

HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND THE CURRENT METHODOLOGICAL CRISIS*

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MORE THAN TWO DECADES AGO T. A. Roberts wrote, 'On the one hand, if Christianity is not to be cut adrift from its historical roots, the question is the gospel true? must be answered at the first level by a rigorous application of historical criticism, with all its techniques and methods for assessing the reliability of evidence about the past. But historical criticism is essentially a secular tool, fashioned to meet secular interests, and thus by its very nature useless to evaluate the religious affirmations of Faith. Yet the very documents which we seek to examine historically were written from Faith to Faith, bearing witness to the Word which became Flesh, dwelling amongst us, and revealing the glory of the Only-begotten Son of God. How this dilemma is to be resolved is the most pressing problem in the field of Christian apologetic.'

In the modern study of the Bible the dilemma to which Roberts refers was recognised long ago. The theological controversy of the nineteenth century which came to a focus in the debate over the historical Jesus² and the proposals in historical theology by F. C. Bauer³ were precipitated by the clash between the interests of historical criticism and the commitment of Christian faith. No better example of the dimensions of the continuing debate could be given than that which Robert Morgan has presented in his translation and study of two important essays by William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter.⁴ It also seems evident that the most important works in NT theology which have been written during the twentieth century, in one way or another, reflect the dilemma. For example, Rudolf Bultmann's work⁵ seeks to combine the rigor of historical method with the theological concerns of authentic belief, and the degree of both the success and the failure of Bultmann's attempt confirm the significance as well as the apparent intractability of the problem.

The discussion which follows is based on representative publications which illustrate the more important issues in current debate.⁶

*Reprinted by permission from Scottish *Journal of Theology*, 36 (1983) 59-71.

¹T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: S.P.C.K., 1960), pp. 173-4.

²D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. Edited with an introduction by Peter C. Hodgson. Translated from the 4th German ed. by George Eliot (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

³W. G. Kuemmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*. Translated by S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), pp. 120-205.

⁴Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, Studies in Biblical Theology: Second Series, No. 25 (Naperville, Illinois: Alec. R. Allenson Inc., 1973).

⁵Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*. Translated by Kendrick Grobel. 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951-5).

⁶For a general introduction and bibliography, see Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), and Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), esp. p. 19, notes 32-5. Relevant topics emerge clearly in the following essays and books: Paul Achtemeier, 'On the Historical-Critical Method in New Testament Studies: Apologia pro Vita Sua', *Perspective*, 11 (1970), pp. 289-304. Elizabeth Achtemeier et al., 'Symposium on Biblical Criticism: Theology Today', 33 (1977), pp. 354-67. James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980). Brevard S. Childs, 'Search for Biblical Authority Today', *Andover Newton Quarterly*, 16 (1976), pp. 199-206. John D. Crossan, 'Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Biblical Research', 22 (1977), pp. 39-49. O. C. Edwards, 'Historical-Critical Method's Failure of Nerve and a Prescription for a Tonic', *Anglican Theological Review*, 59 (1977), pp. 115-34. Martin Franzmann, 'The Hermeneutical Dilemma: Dualism in the Interpretation of Scripture: Concordia Theological Monthly', 36 (1965), pp. 502-33. Roland M. Frye, 'A Literary Perspective for the Criticism of the Gospels: in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, 2 vols. (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), vol. II, pp. 193-221. id., 'On the Historical-Critical Method in New Testament Studies: A Reply to Professor Achtemeier:

At the outset it is useful to summarise the arguments which have been employed against historical criticism. Attention is given primarily to debate from within the circle of critical scholarship itself? Historical criticism is said to be deficient for the following reasons:

