BIBLICAL CRITICISM

INTRODUCTION

Biblical Criticism, the application of diverse intellectual tools as aids to interpretation of the Bible. Such criticism is generally designed to establish the correct biblical text and determine proper methods for establishing the text’s meaning.

Biblical criticism, in one sense, is as old as the Bible. Both the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament, and the New Testament consist of books that were transmitted in the form of handwritten manuscripts for generations—and in some cases, centuries—after they were originally composed or written down. After Jewish and Christian communities gathered collections of these books, it became important to determine which versions would become the “official” versions. The versions deemed official were judged to be free of errors introduced, either accidentally or on purpose, by scribes who had copied and recopied earlier versions.

Critical standards thus arose to help early religious communities determine which of the many versions of a specific biblical book were authoritative. Similarly, once canonical (authoritative) collections of scriptures began to circulate, it became important to determine what the texts meant for the life of the religious community. As a result, certain methods of interpreting the texts developed and a range of authoritative interpretations came to circulate.

Despite the need for biblical interpretation in Jewish and Christian communities, the term biblical criticism in modern times has come to imply a challenge to traditional ways of interpreting the Bible. When contemporary scholars speak of biblical criticism, therefore, they tend to refer to forms of biblical interpretation that in some way challenge traditional Jewish or
Christian ideas regarding the Bible’s ideas about historical or scientific matters in relation to the findings of contemporary scholarship.

For a discussion of the texts and versions of the Old and New Testaments, See Bible. See also Biblical Archaeology.

II. PREMODERN CRITICISM

The critical methods that Jews and Christians applied to their Scripture were invented in Egypt as early as the 4th century BC, but neither by Jews or Christians nor to clarify the Scriptures. Scholars of the Hellenistic Age (4th to 1st century BC), during which Greek culture prevailed, developed the fundamental methods of ancient literary criticism so that they could produce proper editions of the classics of Greek literature. These classics included the Homeric epics (see Homer), the works of the great philosophers, and the plays of the great Greek dramatists.

A. Allegory

Along with establishing the versions of Greek works that should be studied, Hellenistic scholars felt a parallel need to determine what the texts meant. They often used allegory as a method for determining that meaning, particularly when the viewpoint of a text seemed to conflict with prevailing views about morality or history. Allegory as an interpretive method looks beyond the obvious or literal meaning of a text for some underlying, hidden meaning understood only by those familiar with ethical or philosophical traditions outside the text itself.

A large Jewish community lived in Hellenistic Egypt where Jewish scholars began to apply Hellenistic methods of literary criticism to the emerging collection of scriptural books. The most important of these literary critics of the Bible was a philosopher named Philo Judaeus. In dozens of works of biblical interpretation, Philo sought to demonstrate the correspondence of the Hebrew Bible, which he knew in its Greek translation, with the world view formed by Greek philosophers and scientists. To achieve this reconciliation, Philo used the allegorical method he
had learned from studying Hellenistic commentaries to Homer and other Greek literary classics. The biblical Tree of Life, for example, he understood as a symbol rather than as a living plant. He sometimes compared God to an architect or gardener, giving form to matter and creating according to a pattern of the ideal world. Through his allegorical method, Philo found numerous interpretations of the same biblical verse.

B. Rabbinic Scholarship

The earliest biblical scholars sought to reconcile the discrepancies caused by human authorship with their conviction that the Bible was divinely inspired—either through direct dictation by God to human authors or through suggestion to the authors in dreams, visions, and other indirect presentations. Invariably, they stressed the divine element at the expense of the human. From AD 200 to 500 in Palestine and Babylonia, early rabbis (Hebrew, meaning “teachers”) strove to achieve consistency among the shifting perspectives in different books of the Bible. They also sought consistency between the Bible and the practices of Judaism, which they regarded as a divinely guided interpretation of the Old Testament. To achieve such consistency, they employed types of reasoning that, by modern standards of textual interpretation, often seem convoluted and arbitrary. Their discussions are preserved in the Talmud (Hebrew, “instruction”). See also Mishnah; Gemara.

