

The Principles  
OF THE  
**Higher Criticism**  
AND  
THEIR PRACTICAL VALUE.

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PRINCIPLES OF THE HIGHER CRITICISM  
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————— by A.C. ZENOS

THE first to make use of the principles known currently under the technical name of the "Higher Criticism" was Astruc. The name itself was introduced into the "*usus loquendi*" of Biblical scholars somewhat later (about one hundred years ago) by Eichorn. Since then both name and principles have had a remarkable career. They have been adopted and applied with vigor and rigor, so that at this late day one undertaking to speak of them might be expected to assume that they are clearly known and understood by every student of Biblical literature. It is to be doubted, however, whether such an assumption would be as useful practically as it is complimentary to the erudition of the average Bible scholar.

What is the Higher Criticism? What are its principles? No one has yet given us a clear and definite answer to these questions. So far as critics have

appeared to do so, they have differed so much in their statements, that they must either be considered inconsistent or fragmentary. Their statements must either be modified to meet the demands of scientific and logical definition or incorporated into a broader and more comprehensive statement including them all, and perhaps more. In either case, however, the present essayist must disclaim attempting to do what those having the requisite authority and ability have deemed it wise not to undertake. It is not with a view to giving either a complete and exhaustive or a scientific and logical formulation of these principles that we take upon ourselves the present task, but rather in order to call to the surface and test in a specific way some of the characteristics of the Higher Criticism, some that we may all have discerned in watching the current discussions on the subject.

It has not certainly escaped the observation of any intelligent student of Biblical literature, that the difference between the "Higher" and all other forms of literary criticism is one of aim. It is the province of the *Lower* or Textual criticism to examine the text of a composition for the purpose of ascertaining its truest and most valuable meaning; that of the *Higher*, to examine the same text for the purpose of discovering its origin and history. The Higher Criticism is based on the fundamental assumption that every writing must give an account of its genesis and development, as it were, between the lines, and in a handwriting legible only by those who will take pains to familiarize themselves with the use of certain approved rules.

The book, whatever it may be, that comes under treatment, is a veteran tree felled to the ground, a

section of which shows a series of concentric rings; but so finely are these sometimes interwoven and blended among themselves, that one needs the powerful microscope, the set of rules mentioned, to separate them and compute the age of each and all. The task which is proposed is two-fold: first, to see the invisible handwriting, and, secondly, to decipher it; to discern the concentric rings, and then compute the years and characters of each; to discover certain facts not apparent on the surface, and then construct some theory which shall satisfactorily account for them. The task is great, we shall not say impossible, for whether that is so or not depends on many, as yet to us unknown, conditions. First of all, of course, on the effectiveness of the set of rules used. Our next question is then what are these rules? We cannot pretend to give all of these authoritatively but the following will doubtless be recognized as some of the chief ones of the system and if others are omitted, on examination they will prove to be both subordinate and of similar force and kind as these.

The rules we mention are:

1. That differences of style in different parts of a work imply different authors.

2. That the historical contents of books are modified by the historical surrounding under which they are produced. This rule is applied in two ways: first, to detect, through the bare historical facts alluded to or implied in a book, the historical setting into which its origin should be relegated, and second, to find in its ethical and religious ideas the evidence of age and authorship.

3. That parallel and inconsistent accounts in the

same composition must proceed from different authors.

4. Silence proves non-existence or at least non-observance.

5. The language of documents produced in widely different ages must differ correspondingly.

6. Parenthetic passages are interpolations. (This rule is never strictly applied, and will hardly deserve any further notice here.)

The Higher Criticism is then only a method of reaching a theory; one, perhaps, out of many. As a matter of fact other methods have been resorted to, as, for instance, the uncritical reception as true of claims and assertions made in a composition itself; the Testimony of History, commonly called Tradition, the authority of the church. Setting aside the last of these as recognized and used only by Roman Catholics, the Higher Criticism may seek the aid of the remaining methods of investigation or it may despise and reject them as useless or unreliable. If it takes them as auxiliaries or recognizes their validity, it may assign differing degrees of reliability to each affecting their relative positions. It may in the hands of some set tradition above internal claims of authorship, or it in the hands of others may correct the testimony of tradition by that of internal claim. Moreover, even its own position among them (in case it should call them in as allies) may vary with the prejudices, tastes and antecedent beliefs of the critic handling it. Hence there may be, and there is, a diametrical opposition between different schools recognizing the validity of the method. Each school, each individual, we may almost say in each school of criticism, occupies a different platform, takes up the

