

A “Biblical” Approach to Biblical Studies?

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This is the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy. People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad...It is always easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own. It is always easy to be a modernist; as it is easy to be a snob. To have fallen into any of those open traps of error and exaggeration which fashion after fashion and sect after sect set along the historic path of Christendom – that would indeed have been simple. It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.¹

A biblical approach to Biblical Studies? This is the question I was tasked with for my tenure paper at Belhaven University a number of years ago, and this article represents a minor revision of the fruit of that labor.

Is there a *biblical* approach for studying the Bible? This seems an odd question indeed, but in light of the claims of the Bible, the question is of primary importance. Just as it is possible to study Chemistry, Mathematics, or Psychology from either a Christian or a secular point of view, so it is also possible to study the Bible from a Christian or secular view. In light of the claims that Scripture makes, this issue has far-reaching implications for life, faith, research, and teaching. Consequently, my purpose in this article is to examine and articulate what it means to approach and study the Bible from a “biblical” point of view and with a Christian worldview by comparing and contrasting secular and Christian approaches to Scripture.

Before considering a “biblical” approach to Biblical Studies, I will first, by way of contrast, identify and discuss some basic philosophical and methodological presuppositions of past and current *secular* scholarship in the field of Biblical Studies. In this section, since my area of specialization is in the field of New Testament,² I will by and large interact with secular scholarship from that field.

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Ignatius: San Francisco, 1908), 107-108.

² My PhD from the University of Edinburgh is in New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology.

After surveying the philosophical and methodological presuppositions of secular scholarship, I will identify and discuss appropriate biblical philosophical and methodological presuppositions for the field of Biblical Studies. In the discussion of appropriate philosophical and methodological presuppositions, I will focus more generally on the wider field of Biblical Studies, as opposed to the more specific field of New Testament. Finally, I will conclude the article by offering some application thoughts for the tasks of research and teaching in the field of Biblical Studies.

In reference to the scope and limitations of this article, there is a vast amount of literature that could be consulted, and exhaustive study of the topic is not possible. In keeping with the aims of the article, my goal is to identify and discuss some key issues in how Christians should approach the Bible. By necessity, my discussion of the various topics will be broad, and the use of secondary sources will highlight examples and point the reader to more detailed discussions.

Philosophical Presuppositions of Current Secular Scholarship in Biblical Studies

While it is impossible to summarize adequately here the numerous views within secular biblical scholarship, it is possible to identify some general outlooks which are characteristic of a secular approach. I will focus my attention on two primary philosophical presuppositions of *secular* Biblical scholarship: 1) the Bible is merely a human document; 2) human reason is the final arbiter of truth for Biblical interpretation.³

Although there has never been one uniform view of Scripture, it is noteworthy that many Bible scholars in the last 250-300 years have questioned the claim that God has revealed himself in Scripture. Indeed, the consistent view of secular biblical scholars is that the Bible is *merely* a human document and consequently not the word of God. The natural conclusion of this outlook is that the Bible (as merely a human document) is fallible and subject to the same kinds of error and falsehood of any other piece of literature. While the emphasis on human authorship has reaped some good results (more to come on this below), this understanding of the Bible has also led to some unfruitful conclusions such as the doubting of supernatural prophecy, the doubting of miraculous biblical claims, and the questioning of traditional authorship and dates for various books of the Bible.⁴

³ When I interact with various scholars and distinguish between “Christian” or “biblical” approaches and “secular” approaches, I make no claim about the personal faith of any person with whom I interact. I merely distinguish between what I regard as “biblical” and “secular” approaches to Biblical Studies. To be sure, some Christian scholars at times adopt secular presuppositions, and non-Christian scholars at times follow what I would consider more biblical presuppositions.

⁴ More to come on this below.

Since the onset of the Enlightenment, the most influential and pervasive secular presupposition for interpreting the Bible has been that human reason is the final arbiter of truth. This second presupposition naturally follows from the first (that Scripture is *merely* a human document), and is perhaps even more man-centered. Adhering to human reason as the final arbiter of truth has led to disastrous consequences and the tendency for humanity to invert the creation order of the Bible. The creation account emphasizes that God created humanity in his image and for his glory, but the emphasis on human reason as the final arbiter of truth has led to humanity creating God in the image of man, resulting in turning God's revelation into a sort of secular humanism.

With human reason (and to be more specific Western Enlightenment human reason) as a presupposition, it should not be surprising to discover that a major movement in the last 300 years has been to rid the Bible of supernatural elements. In Old Testament studies, for example, scholars often question the historicity of much of the Old Testament, claiming that the stories are merely myths to explain the origins of Israel and Jewish religion. In New Testament studies, one way that this has taken shape is in the "quest for the historical Jesus." This "quest for the historical Jesus" illustrates well the approach of secular New Testament scholarship, and the discussion that follows will by and large trace this approach.⁵

In the first quest for the historical Jesus, secular scholars largely remade the Jesus of the New Testament gospels into a "liberal" Jesus that focused almost essentially on the ethical and moral value of Jesus' life and teaching.⁶ With rationalism as the bedrock of their scholarship, the supernatural was viewed with skepticism. On the one hand, Herman Samuel Reimarus claimed that a fraudulent and deceitful church was to blame for the "supernatural" portrait of Jesus found in the gospels.⁷ In reality, Jesus was merely a human messiah whose goal was to free Israel from Roman control and domination. After his death, Jesus' disciples stole his body, claimed that he was resurrected, and began the Christian church.⁸

⁵ For my discussion of the quest for the historical Jesus, I am largely dependent on the examinations of Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospels Criticism* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1995), and Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). In most cases, I have consulted the primary sources, but I have been directed to these sources and issues from Strimple and Strauss.