Philo’s Bible was a Greek translation of books originally written largely in Hebrew. The Hebrew versions had been composed primarily in Palestine from the 5th century BC on. By Philo’s time (about 20 BC to AD 50), Jews in Palestine and Mesopotamia had begun to agree on a Hebrew scriptural canon. Palestinian Jews in particular drew upon many schools of biblical criticism in establishing authoritative versions and proposed to offer convincing interpretations. The rabbis who rose to prominence in the centuries after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70 established the text that still serves today as the Bible of Judaism. Known as the Masoretic (“traditional”) text, it was completed in its final version from the 8th to 10th centuries by a group of rabbinic scholars called Masoretes (“transmitters of textual tradition”) The rabbis also established their own interpretive method called midrash, which defined the theological and legal terms of the Bible.
C. Early Christian Scholarship

Within a century of the birth of Christianity, the early Church was compiling its own biblical collection. This consisted of a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Septuagint, and the emerging collection of Christian Scriptures, known as the New Testament. Most of the early Fathers of the Church, who pioneered Christian criticism of the new scriptural canon, were inspired by Philo Judaeus to use allegory in the interpretation the Septuagint in particular. The Septuagint, known to Christians as the Old Testament, was a Jewish collection of stories about ancient Israel and laws given to Israel by God. The Church fathers now read it allegorically as an encyclopedia of hidden references to the life and messianic career of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, Christian biblical criticism argued that the real meaning of the Old Testament lay in what it signified through the New Testament and later Christian interpretations. Early interpreters of the New Testament tended to treat the Old Testament as a Christian book that had significance only insofar as it foretold or prefigured events that were later fulfilled in Christ and in the Christian Church.

D. From Ancient to Modern Times

Today, some Jewish communities continue to rely on ancient and medieval midrashic methods to define the meaning of the Hebrew Bible for Jewish life and practice. Similarly, some Christian commentators continue to think of the Old Testament mainly in terms of its relevance to the Christian Church, as did the Second Vatican Council, at least in some parts of its decree concerning Scripture. Both interpretive positions find themselves in some tension with what has come to be called the historico-literary method. This method emerged in the 18th century as European culture became more secular (worldly, or nonreligious) in its outlook. Its goal was to free biblical criticism from the doctrinal constraints of Judaism and Christianity and to determine what the various biblical books had meant in their historical context—that is, when they were originally written. Even when this historical meaning conflicted with the theological convictions of later readers of Scripture, the consequences were accepted.
Some scholars in antiquity made tentative approaches toward the historico-literary method, a method that relates Scripture to a historical and literary context. Even when allegorical interpretation prevailed, some commentators claimed there were better ways of accounting for a divinely inspired literature than the simple assumption that it had been dictated by God to a human author. Philo’s allegorism, in fact, was in part motivated by his conviction that parts of Scripture could not be taken literally. Philo usually assumed that revelation (the divine communication of the Scriptures) took place by divine possession in the manner of Greek oracles—that is, the divine spirit took possession of a human prophet. Other commentators thought that the interaction of God and humanity in the production of Scripture could take even subtler forms.

The ancient rabbinic sages also acknowledged that, despite their preferred midrashic methods, the obvious or literal meaning of the Bible had to be respected. Especially during the Middle Ages (AD 500 to 1500), rabbinic scholars developed sophisticated linguistic and rhetorical methods for insisting that the literal meaning of the Hebrew Bible did not accord with the allegorical meanings read into it by Christian interpreters. These scholars included 11th-century rabbis Solomon ben Isaac, known as Rashi, in France and Abraham ibn Ezra in Spain, and 12th-century rabbi Simon ben Meir, known as Rashbam, in France.

Among Christians, Saint Augustine, in his commentary on the literal meaning of the book of Genesis (De Genesi ad Litteram, 401-415), displayed acute awareness of the apparent discrepancy between the contemporary scientific view of the world and the view of the biblical authors. He therefore recognized the need for critical interpretation of the biblical view. In Antioch (in present-day Syria), scholar Theodore of Mopsuestia was even bolder. He attempted to distinguish between the “prophetic spirit” (direct revelation), which was responsible for much of the Bible, and a “spirit of wisdom,” which had influenced certain biblical writers such as the author of Ecclesiastes. These writers, Theodore believed, were concerned with matters of opinion or purely human observation.

Despite these and similar efforts, truly critical examination of the Bible did not occur until the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Protestant Reformation had reintroduced serious study of the Bible after centuries of neglect, and scholars soon applied to biblical texts
the new critical methods that had developed during this period for studying historical and literary texts. Among the first biblical critics were 17th-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, 17th-century Dutch Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and 17th-century French scholar Richard Simon.

