

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 (Part One)

Introduction

When I founded the Institute of Applied Biblical Studies three years ago, my primary goal was to help Catholics come to a deeper understanding of Scripture. I was warned about the twin obstacles of ignorance and apathy ("I don't know and I don't care").

I have since discovered a third and perhaps even greater problem, namely, the confusion of ordinary Catholic lay-people--leading to a crisis of confidence in God's Word--caused by the misuse of historical-critical methods in Scripture study. In short, the misuse of historical criticism has undermined many people's faith in God's Word and in the Church's teaching about Scripture.

It may be the casual remark made in a homily, or else some doubt buried in the footnotes at the bottom of the page in what purports to be a Catholic study Bible--in any case, most rank and file Catholics don't usually know how to respond.

A typical example arrived in today's mail from a woman telling of a recent experience in her local parish Bible study: "The Sister who teaches the class doesn't believe any of the stories of the Old Testament, and certainly not the birth story or miracles of Jesus. Sister says that anyone who believes these things is just terribly naive. All of this is very upsetting to me. Many in these classes have no knowledge of Scripture and are soaking up everything she says like a sponge."

How would you respond to such a cri de coeur?

A few months ago I was asked a similar question by my good friend, Karl Keating, who also happens to be America's foremost Catholic apologist and Editor of This Rock magazine. Karl was planning to interview me for the September issue on some topic besides historical criticism, but once he raised the issue, the cat was out of the bag. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.

Historical Roots: Protestant (Criti-)Schism

KEATING A few moments ago, before the tape started rolling, you said that the misuse of historical criticism points to deficient philosophical formation. I want to find out what you mean, but first let's define historical criticism so we know what we're talking about.

HAHN It's hard to define, but what I mean by "historical criticism" needs to be understood in two ways. First, the methods are analytical tools, and in and of themselves they can be considered neutral. They can be used positively, and they can be used negatively. Second, the actual circumstances in which these tools were developed gives us another and clearer understanding of what historical criticism is, because at root historical criticism is grounded in a hermeneutic of suspicion--a basic distrust of tradition--and this was self-conscious on the part of those who developed the methods and of the early practitioners of them in Germany and in England and throughout the world.

The misuse of historical criticism has undermined many people's faith in God's Word and in the Church's teaching about Scripture.

KEATING Is there guilt by association here? Should we be on guard against historical criticism because of how it arose and whom it arose from?

HAHN Yes. There are two points that are significant in my own study as to the rise of historical criticism. First the Protestant Reformation split Christendom in the 1500s, and nobody really thought it was going to be permanent. Luther and

Calvin, for all their zeal and for all their concern for reform in the Church and for all their pride, didn't really believe that what they were doing was going to represent a permanent fragmentation of Christendom.

Second, two generations went by, and in the early 1600s the Thirty Years' War began, which first involved Germany and then England and France, until practically all of Europe was engulfed, with Protestants fighting Catholics, and Lutherans fighting Calvinists, and little sub-groups within Lutheranism and Calvinism warring against each other. This went on for decades. People realized this was going to be a permanent state unless a way out

It is not simply the elevation of reason over revelation; it is the pitting of reason against faith.

was found. In 1648 the Treaty of Westphalia was signed, and all of a sudden Europe made a decision: We must privatize religion. The teachings of the Church or Scripture no longer represented the bond by which European nation-states are united.

Distant Roots

KEATING So do you see this theological conclusion to be really the consequence of a political dilemma?

HAHN Yes. In many ways the historical-critical methods began to rise as a sophisticated but subtle rationalization of the state of affairs brought about by the disintegration of the Christian family that was once Christendom. Benedict Spinoza, a Jew excommunicated from the synagogue; Richard Simon, a priest expelled from the Oratorians; Thomas Hobbes, whose work was condemned by his fellow Protestants and the House of Commons--these three men were, for all practical purposes, the founding fathers of historical criticism--Spinoza first.

KEATING Normally we don't think of historical criticism as going that far back. Normally we think of it going back maybe to the eighteenth century.

HAHN Indeed, but more and more contemporary historical critics, such as the German scholar H. G. Reventlow, now point to these founding figures and their joint efforts to show Europe how to bridle religious passions by relativizing, that is, privatizing religious truth claims. As Spinoza asserted, no longer should we be looking at Scripture to find divine *truth*. Instead, we look to find the *meaning* intended by the human authors. That's how to drive a wedge between the truth, which binds all people, and the *meaning* which the authors believed.

KEATING Was Spinoza trying to effect a civil religion that could keep the political peace while allowing for private variance?

HAHN He tried to create a natural civil religion by subordinating theological method and religious truth claims to the categories of philosophy. It wasn't simply the elevation of reason over revelation. It was a pitting of reason *against* faith. The marriage which had endured for many centuries throughout Europe--the marriage of reason and faith based on divine revelation--was split, seemingly forever.