⁶ For discussions of this "liberal" approach to historical Jesus studies, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 348-350, and Strimple, *Modern Search*, 15-24.

⁷ Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples* (Trans. George Wesley Buchanan; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970). See also the discussions of Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 348-349, and Strimple, *Modern Search*, 16-19.

⁸ See Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 348-349, and Strimple, *Modern Search*, 16-19. The conspiracy that the disciples stole the body of Jesus goes all the way back to Matt 28:11-15 where the chief priests and elders paid the soldiers and instructed them to report this story.

H. E. G. Paulus, on the other hand, explained the supernatural elements of Jesus' life by claiming that they were the result of unrecognized causes or mistaken observations.⁹ For example, the feeding of the 5000 happened when a young boy inspired thousands to share their lunches through his unselfish act of sharing his lunch,¹⁰ and Jesus' walking on water was in reality only a walk by the shore in shallow water with a mist. Similarly, Jesus' power of suggestion and his powerful psychological impact explain his healing of diseases and casting out demons. For Paulus, the raising of Lazarus was merely the result of a premature burial. Finally, Paulus helped to popularize the swoon theory for the resurrection of Jesus, namely that Jesus did not die but only appeared to be dead on the cross, and recovered later in the tomb.¹¹

Although the explanations might differ, the picture painted by these rationalist biblical scholars is clear. Jesus was merely a man, Jesus was an ethical teacher, and Jesus had only human messianic aspirations, if any at all. The pervasive influence of this view can be seen any time Jesus is described merely as an ethical or moral teacher. On a popular level, in their song "New Test Leper," the band R.E.M. sings, "I can't say that I love Jesus. That would be a hollow claim. He did make some observations, and I'm quoting them today: 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' What a beautiful refrain. The studio audience disagrees. Have his lambs all gone astray?"¹² The words of the song are telling, in that they reflect this quite pervasive view of Jesus: Jesus was not anyone special, anyone worthy of love, worship, allegiance, or adoration, but Jesus was perhaps a good teacher who make some good observations.

Although the view that Jesus was merely a good ethical teacher has been somewhat pervasive, it does not square with the teaching of the New Testament. The gospel accounts, in addition to the other New Testament books, make it clear that Jesus was not merely an ethical teacher. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis popularized what has become known as the "trilemma" in response to the preposterous claim that Jesus was merely as an ethical teacher. Lewis writes,

I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who said he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up

⁹ See Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 349 and Strimple, *Modern Search*, 21-22.

¹⁰ Interestingly, the movie *Millions*, a peculiar mix of Catholic, secular, and spiritualist thought, describes the feeding of the 5000 with the same secular explanation.

¹¹ For discussions, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 348-349, and Strimple, *Modern Search*, 21-24.

¹² Lyrics from "New Test Leper," by R.E.M.,

https://www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=r.e.m.+call+me+leper+lyrics.

for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹³

If the first quest for the historical Jesus produced a “liberal” Jesus, its response resulted in what is often referred to as “radicalism” in New Testament Studies, the view that very little could be known about the actual “historical” Jesus. For example, Albert Schweitzer critiqued the movement of the first quest and their conclusions regarding Jesus,¹⁴ but he and the scholars that followed him continued to operate with the same rationalistic and anti-supernatural presuppositions. Schweitzer wrote,

This dogma had first to be shattered before people could once more go out in quest of the historical Jesus, before they could even grasp the thought of his existence. That the historical Jesus is something different from the Jesus Christ of the doctrine of the two natures now seems to us self-evident.¹⁵

For Schweitzer, the “biblical” Jesus could not be the “historical” Jesus because such a view does not align with his rationalistic worldview. With the same assumptions and starting points, what followed in New Testament studies was much more pessimistic, and is typified by the radical skepticism of Rudolf Bultmann.

In his study of or “quest” for the historical Jesus, Rudolf Bultmann treated the gospel accounts with extreme skepticism and assumed they were filled with myths.¹⁶ Although Bultmann maintained that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet and held somewhat to the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith, he also contended that the gospels were not eyewitness accounts and that the “Jesus” of the New Testament was the result of the concerns of the early church community.¹⁷ Concerning the historical Jesus, Bultmann wrote,

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 56. Although the terms were not used by Lewis, this “trilemma” argument is often referred to as “liar, lunatic, or Lord.”