1. Instead of bringing the reader of the Bible into intimate connexion with its message, historical criticism rather has a pronounced 'distancing effect! It renders Scripture into a strange object to be dissected and examined instead of acknowledging it to be a Word that must be heard and obeyed in the present moment.⁸
2. The method arose at a time when it was believed that it was possible to engage in historical research without presuppositions, while in actuality it functioned from the beginning with the assumptions of positivism, which have since been shown to be untenable?
3. Historical criticism can easily oversimplify the complexities of the ancient period due to the limitation of sources, the difference between ancient and modern consciousness, and the inherent ambiguity of historical data. Exact understanding is therefore difficult, and historical criticism has not always admitted this.¹⁰
4. The method produces conflicting results on a variety of problems so that the notion of a 'critical consensus' is a figment of the imagination. A 'vast uncertainty of judgment' and open skepticism prevail.¹¹
5. Contrary to the aim of historical criticism to recover the original meaning and intention of the biblical text,¹² doubts are sometimes expressed that this is possible or even desirable? On the basis of medieval exegesis the argument has been advanced that Scripture may have an 'implicit meaning' going far beyond the author's original intention that can only be understood by a later audience.¹⁴
6. Historical criticism is atomistic and disintegrative; it does not produce adequate understanding of documents as literary wholes, since it concentrates on the pre-literary history of

Perspective, 14 (1973), pp. 28-33. Ferdinand Hahn, 'Probleme historischer Kritik,' *Zeitschrift fuer de neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 63 (1972), pp. 1-17. Martin Hengel, 'Historische Methoden und theologische Auslegung des Neuen Testaments', *Kerygma und Dogma*, 19 (1973), pp. 85-90. Id., *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*. Translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 50-8, 127-36. David H. Kelsey, 'The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology' (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). Paul S. Minear, 'Ecumenical Theology-Profession or Vocation?' *Theology Today*, 33 (1976-7), pp. 66-73. Robert Morgan, 'New Testament Religious Studies: *Religious Studies*, 10 (1974), pp. 385-406. David C. Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis: *Theology Today*, 37 (1980), pp. 27-38. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. Translated by Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

⁸Hahn, *New Testament Theology*, p. 19, refers to the debate and says that the discipline is 'caught up in a methodological crisis': Fundamentalist objections to historical criticism have been analyzed by James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1977), and Paul Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980).

*Hahn, 'Probleme', p. 14; Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, p. 62.

⁹Hahn, 'Probleme', p. 13. D. E. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus*, p. 75, contended that the universe forms a circle which endures no intrusions from anything outside that circle, and that events within it occur according to the natural chain of cause and effect.

¹⁰Hengel, 'Historische Methoden', p. 86, and id., *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, p. 130. Cf. also Hahn, 'Probleme', p. 5.

¹¹Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, pp. 71-5, sets forth the following: (1) Uncertainty about the preaching of the primitive community (2) Extreme redactional theories about the NT epistles. (3) Theological pluralism everywhere in the NT documents which makes impossible any notion of theological unity. (4) The biblical canon as merely a product of the self-preservation instinct functioning against heresy, (5) Uncertainty about the historical Jesus and his message. On the last item, cf. Gerard S. Sloyan, 'Recent Literature on the Trial Narratives of the Four Gospels: in *Critical History and Biblical Faith: New Testament Perspectives*, edited by Thomas J. Ryan (Villanova University: The College Theology Society, 1979), who refers to his shift away from concern for historical data because 'the step from traditional materials back to historical reminiscences is almost impossible to make, except for the basic historical realities' (p. 137). Dan O. Via, Jr., *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament: A Structuralist Approach to Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). p. 6, mentions recent misgivings on the question of Markan priority and states his opinion that equally good reasons can be given for establishing the priority of Matthew. For him a structuralist approach is not dependent upon either position since it can be carried out without regard for genetic relationships. To give further examples about the fluctuation of critical opinion would unnecessarily overload this paper with a vast bibliography

¹²Benjamin Jowell, *On the Interpretation of Scripture and Other Essays* (London: C. Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1907), p. 7.

¹³Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis'.