KEATING The question was at this point, if they can't be married, which is going to be superior? And Spinoza and the others said it should be reason instead of faith.

HAHN Exactly. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the rise of the Enlightenment, you have Rationalism on the Continent and Empiricism in Great Britain, until Hume's skepticism engulfs all of Europe, leaving Kant to pick up the pieces by turning the mind away from reality--and into itself and its own impression of experiential phenomena. One could almost say that, by reshaping the mind of Europe, Kant rules from the grave. He has shaped a civilization that is, at root, post-Christian.

KEATING And highly political, as we see even in historical criticism.

HAHN As Robert and Mary Coote readily demonstrate in *Power, Politics and the Making of the Bible*, historical-critical methods are employed to find political motives behind the narrative text. For instance, when you divide up the Pentateuch into four sources (J, E, D, and P): J, the Jahwist, supposedly was a tenth-century monarchist who supported the Davidic regime down south, in Judah, whereas E, the Elohist, was a representative of the Northern Kingdom, made up of the ten tribes that had revolted against the Davidic empire. The narrative stories in Genesis that seem to support the Davidic monarchy are ascribed to J, while the stories that would tend to support the revolutionary policies of the northern tribes that formed the Israelite kingdom are ascribed to E.

Of course, the cultic, ritual, and sacrificial ceremonies are identified with the much later source P, since they represent the interests of the priestly editors who, after the Babylonian exile, took Jerusalem and built a theocracy under their own control with a priestly monopoly maintained by the very rituals that their rewritten Bibles now stipulated. (This is nothing but *Realpolitik*.)

As scholars (such as J. D. Levenson at Harvard) point out, many historical critics simply read political interests into ordinary historical discourse, when in fact their conclusions simply reflect their personal political outlook--their own anti-Judaism, for instance as in the case of German scholars of the 1800s, but also a deeply embedded anti-Catholicism.

You'll find Julius Wellhausen doesn't even make an attempt to hide his animus against Roman Catholicism. He sees Jewish ritual in the Old

Testament as an ugly precursor to medieval Catholicism.

Albert Schweitzer made a similar observation about the many lives of Jesus written by New Testament Gospel critics: Staring down the well (of history), what they take for the face of Jesus is nothing but their own reflection at the bottom.

Bismarck Backs New Criticism

KEATING So you've got a political motivation from which you make conclusions about the origin and editing of the Bible. You've declined in dignity by going from the theological or historical to the merely political; you are intruding eighteenth-century thoughts onto the ancient writers.

HAHN This continued on into the nineteenth century.

KEATING Under Bismarck we see the *Kulturkampf* ("culture war") and the battle for the unification in Germany. During this time comes the advance of the historical-critical method in the more modern sense, led by German scholars--all Protestant or at least token Protestant.

HAHN William Farmer, a world-class New Testament scholar at the University of Dallas, has done a lot of investigation into the *Kulturkampf*, to discover why it was that the two-source theory--Marcan priority--which a small minority had argued for unsuccessfully in the first half of the nineteenth century, suddenly began taking German scholarship by storm in the 1870s.

Farmer points to the political circumstances surrounding the *Kulturkampf*, with the definition of papal infallibility in 1870 and Bismarck's reaction. I've been reading about the measures that were administered to suppress the Catholics in Germany, and I don't think many of us realize that the German liberals were hailing Bismarck as a second Luther, especially in driving the Jesuits out and suppressing religious orders. At the time all theology professors were paid by the state, so the shortcut to promotion was by supporting a theory that undermined the proof text used by the papacy to justify its infallibility, Matthew 16:17-19. If Mark's Gospel is first, then the historical reliability of the famous Petrine primacy text is more easily attacked--indeed, scholars were denying its historicity, since it was politically correct to do so.

KEATING So German scholars in the pay of the state were able to advance precisely to the extent that they came out against the Catholic Church, which Bismarck had a political animus against anyway. The state, indirectly at least, was subsidizing an anti-Catholic exegetical position.

HAHN Along with anti-Catholic political measures. Here's what Kurt Reinhardt says in *Historical Studies in Germany: Germany's Two Thousand Years*: "All religious orders and congregations were

dissolved. The Catholics' right to organizational assembly was greatly restricted. The Catholic press was subjected to rigorous censorship. Many of the Catholic priests were fined, expelled, or imprisoned."

These contemporary political circumstances shed more light on the critics themselves, and the ulterior motives underlying their theories, than whatever light which the critics may throw upon the biblical text--with their alleged discoveries and speculations, which often amounted to little more than hypothetical reconstructions of the pre-history of the text anyway. Instead of focusing on the text itself, they were more concerned, or preoccupied, with discovering the hidden political agendas of the Marcan community, Matthean community, Johannine community--whereas the basic task and primary responsibility of the exegete should be the interpretation of the text as it stands, that is, in its final canonical form.

KEATING Do you really see those supposed communities of the first century as being projections or even fantasies, if I can go that far, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German scholars?