¹⁴ For Schweitzer’s critique, see Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1st complete edition; Trans. W. Montgomery, J. R. Coates, Susan Cupitt, and John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Schweitzer, *Quest*, 5.

¹⁶ See e.g. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1958), and Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Theology” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1-43. For the discussion which follows, I am dependent on the analysis of Strauss in *Four Portraits*, 350-357.

¹⁷ Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 355. That the early church was responsible for the creation of the biblical Jesus can be traced back to scholars such as Herman Samuel Reimarus, *The Goal of Jesus and his Disciples*, and William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Trans. J. C. G. Greig; Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971). More recently, Bart Ehrman contends that the gospels were not eyewitness accounts and were by and large creations of early Christians. See e.g. Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially 210-224. For a defense of

I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist. Except for the purely critical research, what has been written in the last hundred and fifty years on the life of Jesus, his personality and the development of his inner life, is fantastic and romantic.¹⁸

With this view, Rudolf Bultmann effectively challenged Bible scholars to give up the quest for the historical Jesus, and to acknowledge that the Christ of faith is what is truly important. For Bultmann, it was erroneous to depend on historical evidence for faith in Jesus.¹⁹ The goal for scholars and students of the Bible is to “demythologize” the New Testament in order to access the genuine existential message of Jesus.²⁰ Combining this skepticism with his existentialist worldview, Bultmann argued that embracing Jesus meant a “call to decision” and that this would enable a person to have a life of “authentic existence.”²¹ But as critics of Bultmann have noted, when Jesus and the New Testament message are “demythologized” in this way, there is no Jesus and no message of salvation that remains.²²

After Rudolf Bultmann, a number of scholars called for and began a new quest (i.e. the second quest) (1950s – 1970s) for the historical Jesus.²³ While these scholars rejected the radical skepticism of Bultmann, they nevertheless adopted the same basic starting points and presuppositions. Mark Strauss identifies the following presuppositions as characteristic of this approach: 1) existentialist worldview; 2) rejection of the supernatural; 3) strict dichotomy between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith; 4) the Gospels as theological rather than historical documents; 5) the gospels not as eyewitness accounts but rather the product of the early Christian church; 6) form-critical approach.²⁴ With these presuppositions, the scholars from this second quest could in actuality identify very little about the historical Jesus.²⁵ While very basic Biblical assertions about Jesus were affirmed, the supernatural elements of Jesus’ life were by and large rejected.

the gospels as eyewitness accounts, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

¹⁸Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 8.

¹⁹ Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 355.

²⁰ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*.

²¹ From Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 356.

²² See Strimple, *Modern Search*, 124-126.

²³ Strauss highlights Ernst Käsemann, Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, Günther Bornkamm as key contributors to the second quest, *Four Portraits*, 356-357.

²⁴ Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 356.

²⁵ For a summary of their conclusions, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 356-357.

After the second quest for the historical Jesus failed to produce meaningful findings, a new wave of scholars from the 1980s to the present have taken up the task of studying the life of Jesus in what is sometimes referred to as the third quest for the historical Jesus.²⁶ This movement is more diverse since it includes both liberal and conservative scholars,²⁷ and more positive since these scholars assert that it is possible to know something about the historical Jesus. Nonetheless, although many of these scholars reject the radical skepticism of their predecessors, the criteria they use to evaluate the historical Jesus reveal that their philosophical presupposition all too frequently remains human reason with an anti-supernatural bias.

For example, John Dominic Crossan moralizes Jesus' miracles when he explains Jesus' cleansing of the leper in this manner:

Was he curing the disease through an intervention in the physical world, or was he healing the illness through an intervention in the social world? I presume that Jesus, who did not and could not cure that disease or any other one, healed the poor man's illness by refusing to accept the disease's ritual uncleanness and social ostracization. Jesus thereby forced others either to reject him from their community or to accept the leper within it as well.²⁸

In her study of Jesus, Paula Fredriksen similarly betrays this anti-supernatural presupposition when she writes,

Did Jesus of Nazareth, then, perform miracles? Here I as a historian have to weigh the testimony of tradition against what I think is possible in principle. I do not believe that God occasionally suspends the operation of what Hume called "natural law." What I think Jesus might possibly have done, in other words, must conform to what I think is possible in any case... So, to answer my own question: Yes, I think that Jesus probably did perform deeds that contemporaries viewed as miracles... Modern culture, too, is familiar with charismatic cures worked by suggestion. Our explanations differ from those given in ancient sources—where we use the language of psychosomatic disease and suggestion, people in antiquity spoke of demons and special powers—but the phenomenon observed seems identical.²⁹

²⁶ For a helpful discussion and introduction, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 358-377. Sometimes included in this "third quest" is the even more controversial "Jesus Seminar."

²⁷ As conservative scholars in this third quest for the historical Jesus, Strauss highlights N. T. Wright and Ben Witherington, *Four Portraits*, 358-359.

²⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 82.

²⁹ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 114-115.