¹⁴ibid., p. 32 Cf. also Henri de Lubac, *The Sources of Revelation*. Translated by Luke O'Neill (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

the text and tends to ignore its 'post-history'. Thus the tradition is ground up into small pieces which have no meaning within a broader context.¹⁵

7. The results of historical criticism cannot be effectively communicated to non-specialists and consequently can hardly serve the needs of the Christian community for teaching and edification.¹⁶

8. The criteria by which historical method functions (e.g. the principle of analogy) are inadequate in dealing with historical novelty; in biblical narratives there are numerous events which are without analogy.¹⁷

9. Historical criticism is largely responsible for the sterility of the academic study of the Bible; it negates the devotional use of Scripture, strips it of theological meaning and renders it difficult if not impossible to gain exegetical results which are relevant and meaningful for contemporary worship and practice?

10. The view of myth often advocated by historical criticism is not only reductionistic and anti-historical but also ignores the power and meaning of myth even for modern humanity?

11. Historical criticism embraces the often unexamined assumption that in the biblical narratives only that which can be proved to have actually happened has any meaning.²⁰

12. The study of the 'direct, genetic or causal relationships' of units with each other, 'involving the *prehistory* and the *post-history* of the texts' is inadequate for a full understanding. In addition, 'there must also be what could be called their *para-history*, an investigation of significant parallels, wherever found and from whatever time and on whatever level, an investigation carefully disciplined by structural methodology?

At this point it becomes necessary to refer to certain difficulties which arise from the perspectives of both criticism and theology. We notice that there are problems which are raised as much by the attacks on historical criticism as by the weaknesses of the method itself.

In the first place, one observes that almost everywhere the expression 'historical criticism' appears to refer to a method so well understood that it needs no definition; but as Martin Hengel has aptly said, it is a dubious procedure to speak about 'the historical-critical method: when in fact there is a plurality of historical methods.²² What is ordinarily meant is not a uniform method but rather a set of assumptions thought to be operative in doing historical research; i.e. criticism must be freed from dogmatic presuppositions, maintain a high degree of objectivity eschew ecclesiastical controls, and accept secular historians' notions of historical homogeneity, of cause and effect relationships and of the criticism of sources.

¹⁵Frye, 'A Literary Perspective'; Crossan, 'Perspectives and Methods: p. 44.

¹⁶Steinmetz; The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis: p. 38; Childs, 'Symposium on Biblical Criticism: p. 358.

¹⁷Hengel, 'Historische Methoden', pp. 85-6; id., *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, pp. 129-30. Cf. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*. Translated by Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954), for principles utilised by modern historians.

¹⁸Childs, 'The Search for Biblical Authority Today'; id., *Introduction to the O/d Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 79. Morgan, 'The New Testament in Religious Studies: p. 396, says that unless historical critical study is supplemented by theological interpretation of the NT, then it will produce only 'the liberal protestant phase of intellectual adolescence: and the NT will no longer stand 'at the center of. theological thinking! Similarly, cf. Minear, 'Ecumenical Theology! Pannenberg's critique also seems to be related to this point; he speaks of the 'anthropocentric' character of historical criticism. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, 3 vols.; vol I translated by George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 15-80.

¹⁹Frye, 'A Literary Perspective'; Stephen S. Smalley, Review of Norman Perrin's *Introduction to Testament*, in *Expository Times*, 86 (1975), p. 216; Raphael Patai, *Myth and Modern Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1972).

²⁰Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); cf. Edwards, 'Historical-Critical Method's Failure of Nerve', p. 129.

²¹Crossan, 'Perspectives and Methods: p. 44.

²²Hengel, 'Historische Methoden', p. 85; id. *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, p. 129. When Hengel mentions specific methods designed to deal with particular objects of research, he apparently has in mind the variety of techniques which have been developed for determining the meaning of those objects, such as the procedures used in the 'cross-examination' of sources or in linguistics.

