

# BULLETIN OF APPLIED BIBLICAL STUDIES

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE INSTITUTE OF APPLIED BIBLICAL STUDIES

*Guided by the teaching of the Catholic Church, the Institute of Applied Biblical Studies seeks to train men and women to discover the practical wisdom of God's Word for life in contemporary society.*

## THE BIBLE POLITICIZED: The Roots and Fruits of Historical Criticism *An Interview with Scott Hahn (Concluded)*

*Here is the conclusion of a reprinted interview of Scott Hahn by Karl Keating, founder of Catholic Answers, which appeared in the September issue of This Rock magazine. The first half of this interview appeared in the September issue of the Bulletin.*

**KEATING** Is there any way we can reach back and find the Jesus of history?

**HAHN** In Meier's methodology, no. The ideal he envisions is a Catholic, a Jew, and a Protestant, all biblical scholars, trapped in the basement of Harvard's library, and they aren't allowed out until they reach consensus.

**KEATING** This seems reminiscent of John Rawls in his political philosophy a quarter century ago.

**HAHN** A lowest-common-denominator approach. Meier says we have to begin with the concession that the Gospels have limited value as historical records--

**KEATING** This is just an assumption on his part.

**HAHN** Not just an assumption, really. Using the hermeneutic of suspicion, he reaches his conclusion. In the field he is considered a moderate, at some points even a conservative. As a Catholic he says he must conclude his historical-critical studies by saying that Christ was probably born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem.

In a presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association, Meier argued on historical-critical grounds that Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters, presumably *through Mary*.

**KEATING** The standard Protestant approach.

**HAHN** What made it so ironic was that the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* then published a response by an Evangelical Protestant scholar in England, Richard Bauckham, arguing for one of the traditional Catholic approaches to understanding the "brethren of the Lord." He said that the "brethren" might have been offspring from a previous marriage of Joseph.

But in the *U.S. News* article, the reporter describes how "Meier keeps his academic work and his faith separate. He says, 'You can't mix theology and historical research without causing tremendous confusion.'" For me *that's* the issue. Meier drives a wedge -- a methodological separation -- between his faith and theological beliefs on the one hand and his historical-critical conclusions on the other.

*"It would never be consonant with the Catholic spirit...to approach the study of Scripture with an attitude of scientific neutrality detached from theological faith."*

### It wasn't always this way . . .

**KEATING** Is this the proper method for scholars?

**HAHN** I don't think so. After reading the article, I went back and began scouring decades of back issues of the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* to see how far back this tendency could be traced. I discovered Fr. J. P. O'Donnell gave a presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association in 1950. It was published in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* the next year, in 1951. He stated, "Certainly then it would never be consonant with the Catholic spirit or tradition to approach the study of Scripture with an attitude of scientific neutrality detached from theological faith.... This further attitude does not mean we can contemplate the sacred text in an attitude of faith and be absolved from the duty of continued application to the problems of text, language, history, and archaeology."

But to separate, as Meier does, the historical-critical study of Scripture from theological faith is something that in 1950 the president of the Catholic Biblical Association regarded as unthinkable for authentic Catholic exegetes. Yet now it seems to be the operating assumption.

**KEATING** Are we seeing a replay of the philosophical position that is said to have infected some of the Muslim scholars in the Middle Ages? There was a disjuncture between what you believed in faith and what you understood by reason. Through the historical-critical method the Catholic scholar may say, "This is what really happened," but because of his faith he says, "Actually, it happened this other way." There is an opposition.

**HAHN** That's right.

### Building bridges

**KEATING** How does he square it? Is the critic saying that both things are true?

**HAHN** He is saying that certain things we conclude from historical-critical research *can* be at odds with what we believe through faith. This, I believe, is a modern version of the double-truth theory advocated by the thirteenth-century Averroist philosophers. As Chesterton points out in *The Dumb Ox*, St. Thomas was always polite with his enemies *except* when it came to Christian Averroists, such as Siger of Brabant, a Catholic scholar who advocated this double-truth approach to knowledge. Aquinas saw in Siger a greater threat to the faith than the Islamic Averroists who attacked it.

**KEATING** If I were to use Meier's methodology, I could say that, based on historical-critical reasoning, Mary was not perpetually a virgin--she had at least six other children besides Jesus--but through faith I know the Church teaches infallibly that she always was a virgin and Jesus was her only child. I can hold both ideas simultaneously. But what does that do to me mentally? What consequences follow as I deal with the rest of the faith?

**HAHN** An erosion process begins, if not in your own lifestyle then in that of your students, not least in their faith.

**KEATING** What's the motivation behind this hermeneutic?

**HAHN** Personally I'm convinced that it's mostly due to peer pressure, wanting to look smart and objective to your fellow scholars, especially non-Catholics. There's also a genuine concern to build bridges, to find common ground with non-Catholic scholars--a fine and worthy motive. But it shouldn't be allowed to control your research, or it ends up becoming a diluted apologetic that is quite ineffective.