With these interpretations, Crossan and Fredriksen reveal that naturalism and human reason are their primary presuppositions for interpreting the Bible. In line with this anti-supernatural bias, it is not uncommon for scholars associated with this quest to assert that Jesus lived, taught, began some sort of movement, was crucified, but (certainly) was not resurrected. The resurrection of Jesus is often patently denied because they do not deem it possible for people to be raised from the dead.

The chief problem with this rationalistic and anti-supernatural understanding of Jesus is that it is in contradiction with the biblical evidence. Robert Strimple writes, "Where shall we look to discover such a nonsupernatural Jesus? In what historical sources shall we find him? Clearly such a Jesus is not to be found in the entire biblical record."³⁰ When commenting on the liberal scholarship of his day, B. B. Warfield noted,

Naturalistic criticism thus overreaches itself and is caught up suddenly by the discovery that in abolishing the supernatural Jesus it has abolished Jesus altogether, since this supernatural Jesus is the only Jesus which enters as a factor into the historical development. It is the desupernaturalized Jesus which is the mythical Jesus, who never had any existence....³¹

Similarly, J. Gresham Machen recognized that the true authority for such scholars is "individual experience" and that "the result is an abysmal skepticism."³² At the end of the day, biblical scholarship that begins and ends with naturalistic human reason does not get very far. It results in a radical skepticism of anything that can be known about Jesus.

Methodological Presuppositions of Current Secular Scholarship in Biblical Studies

If human reason is the primary philosophical presupposition of secular Biblical scholarship, then historical criticism is the principal methodological presupposition. In its most basic sense, historical criticism is akin to historical analysis. Since the Bible is a historical document,³³ historical inquiry and historical analysis are essential components of biblical scholarship, including

³⁰ Strimple, *Modern Search*, 9.

³¹ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 22.

³² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 78. Machen also noted that the foundation for Christianity is the Bible while the foundation of liberalism is "the shifting emotions of sinful men," *Christianity and Liberalism*, 79.

³³ Mark Strauss identifies three ways the gospels are historical when he notes that there is a history of composition, there is a historical context, and that they record accurate history, *Four Portraits*, 27. This is true for all Scripture since all the books of the Bible have a history of composition, a historical context, and record accurate history.

evangelical biblical scholarship. In this sense, historical criticism is consistent with Christian biblical scholarship. However, since human reason and human autonomy on most occasions serve as the philosophical presuppositions for historical criticism, the result is that the Bible is viewed with historical suspicion, as no more reliable or authoritative than any other document. Furthermore, historical criticism in the field of Biblical Studies has by and large been appropriated by scholars who approach the Bible merely as a human document (which is subject to all the errors and falsehoods of any other human document), and by secular scholars who themselves determine what is true and not true of the Bible's historical claims. Understood in this way, one can see that the philosophical and methodological presuppositions of a secular approach to biblical studies are closely related.

Some of the ways the historical-critical method manifests itself in secular Biblical scholarship can be detected in the questioning of traditional authorship, the questioning of traditional dates for various books of the Bible, and the doubting of the historical veracity of various parts of the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament, Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, affirmed by the Old Testament (Exod 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Numb 33:1-2; Deut 31:9-11; Josh 8:31-32; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; 21:8; Ezra 6:18; Neh 13:1; Dan 9:11-13; Mal 4:4), by Jewish tradition, and by the New Testament (Mt 19:8; Mk 12:26; Jn 5:45-47; 7:19; Acts 3:22; Rom 10:5), has been questioned and doubted in favor of the documentary hypothesis, which holds that the Pentateuch was most likely composed from various sources at different times in Israel's history (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly).³⁴ Similarly, through historical-critical analysis, Isaiah's and Daniel's authorship of the respective books that bear their names has been doubted.³⁵ The impetus for doubting the authorship of all or parts of these books lies at least in part with the doubting of supernatural prophecy, precisely because historical-critical scholars view the Bible as a merely human document.

Within New Testament scholarship, only 7 of the 13 letters claimed to be written by Paul are accepted as "undisputed" or genuinely from Paul (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon), and the conclusion for the remaining six Pauline epistles falls somewhere along the spectrum of "possibly," "probably not," and "almost certainly not" as to

³⁴ For a helpful introduction to and critique of the documentary hypothesis, see Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 38-48.

³⁵ On account of the prophecies in Isaiah 40-66, many scholars have argued that Isaiah could not have written these chapters and concluded that this section was penned by one or two additional authors. For a discussion of authorship of Isaiah and "Deutero-Isaiah" and "Trito-Isaiah," see Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 268-275. Similarly, historical-critical scholars have concluded that the book of Daniel is pseudonymous and consists of "prophecy after the fact." For a discussion of this issue and authorship of Daniel, see Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 330-337.

whether they could have been written by the apostle.³⁶ Historical-critical scholars arrive at such conclusions when they deem that Paul could not have written certain epistles because they lack Pauline themes or because they represent a church structure that must have developed after the time of Paul.³⁷ In a similar vein, almost all historical-critical scholars consider it a near impossibility that Peter penned the second epistle that bears his name (2 Peter).³⁸

