

Biblical Criticism is a name commonly but loosely applied to a type of historical inquiry that seeks answers to an extraordinary number of different kinds of questions: What are the most reliable and trustworthy texts of the O.T. and N.T.? What are the relationships between the various books? When and by whom were the texts written and for what purpose? What are the sources, if any, the authors used? What is the relationship of these sources to other oral and written materials of the time? What light does the use of the sources cast on the authors' purposes? What structure and style does the text have and what does it reveal about the beliefs and intentions of the author or about the community that used the text? What are the crucial ideas in the document? How are these ideas related to other ideas of the same sort in the cultural environment? To what degree are the historical reports reliable or true?

Any simple classification of such diverse questions as these will inevitably be inadequate and restrictive. To call those questions having to do with the authenticity of a text "lower criticism" and to lump all other questions under the rubric "higher criticism" is not very illuminating. It is also artificial to make a sharp differentiation between literary criticism (the analysis of the form and style and the uses of sources) and historical criticism (questions concerning the historical character of the work), because the analysis of the form, style, and sources of an author inevitably involves historical interpretation. It would be better, then, simply to acknowledge that B.C. involves numerous sorts of questions and correspondingly numerous sorts of ways of going about answering those questions.

Some of the questions noted above have been asked by Biblical scholars from the beginning of Christendom, and in this limited sense B.C. is not new. Nevertheless, B.C. in its precise sense is a product of the 18th and 19th centuries and is unintelligible apart from the development of modern secular historiography. In this sense, B.C. is simply the application of general historical principles to the Bible. This utilization of general historical principles, however, necessarily presupposed that the Biblical documents are human and that in so far as they purport to report events, it is possible to ask whether

those reports are really true. The question, Is that report true?, however, itself presupposes some standard of judgment, and this standard is necessarily influenced by present knowledge and the sciences. It was only when present knowledge was used as the criterion for judgments about the past that historians were able to sort out the fantastic, legendary, and mythological elements from the probably true ones. These two presuppositions, however, challenged the belief in the verbal INSPIRATION and inerrancy of the Scriptures; hence, B.C. became a center of controversy, particularly in the late 19th century. This controversy was aggravated by the fact that the work of the first Biblical critics inevitably involved many negative judgments about traditional beliefs. The critics judged, for example, that (1) the first five books of the O.T. were not written by Moses but were the products of many hands; (2) the book of Isaiah was not one but at least two books; (3) the book of Daniel was not written in the period it describes; (4) the Fourth Gospel differs radically from the first three Gospels and cannot provide a dependable framework for the life and thought of Jesus; (5) the authors of Matthew and Luke probably copied the work of Mark (see Synoptic Problem); (6) it is impossible to reconstruct a history of Jesus' ministry; (7) Paul probably did not write several of the letters attributed to him.

Fundamentalists attacked the "higher criticism" and the R.C. CHURCH established a Biblical Commission in 1902 to make sure that no R.C. scholar advocated historical views alien to church DOGMA. Liberal Prot. theologians, on the other hand, welcomed B.C., and Biblical scholarship owes its existence in large part to their efforts. Neo-Reformed theologians, though critical of LIBERAL PROTESTANTISM in many respects, praised the honesty of the liberal scholars and continued to support this tradition. More recently, Roman Catholicism has generally softened its attitude toward B.C. and many of its scholars accept all or most of the conclusions of the critics cited in the previous paragraph.

The new affirmative attitude toward B.C. on the part of more conservative scholars is due in part to the fact that the modern critic is less concerned to measure the past by the present and to criticize traditional belief than he is to

Critical Appraisal

"Higher Criticism"