. These three, we’re going to see, develop historically and logically from source and form criticism, which both, basically look at the sources or the oral forms that lie behind the Old and New Testament that basically end up and make their way, into the final form or the New Testament or Old Testament itself. Again they all ask questions about the author and redaction criticism then goes a little bit further, and ask, “how has the author taken these sources or these individual forms and woven them together into a biblical text? How is the author responsible for bringing the sources and forms that lie behind the text, into the final form of the text?” So, because of that, source, form, and redaction criticism are part of the historical criticism, more generally.

Also, it’s important to say, while all three of these are alive and well in Old and New Testament interpretation today, they’ve generally taken a back seat to
other newer and more modern methods of interpretation. So, in some textbooks on hermeneutics, or discussions of interpretation, these are often overlooked or given a very short treatment, because again they’ve basically been eclipsed by newer and more recent methods.

**Source Criticism**

Let me begin to introduce you to the first one, that usually historically and logically takes place first, and that is source criticism. Basically, source criticism, in both the Old and New Testament, although it works out slightly differently in the Old and New Testament, as far as which book it covers and how it is utilized, but source criticism in both the Old and New Testament is basically an attempt to get behind the written text, whether it is Genesis, or 1 and 2 Chronicles, or Matthew, Mark and Luke, or one of Paul’s letters for example. Perhaps it is an attempt to get behind the written text as we have it, to uncover particularly the written sources that the author may have utilized that lie behind the text. So the assumption is that biblical authors relied on written sources and these can be uncovered or reconstructed from the text itself.

So, in the heyday of source criticism, but also today, you’ll often find interest in discussing the so called written sources that the author, in the Old Testament or the New Testament, may have utilized, sometimes reconstructing those sources, and perhaps sometimes even going further and asking where did those sources come from? What community or situation does it reflect? What situation or issue did it originally address, what situation originally gave rise to it? But on the whole, source criticism is simply an attempt to go behind the written text, and ask the question of the sources used that may have influenced it.

Again, we’ve already looked at two pieces of evidence from the Old and New Testament that would suggest that source criticism is indeed a valid enterprise. The New Testament and Old Testament authors did rely at times, on earlier sources, however that is difficult and speculative to reconstruct those sources. We saw in reference to 1 and 2 Kings, frequent reference to the author
saying, concluding his survey of Israel’s history of the monarchy, will often say, “were these things not written in the annals of the kings,” or something like that. The author seems to be relying on a source, a historical source, that he’s drawn on for his own composition. Or, Luke:1 1-4, where Luke says, “others have taken up, or have written an account of the life of Christ,” and in fact, there are other eyewitness of the accounts of Christ of the events surrounding the life of Christ that Luke himself now has drawn upon, to produce his own account. So, even Luke admits that he is relying on both oral and written sources related to the life of Christ that he is incorporating in his own work. He doesn’t tell us what those are, or where those are, when he refers to others who have drawn up a written account of the life of Christ. Is he referring to one or more of the other Gospels, Matthew or Mark, or perhaps other possible accounts of the life of Christ? In any case, Luke appears to be aware of those, and now drawing on those in his own composition. So source criticism attempts to, based on texts like that, reconstruct and ask what the written sources were that the New and Old Testament authors utilized in producing their own composition.

In our next session, we’ll look in more detail at source criticism in the Old and New Testament, and how it works, and what the value might be in it’s contribution to hermeneutics. Then we’ll also move onto the next stage of criticism, that is form criticism and how that has influenced Old and New Testament interpretation.

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