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Jonathan Downing

Introduction

“Pre-critical” Readers and Readings: The Bible in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century

THE PUBLICATION of the call for papers for this special edition in Summer 2014 proved to be a happy coincidence. The call—which invited contributors to probe, evaluate and problematize the notion of the “pre-critical” and its status in the development in modern biblical criticism—was issued on the fortieth anniversary of a publication that identified a pivotal period in the emergence of “critical” biblical interpretation. Hans Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* posited that intellectual developments that emerged primarily in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and Germany rendered a prior, “pre-critical,” reading of the Bible increasingly untenable as the basis for interpretation. The book has remained an important and authoritative work in the field of the history of biblical interpretation ever since.

Frei’s work identified three features of “pre-critical” hermeneutics. First, a belief that biblical narratives “referred to and described actual historical occurrences.” Second, that individual biblical narratives combined to form a single narrative, and that typology—the process of making earlier biblical stories “types” of subsequent narratives—was the glue that bound this cross-testamental story. Third, that this coherent story realistically depicted the

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entirety of human history, from creation to eschaton, and that the reader of the Bible had “a duty to fit himself into that world in which he was in any case a member.”¹ The “critical” era emphasised exegetical methods and approaches that rendered this traditional mode of reading archaic and ill-equipped to satisfy modern interpretative standpoints. The crucial gap that Frei pinpoints at the start of the eighteenth century between “the depicted biblical world and the real historical world” provided the intellectual space for the development of modern biblical criticism—with its distinctly historical-critical emphasis—that characterised the work of the biblical scholar.²

As Jonathan Birch’s contribution to this volume observes, the emergence of a critical sensibility—for Frei—is diachronic. The identification of “pre-critical” interpretation connotes a temporal turning point: the “critical” reading of the Bible emerges as a marker from which prior hermeneutical approaches can be denoted as “pre-critical.” In the decades following the publication of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* we can see this periodisation, marked by the idea of the “critical,” used in a number of studies of biblical interpretation. Writing in 1987, Steve Martin maps “pre-critical,” “critical,” and “post-critical” biblical interpretation onto wider interpretative trends in the natural sciences, indicating that the twentieth century marks a move in biblical studies towards a “post-critical” interpretative paradigm.³ Adela Yarbro Collins, writing in 1984, uses these temporal markers in a different sense, suggesting that these three perspectives can develop in the formulation of an individual reading:

Every text can be read in three different ways: precritically, critically, and postcritically. A precritical reading is naïve, spontaneous, not reflected upon. The precritical reader is personally involved in a text in a way based on unconscious preferences, motives, and processes of socialization. The precritical reader is usually a gullible reader, one who accepts and believes the

¹ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 2–3.

² Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood remind us that this domination of the historical-critical reader came at the expense of Enlightenment critiques of the Bible’s morality. See Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

³ James P. Martin, “Toward a Post-Critical Paradigm,” *New Testament Studies* 33, no. 3 (1987): 370–85.

text at face value and applies it directly and simply to himself or herself.⁴

By contrast, Collins depicts the critical reader as “detached, self-conscious, reflective, and analytical”; their “attempt... to examine both the self and text with objectivity” guarding against their “pre-critical” gullibility.⁵

The three essays in this collection investigate key aspects of the development of biblical historical criticism. In doing so, they all highlight intriguing ways that “pre-critical” interpretation survived, despite the apparent ascendancy of “critical” biblical hermeneutics in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Kevin McGeough’s discussion of the effect of biblical archaeology on the “critical” and “pre-critical” interpretative landscape opens with an illuminating vignette which characterises the potential effects of biblical archaeology in nineteenth-century biblical interpretation. The Archbishop of York and the Bishop of London, speaking at the meeting which would establish the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1865, present two possible (and not necessarily mutually exclusive) futures for the emerging study of biblical archaeology. For the former, it ostensibly offered an opportunity to apply “science” to the material culture of the Holy Land, and in order to unite the society’s disparate aims, the Fund should neither “be a religious society” nor “launch into any controversy.” For the Bishop of London, however, the “intimate acquaintance with the scenes in which the great [biblical] events occurred” would uniquely bolster “a man’s faith.” McGeough’s wide-ranging and engaging article explores the diverse and surprising ways biblical archaeology—and its resultant promise of encounters with material culture from the Holy Land—was used to support, rather than to dismantle, the pre-critical biblical narrative. For many nineteenth-century readers, the opportunity to interact and experience the “thingyness” of the Holy Land, provided an opportunity for them to uphold the historicity of the biblical narrative, and to try and rediscover their place within it.

