

## HISTORICAL CRITICISM REFORMULATED IN THE “AGE OF IMAGINATION”

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In their book *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination*, Colin Greene and Martin Robinson describe how postmodernity, which they call the “Age of Criticism,” has deconstructed many of the certainties of modernity. For one, it put an end to the self-evident hegemony of Western Christianity (“the Age of Reason”) and has left a marginalised church behind. However, Greene and Robinson argue that postmodernity should not only be seen as a negative factor of “deconstruction.” Their book is first and foremost an invitation to the church to take the new situation as one of new opportunities and an encouragement to engage in new ways with Western culture after postmodernity. According to them a new era has arrived, the era of what they call “metavista” or the “Age of Imagination” (Greene & Robinson 2008, xxxi, 21).

*Metavista* is divided in three main parts. The first two are written by Greene and the third by Robinson. In Part I, Greene sketches the way in which postmodernity has questioned the certainties of the modern era, which started so optimistically with the Enlightenment but ended so disastrously with the devastations of two world wars. He describes how postmodernity has ended modernity’s claims of objectivity, neutrality, and progress and why it prefers heterogeneity, diversity, and plurality. In Part II, Greene states that both inside and outside the church there is great confusion about the role and function of the Bible. Neither conservative (fundamentalist or literalist) nor liberal (historical-critical) approaches have resolved this problem. However, Greene argues that postmodernity’s hermeneutics has the potential to give a new impetus to biblical theology, because it opens up ways for re-reading and reformulating biblical narratives. According to him, the church should be “seeking to re-engage with the textual world of the Bible and reimagine the community that reads such texts” (104).

Part III focuses on the problem of secularization and the ending of the discursive power of the Christian story. Robinson describes how religion and theology have been affected by secularization. The institutionalised churches have become marginalised, and religion has moved to the privatised sector and the individual. Robinson argues that the mainstream churches have addressed this situation with far too little imagination. In his view, the church has to learn

to become what he calls “a creative minority” and take the current situation as a window of opportunity for new missional and societal engagement (161).

One of the issues covered in Part II, though briefly, is the rise and fall of the hegemony of the historical-critical method. Greene describes how the method has been criticised for its so-called objectivity and neutrality (98ff., 110ff.). His own view on the value of the method is slightly ambiguous. On the one hand, he acknowledges the importance of the historian in locating the historical particularity of the biblical narrative. On the other hand, even though Greene explicitly states that he does not want to go as far as Walter Wink, who announced the bankruptcy of the historical-critical method (100),<sup>1</sup> he describes it not very favourably. Greene argues it is “obsessed with the ‘world behind the text,’” or describes it as a way in which “the exegete locates something called authorial intent” (xxxix, 117). In the end, he does not seem to attach great value to an historical approach. With reference to Ricoeur, Greene suggests that “the world behind the text is not nearly as generally available to us as many of the practitioners of historical science presume” (100).<sup>2</sup> It should be admitted, though, that Greene does not intend to enter the discussion about the historical-critical method as such. The method is merely mentioned as one example among many others where postmodernism has criticized the self-evident values of modernity. But he does make it sound as if the method has indeed lost its value. Greene simply assumes that the historical method has become highly problematic, if not impossible after postmodernism’s critique. In this article I would like to argue that the historical method is still of great importance for Old and New Testament studies, even though perhaps not in an entirely “modern” fashion.

### Historical criticism criticized

Much has been written against modernity’s historical-critical method and most of it by postmodern authors.<sup>3</sup> At best historical criticism has been described as outdated and antiquated, at worst as totalitarian and monolithic. According to some the method is fundamentally religious and serves the interests of the established churches (Aichele et al. 2009, 392, 395), while according to others it is non-theological and non-religious, detached and positivist (Collins 2005, 7; Räisänen 2001, 284). Serious objections have been raised against its claims of objectivity and neutrality. The gap between postmodernism and historical criticism widened when those who still valued the historical-critical method often defended it by ignoring the objections that were raised. However, in recent years there has been more of a dialogue between the two than in previous decades.<sup>4</sup>

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1 See Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

2 The reference is to Ricoeur’s “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Translated and edited by J. B. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