Secondly, viewed from a theological perspective it is clear that much of the discomfort expressed in regard to historical method is motivated by concern to preserve the priority of theology itself, and the appeal often made for self-criticism by practitioners of historical criticism is understandable.²³

Nevertheless, when proposals are made on specific problems with the intention of overcoming real or alleged weaknesses of historical method, the complexities are multiplied. For example, once it is granted that Scripture has the character of a religious interpretation of existence and sets forth God's demands and promises, the establishment of criteria for determining how Scripture is authoritative is not easily achieved.²⁴

Moreover, in the theological critique of historical method, positivistic historiography has become the favorite whipping boy, and the principle of analogy as advocated by Ernst Troeltsch²⁵ is repudiated. The argument is often stated that these modes of understanding cannot account for historical novelty. At the same time the view may also be expressed that there can be no return to a precritical view of history, but the reader is not always given assistance in separating the 'wheat' from the 'chaff' in the mixture of elements in biblical narrative. Occasionally there may be a call for a 'Christian view of history: but one is unmoved by rhetorical generalities when precise definitions are needed.

From time to time one meets the idea that nineteenth century criticism was dominated by a conception of natural and historical conditions that grew out of the older physics which has now been superseded by the twentieth century revolution in scientific understanding. But what does this mean, or what is it supposed to imply for a more 'up-to-date' view of history? Surely it does not mean that there should be a radical suspension of judgment whereby one simply accepts statements in ancient texts which contradict normal experience, and there can be no surrender to nostalgia for the 'first naivete' of a primitive time.²⁶

The 'vast uncertainty of judgment' mentioned by Stühlmacher²⁷ may be quite disconcerting to the beginner theology student or to a lay person, but one cannot get away from the fact that there are many perspectives which continue to be live options for interpreters, providing for them both a frame of reference within which to work and a way of going about it. Consequently, there seems to be no easy way out of the plethora of alternative modes of understanding the data. To resuscitate obsolete methods or to appeal to institutional authority would not make sense, and while it may be no more than implied that there ought to be a consensus among historical scholars, the suggestion that it would be desirable is somewhat disturbing. Unanimity of opinion or uniformity of interpretation has not characterised biblical scholarship in the modern period, and supposing that such is the better state of affairs implies a cure worse than the disease. Ambiguous evidence will always produce a variety of reconstructions, and Scripture cannot be reduced to exact formulae. It seems that the discipline of historical criticism should rather seek a higher degree of competency than a hermeneutical model which is designed to produce homogeneous interpreta-

²³Consider esp. criticisms 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 11.

²⁴A point made strikingly clear by Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture*, and Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*.

²⁵Ernst Troeltsch, 'Historiography', in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. Edited by James Hastings. 13 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), vol. VI, pp. 716-23, dissociates himself from positivism. Troeltsch describes his three principles of criticism in 'Ueber historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1912-25), vol. II, pp. 729-53. Cf. also Robert Morgan, 'Troeltsch and Christian Theology: in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*. Translated and edited by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), pp. 208-33.

²⁶cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 3.51; *Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness*. Edited by Lee W. Gibbs and W. Taylor Stephenson (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975); Lewis S. Mudge, 'Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation: in Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Edited with an introduction by Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). p. 6.

²⁷cf. above, No. 4, n. 11.

tions. Ample scope must always be granted for one to find his or her own way toward the production of judgments that are both historically and theologically responsible?*

Some recent interpreters have appealed for a return to medieval exegesis.²⁹ David C. Steinmetz describes the approach of medieval exegesis as 'true' over against historical criticism, with its concern to establish the original intention of the text, as 'manifestly false: thereby producing a caricature of the latter. He unnecessarily relativises historical knowledge, and his arguments ignore the positive contributions to biblical exegesis and theological analysis by historical criticism. In this connexion it is well to keep in mind the warning of Martin Hengel that exegesis must never ignore either the traditions which lie behind a text (a point apparently implied by Steinmetz) or the historical basis of those traditions, since 'A text is never a completely isolated entity . . . Every text occurs in a particular "context" and as such served to give an indication; it has the character of a witness.'³⁰ Despite the ambiguity of historical data, not everything is so vague that the text is cut loose from clarifying historical information. It is retrograde to advocate a 'spiritual exegesis' which, for example, wrests the parables of Jesus from their first century environment without further ado.³¹