Instead of focusing on the text itself, they are more concerned, or preoccupied, with discovering the hidden political agendas of the Marcan community, or the Matthean community, etc.

HAHN Yes, in part. There's no question, when you study someone like F. C. Bauer, who was greatly influenced by Hegel's dialectic, that he creates a New Testament theology based on the notion that you've got the Petrine-Jewish church as the thesis, the Pauline-Hellenistic church as the antithesis, and, by the end of the first century, the Johannine community emerges as the "synthesis." Nice and tidy, but entirely contrived.

KEATING When did this idea of Paul against Peter show up? Was it an invention?

HAHN No, but it's an exaggeration, a total distortion of what is described in Galatians 2, where there was tension between Paul and Peter. But Bauer insists that the New Testament writers are really suppressing a much bigger conflict, so the conflicting interests must be exposed by Hegel's dialectic.

Whatever conflict existed between Peter and Paul is magnified a hundredfold and made the basis of an elaborate theory of historical development. This

amounts to little more than a very imaginative--but purely hypothetical--reconstruction.

KEATING It's also a cheeky extrapolation. What we find in Galatians 2 is Paul upbraiding Peter in one private setting, and that's pretty much the extent of it. Now, I can understand how a Fundamentalist uses that to argue against papal infallibility rather weakly. But, if you're this nineteenth-century German theologian, you're trying to read into that little story a contest in the early Church between two big camps. Didn't anybody stand up and say, "This emperor has no clothes?"

Cutting-Edge Scholars Sidelined

HAHN There were several scholars who did, but they were marginalized--Protestants mostly, like E. W. Hengstenberg, but some Catholics too. It's one of those situations where, if you dare to say things that are politically incorrect, your career is ruined. You're blacklisted, you're not promoted, and you certainly will find it much harder to publish.

KEATING Just like today. As Yogi Berra put it, "It's *déjà vu* all over again."

**Cardinal Ratzinger called for...
a "criticism of the critics," and
their misuse of historical-
critical methods.**

HAHN What we're experiencing in the American Catholic scene, especially in the area of biblical scholarship, is a reflection of, a continuation of, this phenomenon.

KEATING Cutting-edge scholars who are questioning these things are being marginalized. Their books don't get reviewed, they don't get promoted, and the centers of this scholarship--certain universities--invite onto their staff only people who already agree with the majority opinion. It seems that they're more interested in maintaining this dike against leaks than in seeing whether there's some substance.

HAHN This phenomenon is especially prevalent in American Catholic scholarly circles. But you seem to find many more Jewish and Protestant scholars doing what Cardinal Ratzinger called for in his 1988 Erasmus Lecture, that is, a "criticism of the critics"--and their misuse of historical-critical methods. And you don't need to look very far to find their vested interests and ulterior motives, their hidden agendas behind their hypothetical reconstructions, and why these tenuous theories catch fire and become the rage of the day. But in Catholic circles you don't find the same sort of thing, at least in North America. Yet Ratzinger's lecture was a clarion call to do precisely

this, to recognize the real but limited value of historical criticism: limited uses, but almost unlimited abuses.

KEATING How was he received by the establishment here?

HAHN There was official, polite applause.

KEATING You can't insult a cardinal. Did it amount to "Thank you very much sir for your opinion"--and then we just go on doing what we are doing?

HAHN For the most part. From talking with someone who attended, I learned there was polite applause, followed by embarrassed silence.

The Influence of Fr. John Meier

KEATING Let's turn now to the Jesus Seminar, which has been in the news for much of the year.

HAHN *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News* came out with cover stories during Holy Week, and they featured the Jesus Seminar, which is *extremely* radical, but they also highlighted the more moderate views of Fr. John Meier, who is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York and a leading New Testament scholar at Catholic University of America.

Meier had an opportunity to respond to the Jesus Seminar, and in many ways his response was to the point, but much of what he said left a bit to be desired. For instance, he insists on driving a wedge between the Jesus of history and the historical Jesus. We're used to hearing about the *Jesus of history* and the *Christ of faith*. But Meier is doing something different. He's driving a wedge between the *Jesus of history* and the *historical Jesus*, insisting that historical critics can only investigate the historical Jesus. The Jesus of history is a much larger figure, but we're not able to retrieve him through historical-critical methods. So the historical Jesus is nothing more than the Jesus that the critics are capable of recreating with their limited methods.

KEATING That is, by looking directly at Scripture alone, like Protestants do.

HAHN Perhaps there's a bit of a *sola scriptura* approach, but it's not just that. The *Jesus of history* is the real Jesus, the Jesus you would have encountered in the first century. The *historical Jesus* is the Jesus the practitioners of the historical-critical methods must be content with, nothing more.

The interview is concluded in the December issue.

**Just what the doctor ordered:
a subscription to *This Rock*
Call Catholic Answers at
(619) 541-1131**