III. TYPES OF MODERN CRITICISM

From Spinoza

Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza is regarded as the foremost Western proponent of pantheism, the belief that God and nature are one and the same. This idea is the central thesis of Spinoza’s most famous and influential work, the 1674 *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (Ethics Demonstrated with Geometrical Order). Author Roger Scruton examines Spinoza’s assertion that God is the “substance” of everything.

Anyone attempting to examine a Bible text should first be sure that the text as transmitted is as accurate as possible and should realize that translation is a form of interpretation. Before a text can be expressed in another language, its meaning must first be determined. Even during the pre-Christian period, commentators dealt with translated material, and they and later scholars recognized that they had to go back to the earliest available form of the texts to determine the original meaning. Much early textual criticism was therefore devoted to establishing an accurate text. Protestant reformers were anxious to see the Bible in the hands of church-goers, and translators of the 16th and 17th centuries searched for manuscripts to assure the best translations possible. From their examinations and from newly discovered manuscripts in the 18th century, the methods of textual criticism developed.

A. Textual Criticism

Determining what was originally written, whatever its meaning or relevance may be, is the concern of textual criticism or the so-called lower criticism. The textual critic has two means of establishing a text: external and internal criteria. The external criteria comprise the physical
properties of the manuscripts themselves—their material, age, and the style of the script—and the history of the manuscripts. (No autograph biblical text—original and handwritten by its author—has been found and it is unlikely that any will be.) Internal criteria stem from the contents of the text.

The surviving manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, date only from Christian times, hundreds of years after the time of its original composition. Nevertheless, the evidence of the ancient versions (the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate) and the pre-Masoretic fragments (see Masora) that have survived suggests that the standard Hebrew text still in use has been preserved with extraordinary fidelity. Hundreds of samples of biblical texts preserved among the Dead Sea Scrolls have provided crucial insights into the early textual history of the Hebrew Bible. The scrolls were discovered in the late 1940s and early 1950s and later published. Despite the antiquity of the Masoretic tradition, these texts show that many other versions of the books now found in the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament were known as early as 200 BC.

The New Testament, on the other hand, is the best-documented text that survives from the Greco-Roman world. Complete and nearly complete New Testament manuscripts date from the 4th century, and numerous existing fragments were probably copied within a century of the original composition of the text. Although literally thousands of variant readings are found among these manuscripts, 90 percent of them involve only incidental matters (such as the substitution of one synonym for another) and present problems that can be solved with relative ease by the textual critic.

In any case, textual critics must depend for their judgments on the internal criteria, which constitute the grounds on which a given manuscript is determined to be authoritative or not. These are simply the commonsense principles by which one variant reading is judged more likely to be original than another. For example, a shorter variant is generally taken to be superior to a longer one, on the assumption that a copyist is more likely to amplify a text (for clarity or other reasons) than to compress it. Similarly, the more difficult of two or more readings is assumed to have the greater probability of originality, because a scribe’s tendency would have been to explain away or resolve interpretive problems rather than create them.
### B. Historico-Literary Criticism

Historico-literary criticism, the so-called higher criticism, emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries, mainly in Germany. By the end of the 19th century higher criticism had aroused tremendous opposition from those who considered it an attack on the reliability of Scripture. To some degree this opposition has not yet been overcome, although the great majority of biblical scholars regard higher criticism as an indispensable tool of biblical interpretation.

The historico-literary method emphatically raises questions of interpretation and relevance, because it is concerned with such problems as the following: Who wrote the book? On what sources did the author depend? Were the sources reliable? What happened to the sources in the process of transmission and editing? How has the message of the biblical word been altered through this process? In short, this approach asks the same questions about reliability and attestation that would be asked by anyone attempting to establish the credibility of any statement occurring in an ancient literary work.

Historico-literary criticism disturbs many people because it has revealed that some biblical accounts could not be literally true when evaluated in the light of historical or archaeological evidence, and that various biblical works could not be the product of those to whom they had traditionally been ascribed. This form of criticism is now also under attack by some critics who feel that scholarly examination often obscures the vitality of the biblical material under study.