Criticism No. 3 poses an interesting problem. How is historical criticism to surmount the barriers constituted by limited sources, the inherent ambiguity of data and the differentiation between ancient and modern consciousness? Concerning the first difficulty, we are often reminded that most of the information from the ancient world comes from the upper classes of society; consequently, to cite one instance, it would seem that often only crude approximations can be made of the situation among the circles where Christianity first took root. Little or nothing can be done about this unless new sources and/or methods are discovered which shed light on the circumstances, and historical criticism is therefore well advised to accept the difficulty with humility, being cautious not to say more than the evidence allows. As for the second barrier, the ambiguity of historical data, one notices that the sources often not only tell us less than we would like to know but also transmit things that may seem embarrassing, pointless, unnecessary, or totally devoid of indications about motives or intent. The questions we would like most to ask appear unlikely to receive an answer. The whole situation is made even more problematic by the third barrier, the distance between ancient and modern consciousness. Perhaps it is possible to forget either the degree of commonality shared by persons of all historical eras or the differences between them, but it is likely that the latter constitutes the more serious problem.³² Consequently, in consideration of these barriers it is not only not surprising that historical criticism produces vastly differing results but also amazing that anything else should be expected. All the same, if there is a 'failure of nerve' which ensues in an anti-historical bias of whatever sort, this simply discloses a personal choice on the part of the persons experiencing the 'failure: Such an eventuality is not a justifiable condemnation of historical inquiry merely

²⁸Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), who, among other things, refers to the bankruptcy of historical criticism, is an example of what has been called 'rhetorical terrorism'.

²⁹Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis'; Lubac, *The Sources of Revelation*.

³⁰Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, pp. 56, 57.

³¹Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis: wholly ignores the modern study of the parables, which, while certainly not exhausting the meaning contained in them nor answering all possible questions, has illuminated the proclamation of Jesus far more than such medieval exegesis as cited by Steinmetz.

³²R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), argues against 'substantialism' in the enlightenment view of human nature; i.e. that in human nature there is a 'static and permanent, an unvarying substratum underlying the course of historical chances and all human activities' (p. 82). He states that Herder was the first to hold 'that human nature is not uniform but diversified' (p. 91). Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), pp. 1, 100-3, 139-40, traces the concept of diversity in human nature to Vico. Cf. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Translated from the 3rd edition (1744) by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, abridged and revised with a new introduction (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc. 1961), pp. 57ff.

because of its difficulties. There rather needs to be an historical learning which does not lose its way amidst ambiguity. It would be overbold to attempt a definition of the sort of historical learning which is essential, although it is fair to say that it must have sufficient strength of will not to draw back before the difficulties or to surrender too quickly to apparently unresolved enigmas.

Criticisms 6, 7, 9 and 12 are related to the Bible as containing 'literature' or writings which in their canonical form deserve treatment going far beyond the interests of a critical reconstruction of the history and literature of the Bible.³³ Critical reconstruction is a concern not to be abandoned, but the disintegrative impact of criticism as usually practised seems evident. Nevertheless, while some recent proposals made in reaction against criticism contain important insights, basically they are inadequate responses to the problems raised by historical analysis. They do not provide a comprehensive understanding that avoids substituting for historical criticism an esoteric method that is an even worse hermeneutical tool.³⁴