3 See also Räisänen 2001, 284-85.

4 See, e.g., the discussions in Räisänen et al. 2000.

The term “historical-critical method” has given rise to many misconceptions. It suggests that the method is a monolithic enterprise, whereas in reality it refers to a range of methods (textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, etcetera) that have been developed from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards. In some cases these methods can even be in conflict with each other.<sup>5</sup> The word “critical” has often been taken as if the method was first and foremost designed to criticize the contents of traditional faith.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, as noted above, there are others who have labelled it as “fundamentally religious” (Aichele et al. 2009, 392). But both the developments within historical criticism and the responses of the church to it have been too varied throughout the last two centuries to label them exclusively as either this or that. Perhaps the newer term “contextual interpretation” is a happier one in that it underlines in a more positive way its aim to understand “ancient texts within the historical, social and cultural context in which they originated” (De Jonge 2008, 135).<sup>7</sup>

### **The problem of “meaning” and “objectivity”**

One of the recurring issues in the discussions is whether it is indeed possible at all to reconstruct authorial intent or to find an original meaning in a text. The more extreme postmodern thinkers would argue that meaning is not something inherent in the text, but something that is construed by each different reader, independently from the original author. But there are also postmodernists who acknowledge that there is a difference between the meaning of a text in its original context and the significance of the text in a present-day context. They have underlined the ongoing importance of the traditional tool of historical research,<sup>8</sup> which should help prevent the tendency of modern readers “to flatten the difference between the biblical world and the current situation” (Sugirtharajah 2000, 51). This was exactly the point made by Hirsch, who was criticised by many because he took a minority position against Gadamer’s hermeneutics in the 1960s. He distinguished between “meaning,” which is to be located in the text, and “significance,” which he described as the relationship between a text and a reader (Hirsch 1967, 8). In a similar vein, the New Testament exegete Krister Stendahl distinguished between

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5 An example of conflicting outcomes resulting from the application of different methods is 1 Cor 11.23-26. According to form critics the story of the Last Supper took shape in the Christian community in explanation of the meal that was celebrated. Thus Bultmann (1958, 286), who calls the story a “Kultlegende aus hellenistischen Kreisen der paulinischen Sphäre” (a cult legend that originated in Hellenistic circles influenced by Paul). According to tradition critics, however, one cannot rule out the possibility that the story preserves “the memory of the Galilean group [i.e., of Jesus’ relatives and disciples] of their last common meal with Jesus before he was arrested and crucified”; see Koch 2001, esp. 250.

6 This seems to be the case with Greene, who labels the historical approach to the Bible as “liberal” and sets it against a fundamentalist and literalist one (Greene & Robinson 2008, 96).

7 Although De Jonge seems to give the impression here that one cannot go behind the text, the rest of his article shows that he is in agreement with Räisänen (2000, 172) who, talking about the Gospels, states: “It is quite possible to sort out what kind of convictions lie behind the story: to sketch the ‘symbolic world’ of its author. It is this that is in the focus of ‘early Christian religion.’”

8 With a reference to Derrida, see Aichele et al. 1995, 67: “It is important to add that deconstruction as a reading strategy does not negate the practice of historical criticism nor eliminate the notion of history. On the contrary, deconstructive reading relies necessarily on traditional historical criticism as ‘an indispensable guardrail’ or ‘safeguard’”; see also Collins 2005, 14.

"what it meant" and "what it means" (Stendahl 2008, 2).<sup>9</sup> It seems then, that there is some agreement that "not every reaction triggered by a text can be regarded as a valid meaning or interpretation," and that the historical-critical method is still needed to understand the "otherness" of a text (Collins 2005, 17).<sup>10</sup> Perhaps "reconstructing the original author" is not a very fortunate way of describing this task, because it assumes that it is possible to reconstruct the author's mind and thinking process. But historical criticism does presuppose that an author wrote for an historically definable audience, that he intended to communicate a certain message to this audience, and that he intended to provoke a certain response from this audience. Basing itself on these presuppositions, historical criticism aims at "reconstructing the original intent of a text in the original context" (De Jonge 2008, 141-42).

Many postmodernists would say that here lies the core of the problem with historical criticism: there is no such thing as objective knowledge, and it is impossible to reconstruct history and present it as "how it really happened."<sup>11</sup> This critique is two-fold. Firstly, it argues that biblical scholars have approached the Bible in a positivist way, trying to reinforce its supernatural content by so-called "objective" data. Secondly, postmodernism underlines the fact that "history" is not an objective discipline but subjective interpretation. Therefore, the "objective" outcomes of historical research are in fact subjective interpretations of history and in many cases prescriptive ones as well.

