

My Paper on Historical Criticism

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I feel compelled to present you with another paper that I wrote last semester. It's full title is *The Historical Critical Approach: It's Definition, Reception, and Significance* and you'll find the paper [on Academia.edu](#). It was written for OT Exegesis class. My assignment was to define and evaluate historical critical method. I took advantage of this homework to cover many issues and thus to develop preliminary research for my thesis. Issues I attempted to cover and things I wanted to say are probably too many for a paper like this. But as I said, it's for a higher good.

In the first part, I attempt to triangulate the mentality of historical critical approach by reviewing work of Spinoza, Eichhorn, and Wellhausen. In the second part, I'm reviewing reception of historical criticism by conservative evangelicals, by "close reading" school (Cassuto, Clines) and by theological exegesis movement (Barth, Childs, Moberly, Hays). I contend that whereas historical critical approach is essentially modern, theological exegesis is essentially postmodern. I think that Childs, in a sense, was a prototype postmodern scholar. In the concluding chapter, I'm contemplating proper places of synchronic and diachronic approach and giving an example.

I won't summarize content of the paper as I [did](#) on the Czech side of this blog. I'll just tease you with these quotations (footnotes deleted).

(1) A historical critic first and foremost attempts to unravel historical origins of the text. He leaves faith-based assumptions out of consideration, because he assumes that authority of the church, as imposed on and through the Bible, doesn't do justice to the historical reality behind the text. (2) Historical criticism is not inherently inimical towards the Bible itself. It invites impartial observers to be introduced to Bible's peculiar world without a need of being dogmatically burdened. The Bible is a document, which may be completely detached from it's traditional readings and theological significance and whose real meaning and significance is buried in history long time ago. (pp. 6–7)

Let's grant, as John Collins insists, that Childs was no postmodernist. Collins explains that "his approach arises from the precritical Protestant principle of sola scriptura rather than from philosophical nonfoundationalism." But let's also realize that Walter Brueggemann, who is the only postmodern Old Testament theologian to Collins's knowledge, has adopted Childs's approach with no substantial dodge. There is no doubt that Childs's readings are often, as Brueggemann had critically put it, "predictably congruent with consensus Calvinism." But when it comes to predictability, so are e.g. feminist readings or even Pentecostal missional readings. I'm therefore ready to propose that from a postmodern point of view, Childs was an essentially postmodern scholar. He escaped from the "thrall of Troeltsch" and developed an approach which subsequently fueled further postmodern approaches. In other words, if we separate Childs's canonical approach from Childs's own application of that approach, we shall see that there is not one, but a number of ways of looking at it and that Childs's reformed way of interpretation might be easily substituted with an entirely different one. (p. 13)

A strenuous argument of those who advocate for primacy of historical critical approach in biblical studies and who denounce any sort of religious treatment of the text is that only an impartial study of the text is able to arrive at it's objective meaning. I find this argument valid, however it may be misused in favor of various anti religious ideologies. It is, however, not able to account for the fact that the Bible often speaks of religious matters and that it's fragmented, contradictory, variegated, and unclear historical meaning, will always be, alas for the skeptics, profoundly religious. Be it J or D, be it in 10th or 4th century, I contend that there always is a tangible religious output, which can be recovered and further contemplated upon theological grounds. The moment of "recovering" and "contemplating" is crucial, as it is the moment when historical critical approach ends and theological exegesis begins. (p. 14)

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