The criticisms which have to do with historical novelty (No. 8), myth (No. 10) and historical facticity (No. 11) refer to aspects of historical method which are perennially controversial. In these matters the issues are as theologically decisive as they are hard to resolve. To cite one notable example, Pannenberg's efforts to overcome the hiatus between history and theology in dealing with the resurrection of Christ as an historical fact illustrate the problem of trying to integrate into one's system the principle of analogy.³⁵ Here the critic who functions as a believer from within the circle of faith is faced with enormous difficulty. The twin perils of the 'sacrifice of the intellect' on the one side and the surrender to a self-contradictory interpretative stance on the other seem impossible to avoid. But a systematic attack upon the problem is essential, and here the dialogue between the historical critic and the theological interpreter (who may or may not be united in one person) must continue. Furthermore, the subject of myth in the Bible has generated much debate since the rise of biblical criticism because it is directly related in the minds of many persons to the question of historical facticity. While some interpreters would restrict myth to a few narratives such as the creation story in Genesis, or the birth, temptation and resurrection narratives in the Gospels, others would extend it to cover almost everything that may be classified as a part of the 'pre-scientific' world view of antiquity or that belongs to the category of the 'supernatural'. Still others assert that myth includes both imaginary elements and genuine historical tradition. While an understanding of myth is often assumed, not all investigators agree on the definition and limitation of it, as well as its meaning for exegesis. Finally, the contention that with eighteenth and nineteenth century criticism there came into existence the ultimately harmful point of view that only what really happened can have meaning in biblical interpretation gives rise to perplexing questions.³⁶ If biblical narratives include traditional stories which have been progressively modified at different stages along the way by interpreters struggling to incorporate their experiences with the treasures of their community inheritance, then what is the relation between facticity and imaginative reconstruction

³³Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); id., *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, esp. pp. 40-1, 74-6, 79, 83. For a related but not identical emphasis, cf. also James A. Saunders, 'Biblical Criticism and the Bible as Canon: *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 32 (1977), pp. 157-65.

³⁴e.g. consider the rather negative analysis of structuralist exegesis in Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 168-81.

³⁵Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Redemptive Event and History: in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. I, pp. 15-80; id., 'The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth: in *Theology as History*, vol. III of 'New Frontiers in Theology: edited by James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), pp. 101-33; id., *Jesus, God and Man*. Translated by Lewis S. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 74, 97-9. CL also Ted F. Peters, 'The Use of Analogy in Historical Method,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 35 (1973), pp. 475-83; G. E. Michalson, Jr., 'Pannenberg on the Resurrection and Historical Method: *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 33 (1980), p. 347

³⁶Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.

or interpretation, and where, if anywhere, does the narrative possess normative meaning and authority?³⁷ How can a quasi-historical narrative and the critic's postulated 'antecedent revelation' (= revelatory events lying behind the narratives in the Bible) both be revelatory?³⁸ What is the effect of such a perspective upon the common affirmation that Christianity is in essence an historical religion?

Whereas critics of historical method are justifiably concerned about the theological consequences of criticism, they have not always specified the implications of their criticism nor the complexity of the methodological issues that are entailed. Perhaps the reason for such failure is that some of the critics may not have the qualifications for stringent systematic analysis. The correlation between the questions raised by and about historical criticism and the theological or metaphysical problems of existence is not difficult to see, but who among the critics of historical method is able to deal with such problems?

The hope for constructive suggestions from the ongoing debate for the resolution of the sort of difficulties which have been mentioned cannot be abandoned. It is far easier, however, to ferret out contradictions, incompleteness and weaknesses of historical criticism than it is to lead the way out of the dilemma. It would be presumptuous to attempt to do this in a brief essay, but there is one area in which I wish to make some final comments. The concerns expressed in criticisms 8, 10 and 11 show that theology and historical criticism are haunted by the problems which inhere in the connexions between history, revelation and the testimony of Scripture. Like the man on the stair 'who wasn't there',³⁹ they simply will not go away, whatever one's wishes may be.