Additionally, since secular scholars are skeptical of supernatural prophecy, Jesus' prediction for the destruction of the Temple in Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21 has been doubted and has also at times led to later dating of the synoptic gospels (i.e. after 70 AD and the destruction of the temple). Historical-critical scholars arrive at this conclusion because they consider the Bible a merely human document and doubt the possibility of supernatural prophecy. Additionally, source criticism,³⁹ form criticism,⁴⁰ and redaction criticism⁴¹ have been used in historical-critical scholarship to examine the gospels and the earliest traditions about Jesus.⁴² While these methods can be used in positive ways, they are often used by secular scholars with humanistic, anti-supernatural, and non-historical presuppositions in gospels research.⁴³

The use of the historical-critical method with human reason as the primary presupposition is also evident in the criteria that were adopted and utilized in the third and most recent quest for the historical Jesus. Mark Strauss identifies six "criteria of authenticity" used by modern scholars to evaluate whether particular sayings of Jesus are historical: 1) the criterion of dissimilarity; 2) the criterion of coherence; 3) the criterion of multiple attestation; 4) the criterion of embarrassment; 5) the criterion of Semitic flavor; 6) the criterion of divergent traditions.⁴⁴ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these criteria, but it is significant that the historical-critical method and human reason are the foundation for determining the historicity of Jesus' words rather than the biblical accounts themselves. Moreover, the criteria are subjective and are more often than not used to argue for what scholars desire to prove.⁴⁵

³⁶ Thus Col, Eph, 2 Thess, 1 Tim, 2 Tim, and Tit are considered to be deutero-Pauline. Among critical scholars, Col probably has the most support for traditional Pauline authorship and the pastorals in turn have the least support.

³⁷ For a more thorough discussion, see e.g. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 359-371.

³⁸ The authenticity of 2 Peter is probably doubted more than any other New Testament book which has a claim to authorship. For further discussion, see Carson, Moo, and Morris in *Introduction*, 433-437.

³⁹ In source criticism, scholars attempt to identify the sources which lie behind the four gospels.

⁴⁰ In form criticism, scholars examine the oral traditions which lied behind the four gospels.

⁴¹ In redaction criticism, scholars analyze how the gospel writers edited their sources to complete the gospel accounts.

⁴² For a good discussion and cogent analysis of these methods, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 43-64.

⁴³ Note especially the use of form criticism with non-historical and anti-supernatural bias. See the assessment of Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 58-60.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of these and some other less-utilized criteria, see Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 360-362.

⁴⁵ See Strauss, *Four Portraits*, 362. See also the discussion of Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 1-5.

The Bible is clearly a historical document. It makes historical claims, is rooted in a historical context, and has a history of composition. Therefore, historical analysis and inquiry of the Bible can produce positive results. But in light of the presuppositions that all too often accompany the historical-critical method, the conclusions that are reached are often not consistent with a “biblical” approach to Biblical Studies. For example, when commenting on the historical-critical method, Bart D. Ehrman writes, “But eventually I saw the powerful logic behind the historical-critical method and threw myself heart and soul into the study of the Bible from this perspective.”⁴⁶ Later, Ehrman writes that this historical-critical method makes it clear that “faith in the Bible as the historically inerrant and inspired Word of God...cannot be sustained in light of what we as historians know about the Bible.”⁴⁷

For Ehrman and others, the philosophical presuppositions that the Bible is merely a human document and that human reason is the final arbiter for investigation of the Bible, coupled with the historical-critical approach lead to such a conclusion – namely that the Bible cannot be the inspired word of God. What should be evident from this discussion is that the secular philosophical and methodological presuppositions for investigation of Scripture are no more neutral or unbiased as biblical presuppositions.

When commenting on the use of historical criticism at the beginning of the 20th century, J. Gresham Machen notes, “The critical process is certainly very difficult, and the suspicion often arises that the critic is retaining as genuine words of the historical Jesus only those words which conform to his own preconceived ideas.”⁴⁸ At the end of the day, the secular presuppositions on many occasions merely conform the Bible to the investigator’s preconceived notions and ideas. Therefore, in my estimation, the underlying philosophical and methodological presuppositions do not represent an adequate and proper approach to the Bible. In what follows, I will outline what I consider to be the “biblical” philosophical and methodological presuppositions for study of the Bible.

Appropriate and Relevant Biblical Presuppositions in Biblical Studies

At the heart of a “biblical” understanding of Biblical Studies is that God has revealed himself. In Psalm 19, David writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words

⁴⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 15.

⁴⁷ Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 18.

⁴⁸ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 77.

to the ends of the world” (Ps 19:1-4).⁴⁹ In Rom 1:18-32, Paul writes that God’s character (1:18-19), power (1:20), and divine nature (1:20) have been revealed to all people through God’s creation (1:20) and on account of being made in the image of God (1:18-32). Since God has universally revealed himself in this way, all people are without excuse (Rom 1:20), and it is the fool who believes that there is no God (Ps 53:1).