weapon with a different preparation and intent, and reaches a different conclusion. One, for example, starting with the philosophical (using the word, not as equivalent to philosophically correct, but as meaning "drawn from the domain of philosophy,") prejudice that the supernatural is impossible and perhaps longing to prove his prejudice by showing that the records in which it is found are untrustworthy, applies the Higher Criticism as the sole, the infallible means of finding out when a book was composed. Another, starting with the philosophical bias ~~was~~ that the supernatural is a fact proved and certain, comes to the subject in hand with that and the further critical bias that as regards the comparative merits of the different means of information that of internal claim of authorship should stand first, the Higher Criticism, second, and Tradition last. Another, again, starts with that natural state of mind in which the supernatural is neither impossible, nor, on the other hand to be assumed as certain, but partly, at least, to be proved or discredited from its relation to the nature, the origin, the credibility and genuineness of the documents in which its record is found. This type of critic finds the question of origin settled by other and older texts than the Higher Criticism and will not re-open it except under a special conviction that such re-opening will lead to a surer result than the one already attained. He therefore assigns to the new method a subordinate position, using it as an adjunct, very much as one would use a prop obliquely set, which though it may somewhat help the pillar in supporting the weight of a structure, still of itself can support nothing. To this last posi-



tion we think the practical test will tend to compel the Higher Criticism.

But why the practical rather than any other test? This question may seem superfluous, almost trivial; indeed it would and ought to be such; but let us remember that we are dealing with a subject in which theory has a tremendous fascination, giving it a special momentum that carries it far past the limits of reason. Because it is undeniable that the system of principles and rules under consideration can be in theory proved very valuable, some of us forget that it is equally undeniable that theoretical proof of utility is one thing and practical experience of the same quite another. The practical application of theoretically established principles sets many forces to work which mere speculation is apt to leave out of consideration and which entirely change the aspect of the case. The case is very much like that of the temperance lecturer, who when he was confronted with the statement that a glass of beer has nothing wrong in it *per se*, answered: "True, but when you put a habitual drunkard within reach of it, it is *per se* no longer." The Higher Criticism has been loved and admired and extolled as a system of principles, a royal way of reaching a certain kind of truth; but so far it is *per se*. Confronted by a system of facts such as those given in the form and contents of the Old Testament it is no longer *per se*, and the question is whether it can shape those facts into a solid and credible theory, and thus sustain its theoretical value or not.

I. There are two ways of reaching an answer to this question. The first is to make a comparison between the method and the facts in the special case.



Assuming that the system is valid as a method of investigation, (which no one ought to deny), are the facts manageable? It being proved that the scalpel is of some use in dissecting, whether it shall prove its usefulness in a special case depends on the material to be dissected; if this turns out to be unyielding, then no matter how polished the blade, how fine the steel, the instrument can be of no use there; it must be laid aside, reserved perhaps for other cases. And what to the scalpel is the softness of muscle and nerve, that to the system of the Higher Criticism is an extensive basis of literature to work on—an indispensable prerequisite. The rules assume a certain standard, or measure whereby the material on hand can be gauged. That standard, if it shall be trustworthy at all, must be the distilled essence of a large amount of material, the result of a large induction of facts. For instance, that differences of style may proceed from different authorship is in the abstract true, but to argue in general from difference of style to diversity of authorship is a simple *non sequiter*—an argument from effect to cause. It is to assert that because something *may* happen, it *has* happened. There are many other causes which may produce the same result. Advancing age in the same author is one. Many a writer who is diffuse and redundant in youth may become terse and pithy in old age; and contrariwise, a concise style may degenerate into prolixity, pompousness, and efflorescence, with advancing years. Macaulay mentions as a glaring instance of this, the style of the celebrated Edmund Burke. Another cause of such change is change of occupation. The military officers' curt, quick, impatient way of putting his dispatches may become profuse, figurative,

even poetical if in maturer years, leaving the camp and general's staff he should emulate the distinction of the leader in the senate, or the popularity of the lecturer.

Another source of difference is the use of different men as instruments or aids in composing. Even the change of amanuenses may vary the favorite ways of clothing one's thoughts, much more change in the surrounding especially of trusted friends whose opinion is sought after and corrections embodied.