What, then, is to be said about all this? Firstly, the history of biblical study demonstrates the urgency of fashioning a concept of revelation which incorporates insights from historical criticism, such as the development of traditions in the OT and NT and the differing perspectives of various writings within the canon. Secondly, the heart of the hermeneutical problem, the need to 'thaw out' Scripture from the historical 'deep freeze locker: is concentrated in the difference between ancient and modern consciousness about the way the world really is. This difference seems to me to be an inescapable fact, and whatever the deficiencies of Bultmann's demythologising program, it possessed the merit of tackling the problem head-on. As much cannot be said for some recent theology and criticism which simply ignore that difference. There may indeed be a way of reappropriating ancient religious symbolism through criticism,⁴⁰ a way which contains no suggestion of a simplistic acceptance of a view of existence which is essentially alien and therefore inaccessible to us. To work out such an approach is one of the pressing needs of biblical interpretation.

The theological concern for openness to transcendence is directly applicable here,⁴¹ but the biblical interpreter cannot forget that the ancient description of the ways in which mortals experienced the irruption of the ordinary by transcendent reality, by God and the agents of God, have to do with manifestations that we find next to impossible to take seriously as literal actualisations. Again we mention Pannenberg's difficulty in speaking of the resurrection of Christ as an historical event; ultimately the nature of the narrative and the character of that which is denoted simply will not fit into historians' conceptions. The resultant description of the resurrection by Pannenberg as a 'metaphor' is not greatly different from calling it a 'myth'. To include in a discussion of the facticity of the resurrection references

³⁷Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, pp. 1-17, 52-64, 111-33.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 60. Or, as Barr says, is revelation to be found also in the community of faith which possessed the traditions, had experiences of a revelatory character, and formulated texts which embraced both?

³⁹*A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*. Edited with an introduction by Oscar Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 604

⁴⁰Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*.

⁴¹Stühlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, p. 84.

to the metaphorical nature of the term denoting the event seems unlike customary historical descriptions. The bombing of Hiroshima is not called a metaphor, although 'Hiroshima' continues to be metaphorical for the unimaginable horror of nuclear war. At the same time it must be said that to use the term 'metaphor' (or 'myth') with reference to Christ's resurrection does not necessarily connote unreality. To be sure, it may be a halting form of speech, possibly the only way open to human language to speak about that phenomenon as God's mysterious revelatory and redemptive activity.

But the moment we begin to speak about the biblical testimony concerning Christ as risen from the dead, acknowledging the resurrection in some sense as an 'event' which is both revelatory and redemptive, we have crossed over the boundary separating ordinary historical discourse from theological discourse. The plain recognition of this fact means that there is an obvious dualism here, two modes of discourse and/or two approaches in the understanding of Scripture. Thus we have turned full circle to the point with which we began. Now whether a method is possible that can transcend the dualism is another matter; it appears that no generally acceptable hermeneutic has yet been invented or discovered which is able to resolve the conflict. But to admit such a disturbing thing as this is in itself a positive gain in understanding for one receives the impression from some criticism and theology that the dichotomy goes unnoticed or else is 'swept under the rug'. There are biblical interpreters who suspend the rules of historical criticism here and there, when theologising on the basis of the testimony of Scripture, although they are ostensibly using *only* the criteria of historical criticism.⁴² Evidently interpreters of this sort would insist on employing the same criteria for inquiry into other areas, whether the object happens to be political history or the history of the non-Christian religions. But from the standpoint of methodology, it is intolerable to engage in the pretense of using nothing other than historical method, when all the while there is a 'hidden agenda' beneath the surface. On the one hand to appeal for critical stringency in the exegesis of biblical texts, and on the other hand to call for openness to transcendence, dialogue with the text and responsiveness to the summons of the text, without at the same time proposing more explicitly and with great clarity a way to overcome the disparity between ancient consciousness and modern consciousness, is the methodological equivalent of mixing oil with water.

⁴²cf. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic*, pp. 49- 143, for an analysis of three works by E. C. Burkitt, C. H. Dodd and Austin Farrer in this connexion. These writers are by no means exceptional in functioning in such a manner.