Theologians have often referred to this revelation through creation as general revelation. While general revelation is available to all people, it is also limited in what it reveals about God.⁵⁰ Therefore, it is not sufficient for communicating the entirety of God’s standards, how people are to relate to God, and how people can know God. For answers to questions such as these, we need more specific revelation.

In addition to God’s revelation in creation, he has also revealed himself through his word, often referred to as special revelation.⁵¹ Throughout redemptive history, there are times when God has spoken audibly (e.g. Exodus 19 when God speaks to Moses). In addition to the Divine voice, God has also spoken through his Old Testament and New Testament prophets, servants of God that are called to speak his word.⁵²⁵³ Finally, the Bible emphasizes that God has spoken through his written word, and this revelation in Scripture will be the focus of this section.⁵⁴

The fact that God has spoken in his written word, now contained in the Old and New Testament Scriptures, is of monumental importance – both for faith (what we are to believe about God) and for life (how we are to live). In what follows, I will discuss what the Bible reveals about how we are to approach the Bible, or as introduced earlier in the article “a ‘biblical’ approach to biblical studies.” To be specific, I will discuss the appropriate and biblical philosophical and methodological presuppositions for study of the Bible.

The Biblical Philosophical Presuppositions for Biblical Studies

⁴⁹ All Biblical quotations are from the New International Version, 1984.

⁵⁰ From the Scriptures cited above, all people can know that God exists, can know something about God’s righteous and just character, and can know that God is powerful. Romans 1:18 also reveals why people reject this clear revelation – because they suppress the truth in wickedness.

⁵¹ This is not to say that general revelation and word revelation are the only ways that God has revealed himself. In addition to word revelation, John Frame notes that God has also revealed himself through events and persons, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2013), 519-693.

⁵² See e.g. Exod 4:11-16, Deut 18:18-19, Jer 1:4-12, and Ezek 2:8-3:10. See also Frame’s discussion in *Systematic Theology*, 545-557.

⁵³ In his earthly life and ministry, Jesus spoke both as a prophet and as the divine voice. See Frame’s discussion, *Systematic Theology*, 557-559.

⁵⁴ Of utmost significance is that fact that there is no loss of truth, power, or authority when going from the Divine voice, to the word through prophets and apostles, and finally to the written word. See Frame’s discussion in *Systematic Theology*, 542-557, 562-590.

In this section, I will discuss two primary philosophical presuppositions that are essential for a Christian view of biblical studies: 1) the Bible is a human document with human authors; 2) the Bible is the word of God spoken through the human authors. First, Scripture makes it clear that it is a human document written by human authors.⁵⁵ In Lk 1:1-4, Luke records that he did hard work to compose his gospel: he consulted eyewitnesses, investigated everything from the beginning, and wrote an orderly account of the life of Jesus. In his epistles, Paul on most occasions writes to churches or individuals to address specific issues and challenges of the recipients. Highlighting this human element of Scripture, in 1 Cor 1:16, Paul even has trouble remembering those whom he baptized. On a number of occasions, New Testament authors received aid from ministry companions in composing their epistles, either as secretaries or perhaps even helping to write the letters (Rom 16:22; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Pet 5:12).⁵⁶ While this human element of Scripture is readily accepted by secular scholars, it is also an important philosophical presupposition for evangelical Biblical scholars, especially as it relates to certain appropriate methodological presuppositions for Biblical Studies (to be discussed below).

The second philosophical presupposition (second not in terms of significance, but merely in the order of discussion) is that the Bible is God's word. While it is important to acknowledge human authorship of Biblical books, it is of even greater importance to recognize that God, as the ultimate author, worked through the human authors to inspire Scripture.⁵⁷ In 2 Tim 3:16-17, Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." This passage, which will frame my discussion, communicates four essential points about the nature of Scripture.

First, Scripture is "God-breathed." This is the most basic and fundamental presupposition for a proper understanding of the Bible. Quite simply, this means

⁵⁵ As I will clarify below, this emphasis on the human element of Scripture in no way diminishes the importance of Scripture as the word of God. I am simply making the point that the 66 books of the Bible were written by human authors whose backgrounds, thoughts, experiences, research, and circumstances influenced the shape and content of the books of the Bible.

⁵⁶ Church tradition also associates the Gospel of Mark with the apostle Peter.

⁵⁷ The doctrine espoused here, organic inspiration, is that God worked through the styles, personalities, experiences, intellect, research, purposes, etc. of the human authors to inspire Scripture. Machen correctly notes that "the doctrine of plenary inspiration does not deny the individuality of the Biblical writers; it does not ignore their use of ordinary means for acquiring information; it does not involve any lack of interest in the historical situations which gave rise to the Biblical books. What it does deny is the presence of error in the Bible," *Christianity and Liberalism*, 74. Thus, organic inspiration emphasizes the importance of both human and divine authorship of Scripture. For helpful discussions of organic inspiration, see Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 594-597, and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 153-165, though Warfield does not utilize the term "organic" inspiration.

that God is the ultimate author of the Bible.⁵⁸ Critical for a correct understanding of 2 Tim 3:16-17 and the doctrine of inspiration is that God does not breathe into a human document, but rather that all of Scripture is breathed out by God and is therefore God's word. As B. B. Warfield noted, "The Biblical writers do not conceive of the Scriptures as a human product breathed into by the Divine Spirit, and thus heightened in its qualities or endowed with new qualities; but as a Divine product produced through the instrumentality of men."⁵⁹ The implication of this is of critical importance. When we read or hear Scripture, we encounter God's very word.