1. **Form Criticism**

A further dimension of the historico-literary method is form criticism. This approach is based on the observation that literary statements can be made in different ways. For example, the same event or spectacle may be recorded in the language of poetry or in that of straight factual reporting. Each form has its own sphere of relevance. Acknowledging the diversity of literary forms in the Bible blunts the objection that biblical narratives frequently depart from modern norms of sober reportage.
Once the literary forms have been identified, the critic then has to ascertain the historical situation, or *Sitz im Leben* (German, “life situation”), that gave rise to certain forms. This technique was first applied to the Old Testament, principally by pioneer German scholar Hermann Gunkel. He tried to group the Genesis stories into *etiological* (causal) narratives—that is, stories constructed to explain the origin or cause of an existing tradition. For example, he argued that Genesis 9:20-27 served to explain why the Canaanites were subject to the Israelites. Other passages, he suggested, were included in Genesis to account for names, as in Genesis 25:26, which describes the origin of Jacob’s name. He also considered such passages as Genesis 28:10-19 as explanations of cult legends attached to sacred sites such as Bethel.

In New Testament *exegesis* (analysis), the same principles have been applied to the study of the formation of the Gospels in the early church. The individual Gospel stories, too, are independent narratives (variously called conflict stories, pronouncement stories, or miracle stories involving Jesus). Scholars therefore attempt to understand the original function of these stories in order to find out what they reveal about the church that produced them.

2. **Redaction Criticism**

Another aspect of the historico-literary method that has passed from Old Testament to New Testament criticism is redaction criticism, which examines the procedures and motivation of the editors who worked on a text over a period of time. The Hebrew Bible can be divided into three distinct parts: the Torah (first five books), the Prophets, and the Writings, including Psalms and Proverbs. These parts have long been recognized as the products not of individual writers but of various authors whose work has been combined. This situation has also proved true of the Gospels. Books of the Bible once thought to have been the work of a single and identifiable individual (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) are now recognized as the product of a school, a church, a community, or a person working for the community who took the common tradition that was available and adapted it under the pressure of contemporary needs.

Redaction criticism simply exposes layers in the tradition behind a given text—layers that reflect various stages in the history of the community of faith that produced the text. The task of the
interpreter is to decide to which stage of development the ultimate sense of the text should be assigned. Does one, for example, seek a prophetic message in the words of Amos only insofar as these can be reconstructed from the redacted (edited or revised) work that now exists in the Bible? Or does one accept the Book of Amos for what it now is in its redacted state—a prophecy of salvation (Amos 9:11-15) rather than a prediction of inexorable doom? Most commentators prefer to deal with Amos in its earlier, unredacted form.

On the other hand, people generally take for granted that they should seek the message of the Gospels in their final form rather than in the original tradition on which the Gospels depend. In the case of the Old Testament, a special problem is created for Christians by the subsequent development of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Greek Septuagint, which became the Bible for the New Testament and the early church. Today, Christian translators and interpreters of the Bible almost invariably prefer to use the Hebrew Scriptures, not only as the point of departure for their reconstruction of the biblical text but also for determination of its meaning.

3. Structuralism

A 20th-century development in cultural and literary criticism, structuralism stresses an approach to the text in its final, finished form and thus veers away from its editorial and textual history. Structuralist students of the Bible often prepare for their interpretive work by studying the myths, folklores, and narrative traditions of a variety of ancient cultures as well as of nonliterate cultures in the contemporary world that are normally studied by anthropologists. The method of structuralist criticism is, therefore, to explore the Bible’s correspondence to the literatures of other cultures, as revealed in the common motifs, themes, and narrative structures these literatures assume in telling similar stories. The implications of structural parallels and intersections between literatures from diverse cultures are quite far reaching. The universality of specific narrative motifs suggests that a text can have a meaning beyond the understanding of its author. By understanding these meanings, the modern reader of the Bible can gain access to layers of its meaning that are inaccessible to readers who lack a cross-cultural context of interpretation.
4. Gender Criticism

In the late 20th century a new form of biblical criticism came increasingly into vogue among academic scholars of the Bible. Gender criticism originated in the work of feminist theologians of the 1960s and 1970s who were troubled by the ways in which biblical images of women supported discrimination against women in contemporary society. This method seeks to clarify how biblical narratives imagine and justify power relationships within society. One important strategy of gender criticism is to point out that the implied narrator in most biblical stories is normally male. Thus the relations of men and women in such stories do not reflect an objective image of gender relations. Instead, such stories reflect specifically male projections, desires, and interests. While many gender critics have an explicitly religious concern to reform or reshape theological discourse, the implications of gender criticism spread beyond theological circles. Gender criticism has become an important means of understanding the foundations of power relationships in the societies that produced biblical literature.