Or, again, the vacillations of *one* man's style may be due to his unliterary character. A fixed style is the result of many years uniform experience in expressing one's thoughts in writing. One who writes but little and at intervals can expect to have very little homogeneity of diction between the productions of his different stages of experiences. Special features of style are unconscious growths implying habitual use of the pen. Or finally, the differing character of different subjects treated may cause differences in the style not only of the same writer but even in the same writing, so that these differences may be intentional and designed to suit diction to subject. Such is the difference apparent between the narrative and orations recorded in the work of Thucydides. When this celebrated historian records speeches or orations he changes his style so materially that commentators in our days find it necessary to construct different canons of interpretation applicable to these discourses but not to the body of the history. Certainly such intentional differences would be greatly enhanced if the diversity between subjects is not merely that between narrative and oratory but between what might be the minutes of a

legislative assembly and a popular harangue appended to them, between prose and poetry; if, for instance, a song were incorporated in the very bosom of a chronicle, or a rhapsody in a biography. In order to say with certainty that certain differences in a given book indicate diversity of origin in its parts, we must in the first place be in position to prove that all these other possible causes could not have operated. We must show that the difference is of such character or degree, that it must needs be referred to this source. In the classics, under certain restrictions this is possible, because they come to us with a voluminous and varied literature, which affords the ground-work for constructing a standard. The question what degree or kind of difference in style can establish different authorship is there studied in the light of an extensive literature, and then, and not before, is the attempt made to apply the standard arrived at. But, even then, in almost every case, the critic in classics finds himself compelled to call in more certain and reliable tests in order to put his conclusion beyond doubt. In the case of the Old Testament, where is this literature? Looking upon the mere handful of material in the case, we cannot but feel that we have before us a dry bone on which our scalpel can only blunt itself. Neither does this insufficiency of the data affect the rule from style alone, but all the others more or less. Take as another instance the second rule mentioned, viz: that the historical surrounding in which a writing originates gives its historical coloring. It can only be applied rigidly where the history is thoroughly known. To attempt to settle the date and manner of origin of any disputed book in the Old Testament from the scanty historical ~~limits~~ *limits*

contained in it, would verily be like building a pyramid on its apex. These supposed traces of the historical environment of a book may be everything else but what they are taken to be. Here is a characteristic instance: In one of the books of the Pentateuch there is a law regulating the management of the kingdom, if Israel should at any time settle down to that form of government. This is at once to be interpreted by the rule of the Higher Critic as a sign that the book could not have been produced before the establishment of the monarchy. But besides this explanation, there are at least three others which can account for the fact. First: the whole law may be an interpolation. Secondly: the author may have been a genuine prophet, who foresaw that Israel would certainly need such a law. Thirdly: without the gift of supernatural foresight he may have deemed it, in all human wisdom, possible that the people for whom he was legislating should wish to change their form of government to conform to the prevailing monarchical institutions of their neighbors. From a study of the text, with the Higher Criticism as the guide, it can never appear which of these explanations should be not merely preferred but accepted as the true one.

Or, passing to the third rule, the one from parallel and inconsistent accounts however useful it may be with the facts of a language extant and systematized, it can certainly prove nothing definite in the case on hand, since it is now conceded as a fact that parallelism is one of the peculiar features of Hebrew poetry; and if of poetry, then why not of prose, also? Certainly if all the facts were known it might prove to be a peculiarity of Hebrew Rhetoric in all departments

of literature, and if this is so, then as parallelism is based on the habit of looking at one subject from varying points of view in order to bring out delicate shades of meaning, it will naturally often lead to apparent inconsistencies—~~in~~ inconsistencies however, only to the modern critic who looks at these parallel statements and fails to appreciate the position into which the very use of parallelism places a writer. As to the fourth rule, that from silence we may safely say, that it can prove nothing absolutely under any circumstances. It might do so to the satisfaction of all practical demands and the agreement of disputing parties provided a record were preserved of the great bulk of facts in a given case. But if out of a vast ocean of data we have only a drop transmitted to us, can we ever be sure that among the unrecorded items we may not find those now missing? So great is the lack of historical material in the case under review that even the mention of other and inconsistent institutions or customs coupled with silence as regards a *prima facie* first cannot establish the non-existence or even the non-observance of the first, for a full knowledge of the facts may prove the second exceptional, and justifiable on account of exceptional extenuating circumstances, or reprehensible, as the case may be. It will not be disputed that the exceptional, for some reasons, is more likely to be mentioned than the regular. That Samuel, for example, offered sacrifice without any reference to the Priest-code, regulating such offering, does not prove either the non-existence of the code or its non-observance, it only shows that Samuel, under a special stress, offered an exceptional sacrifice which is mentioned on the very account of its extraordinary nature;

whereas the frequent and constant offering of sacrifice in accordance with the requirements of the Priest-code is passed over in silence because regular.