Second, if God is the author of Scripture, then the Bible is truth. Numbers 23:19 records that "God is not a man, that he should lie..." Heb 6:18 emphasizes that it is impossible for God to lie, Ps 31:5 refers to the Lord as the God of truth, and John 17:17 states that God's word is truth.⁶⁰ Since God only speaks truth and since Scripture is "God-breathed," what follows is that Scripture is true, free from falsehood, and free from error. In fact, these two truths – that God is the author of Scripture and that God speaks truth – are the bedrock and foundation for the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture.⁶¹ The implication for the field of Biblical Studies is of monumental importance. Rather than approaching the word of God in doubt, suspicion, or with human reason as the primary criterion, Scripture should be approached as the word of God and thus as true, reliable, trustworthy, and inerrant.

Third, the Bible is authoritative. As the only God, the eternal God, and the author of creation, God has absolute authority over all things. In Is 45:18, we read, "For this is what the LORD says—he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited—he says: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other....'" Since God has absolute authority, his word carries his authority and ought to be obeyed and adhered to.⁶² As God's word, Scripture is and should be recognized as the final authority for life (how to live) and faith (what to believe about God).⁶³

Fourth, Scripture is relevant and applicable. In 2 Tim 3:16-17, we read that Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." In Mt 7:24-29, Jesus contrasts the wise man and the foolish man. In his teaching, Jesus reveals something that is true of both men, and then the difference between the wise and foolish man. Both the wise and foolish man hear

⁵⁸ See also 2 Pet 1:19-21.

⁵⁹ Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 153.

⁶⁰ There are numerous passages that communicate that God is truth and speaks truth; among other passages, see e.g. Isa 65:16; John 1:14; 3:33; 7:28; 8:26; 14:6; Rom 1:25; Tit 1:2; 1 John 5:20.

⁶¹ For an excellent discussion of the inerrancy of Scripture, see Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 597-606.

⁶² See e.g. Exod 20:1-17, Lev 18:1-5, and Luke 6:46-49.

⁶³ See also the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.2 and the Westminster Shorter Catechism Questions 2 and 3, which summarize the significance of Scripture with similar language.

the words of Jesus. The *difference* or the *contrast* between the two men is the application of God's words. The wise man puts God's word into practice while the foolish man does not put them into practice. The implication of this is striking. God's word is meant to be applied, and there are dangers of not applying God's word and blessings for applying God's word.⁶⁴

The Biblical Methodological Presuppositions for Biblical Studies

When considering appropriate methodological presuppositions for the field of Biblical Studies, a mine field awaits. Be too specific – and a legalistic method of Bible study is the result. Be too general – and nothing helpful is identified. Be too “academic” – and intellectualism becomes the model for Biblical Studies. Be too “spiritual” – and the hard work of exegesis and application are minimized. Consequently, it is important to recognize that there is not one specific methodology that encapsulates the proper approach to the Bible.

My aim in this section is to recognize both the significance of hard work for investigation of Scripture, which corresponds with the philosophical presupposition that the Bible is a human document, and yet also the importance of reliance on God and submission to Scripture, which corresponds with the Bible as God's word. To be specific, I will discuss three components (not steps) which are appropriate methodological presuppositions for Biblical Studies: 1) preparation; 2) investigation; 3) application.⁶⁵

First, whether or not it is acknowledged, all scholars, students, and interpreters undergo preparation for their study of the Bible. While it is easy to see how church attendance, Sunday School involvement, formal theological training, or even saying a prayer before Bible study can be “preparation,” the reality is that everything that a person has experienced is part of his or her preparation. While there is much that could be discussed,⁶⁶ I will focus here on one significant aspect of preparation: our spiritual disposition toward God and his word.

In 1 Cor 2:11-14, Paul writes,

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in

⁶⁴ See also James 1:22-25 where James similarly emphasizes the importance of putting God's word into practice and the danger of not putting God's word into practice.

⁶⁵ These three components are from Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1993). Pratt discusses these three components throughout the book but also provides a brief discussion in the introduction, 1-17.

⁶⁶ For further discussion, see Pratt's lengthy analysis in Part 1 of *He Gave Us Stories*, 19-104.

words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The implication of these verses is clear, namely that the most important consideration for correct understanding of the Bible is that a person is a believer in Jesus Christ who is therefore indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Beyond this, since God's word is authoritative (see the discussion above), it is of utmost importance that Christians actively listen to, engage, and submit to God's word. This attitude of submission is epitomized by Mary's response to the angel, "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38), or by Jeremiah's resolute determination to proclaim God's word in the face of persecution because God's word was like a fire in his heart that he could not hold in (Jer 20:8-9). As a result, the only acceptable posture by which to approach the Word of God is through faith and submission.