The assumption that historical criticism is positivist in its method and that it claims to give objective facts is no longer true to the facts.<sup>12</sup> The developments of the last thirty years show that this is no longer the case (Räisänen 2001, 287-89).<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, scholars of the nineteenth century have studied the Gospels with a view to answering the question as to which passages reflected historical facts and which did not. They asked questions such as whether the Easter story could go back to real facts, or what kind of historical event lies behind the story of the transfiguration. Many have done this even to prove the superiority of Christianity over other religions. But the methods and purpose of historical interpretation have changed dramatically in the course of the last 150 years. Nowadays, the Gospels are no longer explained as direct accounts of the events from around the year 30, but as writings of approximately the years 70-90, intended for audiences who lived more than a generation after the events described. In the same manner, Old

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9 He underlines, however, that there is "no method, however existential or structuralist, by which one can detect 'The Meaning' (singular and timeless) of a passage, saying, or book" (2).

10 Compare Sugirtharajah 2000, 50: "A critic's role is not only to subvert and to destabilize the text, but also to protect the text against wayward readings."

11 See Collins 2005, 29, who quotes the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke. The meaning of Von Ranke's famous phrase "wie es eigentlich gewesen" is much debated; what he probably intended to say was that history is more than collecting facts; it is an attempt to understand the essence behind the facts. See Evans 2000, 16-18.

12 Sugirtharajah 2000, 53, is under the impression that the historical-critical method still seeks to prove the truth or falsehood of historical facts in the Bible.

13 For a thorough description of the crisis in historiography in biblical studies with an emphasis on the Old Testament, see Collins 2005, 30ff.

Testament archaeologists and exegetes no longer explain the Exodus as history in any positive sense (Collins 2005, 46).

The second issue, namely the fact that “history” is not an objective discipline but subjective interpretation, is a more interesting problem. As mentioned above, nowadays most exegetes try to understand “ancient texts within the historical, social and cultural context in which they originated.” This is not a claim of “objectivity.” Most scholars would admit that the subjectivity of the historian is operative as well. Understanding the past involves an interaction between the available evidence and the aims and goals set by the historian, and despite the emphasis on objectivity, the historian’s imagination plays an important role as well (Morgan & Barton 1988, 9).<sup>14</sup> The findings and results of an historical approach are tentative. Even so, the historical discipline tries to reconstruct what *most probably* happened on the basis of the evidence that is available. And although “it is true that complete objectivity is not attainable . . . a high degree of it is very much better than a low degree.”<sup>15</sup> The maximum that can be attained by historical criticism is relative objectivity.<sup>16</sup> It is the role of academia and scholarly debate to discuss the viability of different viewpoints, to weigh the evidence, to determine which interpretations are more and which are less probable, and to continuously replace less probable interpretations with more probable ones.<sup>17</sup> The outcomes of the historical-critical method are no longer seen as infallible, but as temporary and limited, and in many cases with several plausible answers to one and the same problem.

This leads then to the issue of *who* decides what is more or less probable, and on what grounds these decisions are made. Postmodernism has, not without reason, argued that all who claim to take a neutral position do, in fact, have an agenda. But nowadays very few exegetes would argue with this. Even the choice for an historical approach in itself is in a sense an ideological one in that it rules out other options. However, a healthy historical approach will at least try to keep the forum of the debate as open as possible, or as Räisänen says: “It is simply a question of fairness and open-mindedness over and against special pleading and propaganda” (2000, 287-88). In “suspending” as much as possible their own theological or ideological agendas, scholars try to create space for others with different viewpoints. As a consequence they avoid having any normative or prescriptive intentions.<sup>18</sup> Issues such as the special status of the canon, the revealed nature of Scriptures, or the

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14 Compare Räisänen 2001, 289.

15 James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1980), 24, quoted by Räisänen 2000, 166.

16 Compare also Hirsch 1967, ix: “Certainty is not the same thing as validity, and knowledge of ambiguity is not necessarily ambiguous knowledge.”

17 Collins 2005, 29, refers to Arnaldo Momigliano, who stated, “what has come to distinguish historical writing from any other type of literature is its being submitted as a whole to the control of evidence.” In response to Kenneth Kitchen’s attempt to prove the historicity of the destruction of Ai by Joshua on the basis of archaeological data “yet to be found,” Collins argues that “the historian must work with evidence that is available, not with hypothetical evidence that may (or may not) be found in future” (34-35; referring to Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]).