Of the fifth and sixth rules above quoted, it will not be necessary to speak in detail. The sixth is not applied with any degree of strictness to demand special mention. As regards the fifth it may be said that the stability of Semitic speech is proverbial; similarity or difference of idiom can be only a very slight indication of age. Until it can be proved either that the Hebrew language is an exception to Semitic rigidity or that all the Semitic languages are as flexible as the Indo-European, the rule will have the appearance of being improvised for the occasion. Meanwhile every consideration advanced on the ground of idiom, as a matter of fact establishes at least the relative dates and positions assigned by tradition and internal claim to the books of the Old Testament and so far confirm the superior trustworthiness of these methods of investigating the question.

Altogether the paucity of material destroys the usefulness of the Higher Criticism as a chief method of research. This element vitiates all logical methods, compels the critic who is dependent chiefly or primarily on his pet method to use fallacies and sophisms not tolerated in any other branch of learning. It offers the temptation to cut the knot which ought to be and can be easily untied by the exercise of common sense. It gives the deciding voice as to the result reached, to the inclination of the one using it. It renders it just as easy for a believer in the supernatural to prove to his own satisfaction, that the book of Genesis was written during the life time of



Joseph, or at least long before Moses, as for the Rationalist to prove that no part of the Old Testament canon was composed before the age of Ezra, or as far as the method is concerned, before the days of the Maccabees. The only reason that these extremes are not resorted to is that neither the believer nor the skeptic deems himself bound to go so far by his antecedent beliefs.

II. Another way, however, of bringing the practical test to bear on the Higher Criticism is to look at the use which has actually been made of it. If in spite of the slenderness of the ground the Higher Critics have succeeded in building a firm and compact edifice on it, they are entitled to consideration. But instead of a strong structure, the result of application has been "confusion worse confounded." The theories arrived at make chaos out of a pre-existing cosmos. To say nothing of the earlier schools of Eichhorn and Ewald, at the present day every critic has a peculiar theory of his own. Robertson Smith differs from Kuenen, and Kuenen from Graf and Wellhausen, and all hold Delitzsch in contempt; while Delitzsch (who should never have entered the whirlpool) has a new theory different from those of Dillmann and Strack on the one hand and Reuss and Smend on the other.

The evangelical school of criticism repudiates the views of the Rationalists and are in return warned by them that they cannot in logical consistency remain where they are, that the very adoption of the method compels them to abandon all old positions. We are warned by a certain authority not to judge the Higher Criticism from the extravagant application made of it by German critics, but we

certainly have a right to ask whether such a multi-form wandering, such a sailing in all directions, is not after all due to the use of an unreliable compass. We are told by another authority that on the division of the Pentateuch, at least, there is substantial agreement; there may be among some few, but Prof. Stebbins, who has collected the statements of a large number of critics, assures us that difference is the rule and agreement between any two the exception. Where there is such agreement we stand ready to prove that the critics are influenced either by one another or by common authorities. Undoubtedly to the average student as he attempts to classify the views held by Higher Critics, from Wellhausen, who declares that he can distinctly see twenty-and-two different authors and redactors in the Hexateuch, to Dr. Briggs who is satisfied with only four authors and one redactor, difference is the rule.

Altogether the Higher Criticism in relation to the Old Testament cannot be conceded the place it claims. It cannot be put above the authority of Internal claims, because these even as mere human statements ought to be believed on the principle that it is more natural for man to speak the truth than to lie. These claims are true until proved otherwise. It is unscientific, uncritical, to set aside the law which holds everywhere else in order to adopt such guesses as the Higher Critics can furnish.

It cannot be put before that voice of history (which will lose none of its authority by being called Scholasticism, Traditionalism, Rabbinism or any other bad name) because the authority of this voice is based on the grander principle that there is a public eye constantly watching and taking note of the

birth and growth of institutions, an eye, which however it may wink at *insignificant* fraud has never allowed unchallenged such wholesale forgeries as would touch the very life of a nation and require a reconstruction of its history three thousand years later. An eye, moreover, combined with a public voice to which it transfers its observations to be kept in the memories of men from generation to generation. With very few and unimportant exceptions, this eye and this voice known together as Tradition, have always exposed the pretensions of fraudulent institutions. This testimony has been always accepted as truth and cannot be set aside except for surer results than would result by their subordination to the Higher Criticism. And after all, for Christians, at least, it is an important question whether they ought not to demand that the Higher Criticism shall solve satisfactorily and beyond a doubt the problem whether the Iliad and Odyssey had one author or two, or fifty-and-two before they yield it the supreme importance and value which it arrogantly claims but has not yet substantiated.



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