Robyn Walsh’s contribution identifies how our current critical landscape is indebted to the intellectual context in which the “critical” study of early Christianity was forged. She investigates how key Romantic historiographical commonplaces, such as the idea of texts being reflective of—and produced by—“early Christian communities,” linger in modern critical discourse. She

⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*

perceptively traces the enduring influence of concepts such as an inspirational *Geist* (Spirit) and a *Volk* (people, community) in our consideration of the development of early Christian texts. Walsh argues that the widespread attention biblical scholars have paid to early Christian communities has contributed to a “death of the author” in biblical studies. This risks obscuring the fact that other ancient texts were produced by “literate specialists with the attendant training and means to circulate writings within networks of similarly skilled literate producers.” Walsh suggests provocatively that biblical criticism in modernity might have swapped one kind of uncritical narrative framework for another: biblical texts are no longer read in the academy in relation to an overarching biblical narrative, but perhaps they are too readily interpreted against the backdrop of a discredited Romantic narrative about ancient literary production.

Finally, Jonathan Birch’s enlightening study focusses our attention on Thomas Woolston and David Strauss. These authors demonstrate a shared scepticism about the historical viability of the gospels’ transfiguration narrative. Yet despite these intimations of the “critical” in their approach to this narrative, Woolston’s and Strauss’s resultant interpretations of the text nonetheless demonstrate a pre-critical tendency to read the Bible “more or less as one book” with Christ at its centre. The emergence of a critical consciousness in these two figures’ readings, Birch argues, sits alongside pre-critical reading tendencies. For both authors, the transfiguration narrative is ultimately read in terms of its place in a supposedly disintegrating “biblical narrative.”

What status then, for *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*—with its framing of a “critical” mindset steadily eroding the authority of the “pre-critical” reading of the Bible—forty-one years after its publication? All three authors have affirmed the value of Frei’s project, turning scholarly attention to a period widely conceived to be formative in the development of historical-critical methodologies. As Robyn Walsh states, “we would be well served in the field to continue to engage in projects like Frei’s that map the trajectory of scholarship.” In doing so, we may further destabilise the idea that biblical interpretation after the European enlightenment moved steadily from the “pre-critical” towards the “critical” reading of the Bible. John Barton has expressed his wariness towards the expression “pre-critical,” precisely because of its problematic “chronological emphasis.”⁶ But perhaps Barton’s alterna-

⁶ *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 189.

tive nomenclature of “critical” and “non-critical” poses its own untenable binary. Perhaps key to the categorisation of the “critical” biblical reader—or individual “critical” readings—is Collins’s language of the “attempt” to achieve objectivity. Paying attention to the survival of “pre-critical” biblical interpretation into modernity, reminds us that just because such attempts are made (and ostensibly were made in greater numbers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western thought), it does not follow that they are always successful in their aims.

Putting the emergence of “critical” biblical scholarship into its proper cultural, intellectual, and historical perspective demonstrates the value of reception history for the present-day academy. It allows us to question the hegemony given to “critical” interpreters of the text, and allows us to probe more deeply into the plurality of interpretative standpoints which have shaped—and continue to shape—the modern “critical” mind. As Paul Joyce notes in his recent preface to a volume examining the impact of Monty Python’s *The Life of Bryan* on biblical studies:

The historical-critical study of the Bible does not stand above the tide of history and culture; it is better understood as a relatively recent phase in the long story of the reception of the Bible, rather than as a kind of foundation on which reception history might be built as a second-stage superstructure.⁷

The essays in this collection have all taken the opportunity to scrutinise important commonplaces and methods engrained in modern-day “critical” discourse. In doing so, they demonstrate how attention to the historical Jesus, the “early Christian communities,” and biblical archaeology after the Enlightenment were all shaped by a contemporary culture where “pre-critical” interpretative standpoints still held considerable sway. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “eclipse” of the “pre-critical,” and its concomitant attachment to an overarching “biblical narrative,” was—and remains—far from total.

Birch, Walsh, and McGeough have produced probing and insightful studies which do much to contextualise key questions, debates and methods within modern biblical scholarship. I hope you enjoy reading their contributions as much as I have.

⁷ Paul M. Joyce, “Introduction,” in *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and His Times Via Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, ed. Joan E. Taylor (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), xviii.