

Biblical Criticism: Key Summary

What is Biblical Criticism?

Official Definition: The study and investigation of biblical writings that seeks to make discerning and discriminating judgments about these writings. The term "criticism" derives from the Greek word *krinō* (κρίνω), meaning "to judge," "to discern," or to be discriminating in making an evaluation.

Important Clarification: Biblical criticism is NOT simply attacking the Bible because critics don't like it. It's an academic discipline that applies the same theoretical perspectives and investigative methods used to interpret any other ancient literature to biblical texts.

The Scholar's Rule of Thumb: "Interpret the Bible in the same way you would interpret any other religious text from the ancient world."

Critical vs. Confessional Scholarship

Critical Scholars are individuals who:

- Have acquired and mastered intellectual concepts and methodologies appropriate to their study
- Apply these tools without formal restrictions on their intellectual freedom
- Work without institutional limits (like creedal statements) that would violate academic freedom
- Are not threatened with termination for their scholarly conclusions

Contrast with Believers' Bible Study:

- Academic criticism assumes no shared faith perspective
- Searches for original meaning, not modern significance
- Uses cross-disciplinary methods based on evidence available to anyone
- Operates on probability based on analogy rather than assuming divine revelation

Exegesis vs. Eisegesis

Exegesis (Greek: εξήγησις - "to draw or lead out")

- The critical process of discerning meaning based on words and ideas within the text itself
- Treats the text as revealing something "other" - different from ourselves
- Presumes strangeness and cultural differences
- Requires rigorous disciplinary strategies to prevent assuming obvious meaning
- Uses specific methodologies to encounter the unfamiliar

Eisegesis ("to introduce, bring in from outside")

- Reading the text as a mirror reflecting our own ideas
- Assumes familiarity and similarity with modern perspectives
- Projects contemporary assumptions into ancient texts
- Assumes the text was intended for modern audiences
- Note: This term wasn't used in ancient Greek - first appeared in 1892

Types of Critical Approaches

Historical Criticism

- **Goal:** Reconstructing the origins and development of communities and traditions
- **Method:** Critical evaluation of empirical evidence using academic historiography principles
- **Focus:** Understanding what actually occurred, the actors involved, and why events unfolded as they did

Text Criticism

- **Goal:** Identifying the most likely original reading of biblical texts
- **Method:** Comparing all available manuscripts to rule out copying errors
- **Importance:** Establishes the most reliable textual foundation for interpretation

Literary Criticism

- **Goal:** Examining texts as complete wholes to describe meaning, themes, and authorial intention
- **Subsets include:**
 - **Narrative Criticism:** Analyzing characteristics of biblical narratives
 - **Rhetorical Criticism:** Understanding what goals narrative strategies serve
 - **Intertextuality:** Examining text interdependence and relationships

Source Criticism

- **Goal:** Identifying various sources that contributed to a text's formation
- **Method:** Comparing related passages to trace textual development
- **Historical Note:** Jean Astruc (1684-1766) pioneered this approach, concluding Moses was not the author of the Torah

Form Criticism

- **Goal:** Using a text's genre to determine its social context
- **Method:** Analyzing literary forms to understand their original life settings
- **Significance:** Connects textual forms to their historical and cultural contexts

Redaction Criticism

- **Goal:** Discerning editors who shaped texts into their present form
- **Method:** Identifying editorial layers and purposes
- **Focus:** Understanding how texts were compiled and organized

Social-Scientific Criticism

- **Goal:** Applying social science methods to biblical study
- **Disciplines:** Incorporates anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences
- **Approach:** Examines texts within broader cultural and social frameworks

Perspectival Criticism

- **Goal:** Examining texts for implicit conceptual or ideological bias
- **Examples:** Feminist criticism, post-colonial criticism
- **Purpose:** Understanding how various perspectives shape interpretation

Historical Context: From Medieval Church-State to Modern Scholarship

The Medieval Church-State System

- Church and State functioned as one all-encompassing power
- Church dominated opinion across all aspects of society
- Controlled all universities and educational institutions
- Church judgment was backed by state police power
- Possessed nearly unlimited financial resources
- Despite these advantages, thinkers like Baruch Spinoza began establishing intellectual freedom through the power of ideas alone

The Challenge of Enlightenment

Key Developments:

- German Enlightenment and English Deism challenged traditional authority

- Copernican Revolution shifted from geocentric to heliocentric worldview
- New geographical discoveries and peoples required explanations the Church couldn't supply
- Thinkers like John Locke and Thomas Paine questioned traditional religious authority

Important Figures in Transition:

- **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)**: Argued faith must be compatible with reason
- **Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536)**: Emphasized importance of classical literature for Bible study
- **Martin Luther (1483-1546)**: Promoted *sola scriptura* (scripture alone)
- **Ibn Ezra (1092-1167)**: Created first modern grammar of biblical Hebrew

Modern Institutional Acceptance

Catholic Church:

- 1943: Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* made historical-critical method a "duty"
- 1964: Pontifical Biblical Commission confirmed the method's use

Protestant Churches:

- 1966: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod acknowledged the method
- However, acceptance wasn't without struggle, as evidenced by conflicts within denominations like Southern Baptists

Core Methodological Principles

Historical-critical method represents not a single approach but a collection of commitments:

1. **Critical Inquiry**: Commitment to examination and rational analysis
2. **Probability Principle**: Establishing likelihood through appropriate analogies from common experience
3. **Methodological Doubt**: Recognizing limits of historical investigation and available evidence
4. **Cultural Context**: Understanding phenomena within their historical and cultural settings
5. **Analytical Objectivity**: Avoiding prejudgment of evidence meaning; setting aside theological interests before critical analysis
6. **Correlation**: Assuming infinite entanglement of cause and effect in historical events

What is History in Biblical Criticism?

History, according to Ernst Troeltsch's foundational work (1898), involves:

- **Rational Narrative:** Writing accounts limited by evidence, natural laws, and probability through analogy
- **Systematic Approach:** Developing classificatory structures grounded in firm chronology
- **Methodological Doubt:** Living with interrogation of sources and accepting that not all questions can be answered
- **Correlation:** Assuming infinite entanglement of cause and effect

Goal: Understanding texts in their original context by accurately describing the world in which their original meaning arose, formulating explanatory hypotheses based solely on evidence available to all trained investigators.

This summary synthesizes the key concepts from REL275, emphasizing both the methodological foundations and historical development of biblical criticism as an academic discipline.