**KEATING** Bridges to everybody, except to the magisterium of the Church?

**HAHN** Indeed! In contrast, I would say, Don't be duplicitous. Just tell other scholars, "Look, I believe

these Catholic things, not just with part of my brain but with all of my mind and with all of my heart," and so they're going to illuminate, they're going to inform, they're going to strengthen my use of the historical method and the critical methods.

### Intellectual schizophrenia

**KEATING** This is the response that Jacob Neusner gives in *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*. He says something like, "You must accept our disagreements. To the extent you try to paint them over, to pretend they aren't there, you insult me. You do not accept me for what I am and what I believe. You think I'm not mature enough to agree to disagree." In trying to build ecumenical bridges to other people, these Catholic exegetes say I should keep off-loading Catholic distinctives until we reach commonality.

**HAHN** That's right. It's basically a subtle form of intellectual schizophrenia. People say they believe with one side of the brain what they're denying with the other.

**KEATING** That reminds me of the bumper sticker that says, "I'm not schizo, and I'm not either."

**HAHN** [laughter] I would say, just to pull things together at this point, that the misuse of historical criticism is practically *always* based upon inadequate philosophical formation. If people were schooled in the philosophy of St. Thomas the way Leo XIII intended scholars to be, I think the problem would practically disappear overnight.

It's very important to distinguish between the classical *historical method* on the one hand and *historical-critical methods* which have arisen in the last few centuries. This is a distinction that is seldom made, but, once made and explained, it becomes virtually self-evident.

*It is important for Catholics to acknowledge that these methods can be useful, but only if we are well-grounded philosophically.*

Going back into antiquity, courts have sifted through documentary sources for evidence, which they have weighed using objective criteria. That is what is meant by the historical method in the classical sense, where you have eyewitness testimony, but only in documentary form.

You ask, Were they eyewitnesses? That's the criterion of reliability. Are the eyewitnesses consistent? That's the criterion of consistency. Are the reports whole and intact? That's the criterion of

integrity. If these three tests are met, we have to give these eyewitnesses the benefit of the doubt. They were alive then; we weren't. What they're reporting ought to be accepted as *prima facie* evidence. *That's* the historical method; *that's* historical research. You can find this basic approach in Louis Gottschalk's *Understanding History*.

But this was overturned with the Enlightenment, with the advent of historical criticism based upon a hermeneutic of suspicion. Indeed, Ernst Troeltsch, the father of historicism, came up with three alternative criteria, his so-called axioms of historical criticism: the principle of analogy, so that the past always resembles the present; the idea of correlation, which is that you always look for natural causes behind whatever event you're studying; and the principle of criticism, that you have a systematic distrust of the reports of tradition and especially of authority.

***Historical criticism cannot prove that a miracle occurred.***

The point is that if you understand the principles that are behind the historical-critical methods--as distinct from the historical method--you'll see that historical criticism is inherently and intrinsically incapable of proving a supernatural event took place.

**KEATING** An analogy: Science cannot prove the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

**Hahn** Right, and historical-critical methods cannot prove that a miracle occurred. The critical methods are *incapable* of determining that. Another thing I want to emphasize is that historical critics have *not* achieved consensus on any single passage of either the Old Testament or the New Testament. They've had two centuries now. They've had thousands of books, tens of thousands of articles, yet they have not achieved consensus. You might have the momentary *illusion* of consensus (the so-called "assured results of modern critical scholarship"), but then a new doctoral dissertation comes out and obliterates it. The methods themselves have produced only negative results.

Some critics might respond, "We have achieved consensus on some things--that Moses didn't write the Pentateuch, that Isaiah didn't write the second half of his book, that Matthew didn't write first." These are purely negative results used to attack the testimony of tradition. In the case of the Gospels, we have the witness of people who were alive at the time of events they describe. These people wrote when others, still living, could have denied their reports--but didn't. You don't make things up under such circumstances.

Chesterton describes tradition as the democracy of the dead. We're not letting the witnesses speak; we're not *allowing* tradition to testify. And that's bad science. The results are not only negative but skeptical. We should interrogate these critics and ask them, What is it about your methods that render them incapable of producing interpretive consensus on any single text of the Bible?

**KEATING** Have any of the historical critics tried to answer that question?

**Hahn** Not that I know of. It's one of those questions people generally avoid raising in public.

**KEATING** John Robinson, in his book *Redating the New Testament*, said that he wanted to take a fresh look at the dates assigned to the New Testament books. He said the historical-critical method had been running in circles--one scholar footnoting a friend, who footnotes the original scholar, back and forth, back and forth. So Robinson took a fresh look and came up with something close to a traditional Catholic understanding.

**Hahn** And I think he did it with scientific integrity and with a degree of scholarly rigor. I don't agree with all his conclusions, but I am generally persuaded by many of the arguments he advanced for a pre-70 dating of the New Testament books.