The second appropriate methodological presupposition is the necessity to investigate God's word. Investigation of Scripture involves the hard work of studying the ancient cultures and contexts in which the Bible was written as well as the hard work of studying Scripture. This work of investigation has often been referred to by evangelical scholars rooted in the tradition of the Reformation as the grammatical-historical method.

In the grammatical-historical method, the focus is on what the original author intended to communicate to the original audience. This is important because, as discussed above, God inspired the writing of Scripture through organic inspiration – by using human authors who wrote to their audiences for various purposes and at different times in redemptive history. Consequently, it is important for Bible scholars to focus on the author, the document, and the audience in their investigation of the various books of Scripture.⁶⁷ The goal of the grammatical-historical method is exegesis – that the meaning derived from a particular passage of Scripture would come from the passage and not merely from the interpreter. This emphasis on the "hard work" of Biblical Studies in no way diminishes the importance of the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit in investigation of Scripture.⁶⁸ Rather, by doing the hard work of considering the writer, the document, and the original audience, interpreters are more equipped to identify and remain faithful to the original meaning of Scripture.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ The Westminster Confession of Faith also emphasizes the importance of the "ordinary means" in the study of Scripture, noting that both the learned and the unlearned can attain a sufficient understanding of Scripture through use of the ordinary means of study (WCF 1.7). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss further the importance of author, document, and audience. For additional discussion, see Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 105-305.

⁶⁸ This was discussed in the "preparation" discussion, but it is also applicable in investigation of Scripture; see again 1 Cor 2:11-14 and also WCF 1.6.

⁶⁹ In this discussion, I affirm that, outside of the rare use of double entendre, that a passage of Scripture has one meaning. See also WCF 1.9 which states that "the true and full sense of any Scripture...is not manifold but one" and the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* Article 7 which similarly asserts,

The third and final methodological presupposition for Biblical Studies is that it is necessary to apply God's word. With application, interpreters move from the original meaning (what the Scripture meant for the original audience) to what it means for believers today. Since I have already discussed application as a philosophical presupposition, my comments here will be brief. Suffice it to say, as a philosophical presupposition, Scripture, by virtue of being God's word, *ought* to be applied. People are called not only to be hearers of God's word but also doers of God's word that respond in obedience.⁷⁰ As a methodological presupposition, the Bible *needs* to be applied. For example, there is no benefit to understanding the meaning and history (or having perfect investigation) of the book of Nehemiah if one has no idea what the book of Nehemiah means for his or her life in the present. Faithful interpreters of Scripture must therefore move from the original meaning to present application.

Although Scripture was penned many years ago, 1 Cor 10:1-13 makes it clear that God designed Scripture with a future orientation to be applied by future generations. In order to apply God's word, it is essential to understand the original meaning of Scripture, to understand the present context, and to discern how God might lead believers to apply Scripture in their lives and situations. Fortunately, Scripture emphasizes that God leads believers by the Holy Spirit (see Romans 8) and promises to grant wisdom when they ask (see Jas 1:5). Application is the final step in the hermeneutical process, and the task of Biblical Studies is both incomplete and inadequate without it.

Conclusion

What can be gained from this comparison and contrast between secular and biblical approaches to biblical studies? In agreement with those who approach the Bible from a secular perspective, evangelicals can affirm two things. First, the Bible is a human document. This is of course assumed in secular approaches, but I have also discussed how the backgrounds, experiences, and intentions of the human authors are vital for understanding Scripture. Second, with the correct assumptions and use, evangelical scholars should also affirm on some level a historical approach to Scripture, precisely because the Bible is historical. The Bible communicates and relates true and genuine history. In its best and most basic sense, historical criticism is simply historical analysis. In *this sense*, historical criticism is not altogether different from the grammatical-historical method.

Although there are some correlations between secular and Biblical approaches, there are also significant contrasts. Second Timothy 3:16-17 makes it clear that

"We affirm that the meaning expressed in each Biblical text is single, definite, and fixed" (as cited in Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 113, 431, note 24).

⁷⁰ See again Matt 7:24-29 and James 1:22-25.

the Bible is God's word and is a divine document. As we have seen, this has been rejected by secular scholars who maintain that the Bible is merely a human document with all of the human shortcomings. Additionally, the second contrast, which follows from the first, is that Scripture (as God's word) is reliable, true, and inerrant. A correct approach to the Bible stands in stark contrast to the secular approach, which has human reason at the center of its rationalistic historical-critical method. These contrasting approaches and presuppositions have led scholars to very different conclusions regarding Scripture.

The issues raised in this article are of utmost importance for Biblical Studies. What I hope has become clear is the necessity to do biblical scholarship under God's lordship and under the authority of the Bible. The fundamental presupposition that the Bible is God's word (2 Tim 3:16-17) impacts everything: how we think about the Bible, how we approach Scripture, how we investigate Scripture, how we apply Scripture, and how we teach Scripture. Christians must therefore remain committed to Scripture as the word of God and the final authority for faith and life.

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