18 See Räisänen 2001, 289. In universities with secular theological programmes and separate ministerial training, such as in the Scandinavian countries and The Netherlands, this has been imperative for a longer period of time (in The Netherlands since 1876). Aichele et al. (2009, 393) are clearly overstating

inspiration of the biblical authors should not play a role: the biblical author should not be considered different from any other author, and his book should not receive special status over any other book.<sup>19</sup> The supposition that historical research has the goal of acquiring purely objective knowledge and that it is prescriptive in its approach is not doing justice to the present state of the discipline.

### **Advantages of an historical approach**

One of the advantages of an historical approach is that it creates space for a text to present its own paradigms. Through historical interpretation “forgotten” paradigms can emerge from the texts, and modern, contextual theology may sometimes be enlightened and renewed by these forgotten paradigms. A famous example is Johannes Weiss’s observation (1892) that New Testament theology was largely shaped by eschatology—a thought that had not been acknowledged by the liberal exegetes and theologians of the nineteenth century. A more recent example is the explanation of the idea of reconciliation. The more traditional Anselmian theology of substitution, in which Jesus by sacrificing his life on the cross gives life to those who believe in him, has been shown to be in fact a post-New Testament development. Nowadays New Testament exegesis tends to focus on the ideas of representation and corporativity, in which the believer through his existential unity with Christ is saved, together with Christ.

Another advantage of an historical approach is that it tries to serve a wide and differentiated audience, and not only a particular one. The Scriptures can be read from innumerable angles, whether they are Catholic, Calvinist, postcolonial, feminist, or Muslim. Some of these readings have raised ethically and politically important issues that need to be addressed. The fact that an historical-critical approach aims at the widest possible audience, and not only a particular one, does not mean that the voices from the margin are not allowed to be heard. The paradigm shift from a non-eschatological to an eschatological reading of the Gospels was brought about by a minority reading. Neither does it mean that an historical reading is the only legitimate approach to the Bible.<sup>20</sup> But if it is applied, then the emphasis must remain on the term historical: “Only if one loses all interest in historical questions can one dispense with historical criticism (though not with a critical approach); if one does ask historical questions, historical methods become

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the situation when they argue that only “some recent critics have noted the fundamentally religious nature of historical criticism and have called for a more secular biblical criticism.”

19 See especially Räisänen 2000 in the chapter “Historical Interpretation: Principles,” where he states that “‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ are, from the point of view of early Christian history, misleading categories which are to be dismissed. They can have a historical significance only: they tell us what was regarded as orthodox or as heretical by some groups at some period of time. Such concepts as ‘revelation’ or ‘inspiration’ also remain outside history-of-religions work” (161). Similarly, De Jonge 2008, 137-39: “the authority of the author whose work is interpreted is irrelevant” (139), *pace* Sugirtharajah (2000, 55), who argues that “those who engage in historical criticism believe in the authority of the text.”

20 *Pace* Sugirtharajah (2000, 52), who argues that “to some of us the historical-critical method is colonial, because of its insistence that a right reading is mediated through the proper use of historical-critical tools alone. . . . Such a claim rules out, at the outset, the right of a reader or an interpreter to use any other means to understand the text, and those who do not practise the methods nor engage with them are seen as outside the circle and as outcasts. Moreover such readings are seen as emotional and sentimental.”

unavoidable” (Räisänen 2001, 299). Not every reading is an *historically* plausible one.

### **Historical criticism and translation**

Although in former days it was often assumed that translation was a generally “neutral” transmission of authorial intent to a target language, nowadays the situation is not seen to be as clear-cut as this. First, as noted above, an historical reconstruction of the original author and the context in which he wrote is no longer seen as an accumulation of “objective” and verifiable facts. It remains a reconstruction, with a fair margin of fallibility and uncertainty, and not infrequently with several answers to one and the same problem. Second, the way in which this reconstruction is transmitted through translation into a target language is quite another matter. There is no unique correct strategy to do this. It has become clear that the enterprise of translation is not just a matter of a neutral transfer from one language to another but a far more complex enterprise in which a negotiation process takes place among the text that needs to be translated, the source languages and cultures, the target languages and cultures, the translator, the commissioner, the intended audience, the medium that will be used, etcetera. The historical-critical method is not so much the director of this negotiation process but more a partner, though not an unimportant one. It is vital for a good understanding of the text in its original context. The more plausible the historical reconstruction of the world of the author and the text, the better a translator has a grip on the translation transformations he or she applies.