**KEATING** What do you think of the more recent writings of Claude Tresmontant and the late Jean Carmignac?

**Hahn** I haven't studied them closely enough to form a final judgment about their conclusions, but I have great respect for their position.

## The Ratzinger gambit

**KEATING** Is there a positive role for historical criticism?

**Hahn** It's important for Catholics to acknowledge that these methods can be useful so long as we are well-grounded philosophically. Historical criticism functions like a prosecuting attorney. He should be allowed his time to cross-examine witnesses, to impugn motives and to look for vested interests and hidden agendas. Ultimately, when the jury is sent out, if the eyewitnesses have withstood the tests, then the events to which they have testified ought to be accepted. Decisions ought to be reached on their testimony. But if the prosecuting attorney is allowed to create a purely adversarial approach to truth, and if he is allowed to control the outcome, then the courtroom procedure is skewed.

Cardinal Ratzinger describes how the critical methods are analytical tools, and their usefulness depends on the way in which they are used and on the philosophical assumptions that lie behind their use. There is no such thing as the purely neutral use of historical-critical methodology. Instead, what you have is the historical-critical methods being

employed according to a particular philosophical outlook. We need to ask, Which theory has to interfere with the sources the least?

**KEATING** What do you mean *interfere*?

**HAHN** As Ratzinger points out in *Behold the Pierced One*, we ought to prefer the theory that can explain the document as it stands in its final form. Scientifically speaking, the more tenable theory is the one that can explain the document as a whole; the less tenable explains only by chopping up the document into disjointed, even contradictory, sources.

**KEATING** In olden times we tried to "save the appearances"--what accounts most simply for the apparent movement of the sun, planets, and stars around the earth? Ancient and medieval thinkers settled on cycles and epicycles, mathematical constructs that predicted movements in a geocentric system. Later, in a heliocentric system, the appearances were saved through ellipses. Overarching unity again was preserved. You didn't end up with scientists saying, "Mars moves along a circle, Venus along a square, and Jupiter along a squiggle." The planets weren't deconstructed.

**HAHN** Indeed. The more a scholar's interpretive view respects the corpus *as given*, as a whole--whether the corpus under study is the book of Genesis or the entire Pentateuch or the three synoptic Gospels--the more his view allows the corpus to remain integral.

**KEATING** Is this methodology something unique in the application to Scripture? Do scholars employ it in regard to other things? I remember Ronald Knox had a wonderful satire on using the historical-critical method to investigate Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam". After tearing it apart line by line and working up fanciful historical and political connection, he concludes that the real author of the poem was Queen Victoria!

**HAHN** I'm not surprised.

## **Reliably unreliable conclusions**

**KEATING** You said earlier that scholars using the historical-critical method often end up with interpretations that are not reliable.

**HAHN** Consider the scholar who says, "In this epistle Paul contradicts what he says in another epistle." I would say, Let's look for an alternate theory that reveals a deeper logic and intelligibility of seemingly opposed passages.

**KEATING** These scholars fall into an error similar to Fundamentalist proof-texting, looking too narrowly at something and therefore seeing a conflict. If they took a broader view, there might be no conflict at all.

**HAHN** Yes, but there's more. The philosophy behind these methods is alien to the subject matter of the documents.

**KEATING** Elaborate on that.

**HAHN** You need a critical sympathy, a critical empathy, with the ancient writer whose documents you're studying.

**KEATING** Does that mean you have to be a believer?

**HAHN** It doesn't mean you have to be a believer, but it implies that a believer has a certain edge.

**KEATING** All things being equal, it's better to be a believer than not, when using this scholarship.

**HAHN** Being a believer, you're going to approach scriptural texts with critical sympathy. You're going to be more open to finding inner cohesion. You're going to be more capable of achieving a synthesis.

**KEATING** Let's conclude our conversation with your prognostication of the future of the historical-critical methods. You've noted that they've been employed with no one verse being resolved with a congenial interpretation by all these exegetes. Is this tank of gas going to run out, or is this car fated to roll on perpetually?

**HAHN** I don't see it going away, at least not in the near future or as a result of direct assault. The way to drive out darkness is to turn on the light. I'm convinced that the more the light of faith is turned on for faithful Catholics through solid biblical preaching, teaching, and study, the more a hermeneutic of faith will establish its own scientific and critical superiority in our minds.

**KEATING** Will the historical-critical methodology at length wear itself out?

**HAHN** The constant misuse of historical criticism is sterile. It doesn't reproduce itself, and so it's dying. It's also parasitical, though, so we've got to be mindful of how it preys upon Catholic students who aren't formed adequately in philosophy.

**KEATING** Do you see an end-run being made around the troubles brought on by misuse of the method?

**HAHN** I see people appropriating Scripture in terms of our tradition in a wide variety of ways: daily contemplation of the lectionary texts; Bible study faithful to the magisterium; memorization of key texts of Scripture; the faithful proclamation of the Word by priests. As these expand, the inevitable outcome will be the gradual dissolution of what future generations may regard as twentieth-century "hysterical criticism."

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