The ancient biblical texts are full of passages that, from a sociocultural viewpoint, are no longer compatible with modern awareness. Such passages can even become harmful and damaging if they are not translated with a sufficient degree of hermeneutical care. To remove the dangerous gap between the ancient text of the Bible and modern sensibilities, often the solution has been to give the ancient text a meaning that erases this gap. Räisänen gives an example from the New Testament, namely the translation of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John (Räisänen 2001, 292-94). In several passages of the New Testament, the Jews are referred to in a negative way. Biblical scholars have become aware of the fact that the New Testament has played a role in creating and confirming anti-Semitic views in Christendom. But it is debatable whether the solution for this is to say that the words “the Jews” in the Gospel of John in fact mean something else. Some commentaries suggest that when the author of the Gospel of John uses the term “the Jews,” he actually means “the Jewish leaders” and not “the Jews” in general. This has led several translations to render the words οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι as “the Jewish leaders” or something similar (e.g., GNB, CEV, NLT, NET, FC, PdV, TLA, and GuNB). Räisänen argues, however, that the negative view of the Jews in the Gospel is not something that was added as an afterthought by its readers. He is right when he underlines the fact that it is the author of the Gospel himself who depicts the Jews in a negative way. In Räisänen’s view these injustices of the past cannot be mitigated “by a strained exegesis or by novel translation” (2001, 293). As far as



the exegesis is concerned, I would agree. Even if John intended οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι to refer to “the Jewish leaders,” he would not have seen them as distinct from the more general group “the Jews,” but as their representatives. In the end, a rendering with “leaders” does not really help.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, historical criticism should reveal the painful and problematic passages in the biblical books, not harmonize them with modern viewpoints. However, one can imagine circumstances in which the rendering “the Jews” might confirm prejudices that exist among the intended audiences. Adding a footnote, as Räsänen suggests, may not work everywhere. There are audiences who do not appreciate footnotes in their translation, or who, even when they have footnotes in the text, for various reasons do not read them. Translators, then, may see it as their responsibility to make sure that the translation does not underline the anti-Jewish bias in the New Testament writings and confirm anti-Semitic sentiments among their audiences. Under conditions like these, a translation such as “the Jewish leaders” might be less dangerous—although one can ask whether this rendering “the Jewish leaders” does indeed help to diminish the danger of an anti-Semitic reading if the leaders are still going to be perceived as representing the whole group. But when a translator decides to imply a distinction between the leaders and the Jewish people as a whole, he or she must understand that such a decision is not brought about by the exegesis of the gospel, but by other motivations, and diminishing the anti-Jewish tone of authors may well be as ahistorical in the end as making the texts more anti-Semitic than they were originally.<sup>22</sup>

The historical-critical method helps a translator to understand where the switch from “the Jews” to “the Jewish leaders” as distinct from “the Jews” is made: not on the level of the original text, but on the level of the translation. In this way the method can help the translator to have a better understanding of the source text and to obtain more insight in the steps taken in the translation process.

To sum up: the historical-critical method should no longer be regarded as a search for infallible, undeniable, and objective facts, but more as a means to find the most plausible solution to a certain historical question. The findings of the method are temporary and limited, sometimes with several plausible answers to one and the same problem. But when applied in a proper and open-minded manner, it is nonetheless vital for a good understanding of a text. For this reason, the historical method is an important partner in the negotiation process of translation.

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21 The question as to who exactly “the Jews” are in the Gospel of John is a much debated one. Usually, interpreters of the Fourth Gospel assume a background of conflict between with the Christian and Jewish community. There is, however, another option. Here it is assumed that by the time John’s Gospel was written, the separation between the synagogue and the Christian community was an accomplished fact. Therefore, the Gospel does not so much focus on a Jewish versus Christian conflict, but rather on an inner-Christian one: the controversy between Johannine Christians with their high Christology on the one hand and their Christian adversaries rejecting such a Christology on the other. This conflict is told in terms of Jesus’ life: Jesus and his followers represent the Johannine community, while “the Jews” represent the non-Johannine Christians. This view is defended by De Ruyter 1998. But even with this exegesis, one does not get rid of the negative way in which John perceives “the Jews.”

22 See also Omanson 1992, esp. 308.



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