

A BRIEF COMPARISON BETWEEN THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD AND THE GRAMMATICO-HISTORICAL METHOD AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

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Abstract

This article discusses the two hermeneutical approaches used to examine the Bible, namely the grammatico-historical and historical-critical methods. The grammatico-historical method focuses on word meanings and relationships, with some consideration of historical context, and emphasizes an inductive approach to understanding the meaning of Scripture based on plain, normal interpretation. On the other hand, the historical-critical method focuses on human reason and experience, with its anti-supernaturalist presuppositions and new understanding of history in which the Bible is not reliable enough when a historiographical record is in view, and, therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct history. This article aims to distinguish between the two methods and explain the basic principles of the grammatico-historical method.

Keywords

Hermeutic, Exegesis, Grammatico-historical method, Historical-critical method

Introduction

Much debate exists regarding the grammatico-historical and historical-critical methods of examining the Bible. These two hermeneutical approaches are distinct and must be considered carefully in order to study and exegete the Bible.

The grammatico-historical method is reported to have its roots in the fifth century AD, “focusing on word meanings and word relationships, and with some consideration of historical context, it has magnified the so-called literal sense.”¹ This method was (and in some circles still is) utilized by the more conservative in biblical scholarship. However, with the birth of the modern world and the awakening during the Enlightenment,² a shift in the interpretation of the Bible occurred.³ The methodology known as historical-critical gained an increasing number of supporters, which helped to pave a new road with substantial implications for the interpretation of the Bible. This method focuses on human reason and experience, with its anti-supernaturalist presuppositions and new understanding of history in which the Bible is not reliable enough when a historiographical record is in view,⁴ and, therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct history.⁵

This paper aims to present a brief description, comparison, and contrast of the two methods and indicate what approach should be considered more convincing to study and interpret the Scriptures. It is divided into five sections. The first section provides a brief description and definition of the

¹ James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 4th ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 1:166.

² Although there is a debate about when this method originated, I will consider the Enlightenment as its starting point following the trends presented by Frank M. Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods of Biblical Interpretation,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics and Adventist Approach*, ed. Frank M. Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2020), 405–61.

³ Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

⁴ This presupposition is based on the concept that the writers of the Bible were concerned about describing their divine-human experience rather than the actual record of history. Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods.”

⁵ Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods.”

historical-critical method (form, source, and redaction criticism). The second briefly describes the grammatico-historical method. The third discusses some reactions to both methods. The fourth section presents a concise comparison and contrast between the historical-critical and grammatico-historical methods. The fifth section discusses the implications for exegesis and which approach was found more convincing to examine the Bible. The conclusion is that the Bible itself calls for a way to be examined; therefore, adequate analysis and exegesis of the Bible take into consideration the approach that prioritizes divine revelation as the word of God.

A Brief Description of the Historical-Critical Method

The main presuppositions on which the historical-critical method is based seem to have been articulated by a German scholar from Göttingen named Ernst Troeltsch.⁶ Thiselton says that Troeltsch built his approach by using sociological theory applied to his history-of-religions method.⁷ According to Troeltsch, every religion is culturally conditioned, even the religion presented in the Bible.⁸ Thus, he concluded that texts from the Bible would be better understood under the principles of probability (principle of doubt or

⁶ Hasel, "Recent Trends in Methods"; Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 90; Craig L. Blomberg, "The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 27.

⁷ Anthony C. Thiselton, "Troeltsch, Ernst," in *The Thiselton Companion to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 820.

⁸ Norman L. Geisler, "Troeltsch, Ernst," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 738; Hasel, "Recent Trends in Methods," 427–29.

criticism), analogy, and correlation.⁹ Richard Davidson states that “the principle most characteristic of the method is the principle of criticism.”¹⁰ David Law describes the historical-critical method (or historical criticism) as a generic term “given to a cluster of related approaches which all focus in some way on the historical character of the Bible.”¹¹ Law continues by saying that historical-critical methods are concerned with the history of the Bible, “both with regard to the history of the text and the events which the text recounts.”¹²

In this sense, the term “historical” stresses concern with determining the meaning of the text by submitting it to the scrutiny of human reason¹³ (or science) on at least four levels or layers.¹⁴ First, the historical truth is examined by identifying and reconstructing historical events (such as the history of Israel, the life of Jesus, and the early church). Second, the history of the biblical text and its development are studied by identifying the sources from which it was constructed, the different layers of the text, which go back to the originator of the text, and which are later additions. Three, the meaning of the text and its original historical context are examined by identifying how biblical terms were used by the original authors. Fourth, secular historical methods are used in interpreting the text by assuming the past is equal to the present and therefore, what is impossible in the present was impossible

⁹ For more details see Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 427–29; Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 90; David R. Law, *The Historical-Critical Method: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 20–22.

¹⁰ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 90.

¹¹ Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 1.

¹² Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 4.

¹³ Robert Grant, *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 105–8.

¹⁴ Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 5.

in the past.¹⁵ The terms “criticism” and “critical” denote the application of reason to the Bible.¹⁶ It seems that these terms were based on the rationalist school and philosophy of René Descartes.¹⁷ The term “method” belongs to the natural sciences and is used in the phrase “historical-critical method” as an attempt to eliminate subjectivity in order to achieve the objective truth that “inheres in the object, independently of the one who knows this truth.”¹⁸

Brevard S. Childs synthesizes a definition of the historical-critical method as follows: “[It] is by definition a descriptive enterprise. It seeks to analyze the biblical sources phenomenologically according to philosophical, literary,

¹⁵ John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 33–35; Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 5–6.

¹⁶ David Law says that the terms do not refer to the personal disposition and motives of the scholar toward the Bible, but the approach employed to “make sense of the text.” Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 8.

¹⁷ Davidson says, “The word ‘criticism’ is used here in the technical sense of Descartes’ ‘methodological doubt’ and refers to the autonomy of the investigator to interrogate and evaluate the scriptural witness, to judge the truthfulness, adequacy, and intelligibility of the specific declarations of the text.” Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 90.

¹⁸ Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 30. Louth says, “It is necessary, then, to locate the objectivity that it is the purpose of the method to reach. This is done by ascribing to the object of study, which in the humanities focuses on the writings of men, a ‘meaning’ which is there independently of any understanding of it. An objective meaning which the historical-critical method attempts to discover.” Louth continues, “The meaning is not so much the meaning of the literary text itself, as the meaning which lies behind the text and which becomes accessible to us as we enter into the mind of the author, divine his meaning, and ‘understand him better than he understood himself.’”

historical, and sociological criteria in order to set these writings in the environment of their own times.”¹⁹

From this description and definition, at least three methodologies arise: form criticism,²⁰ source criticism,²¹ and redaction criticism,²² all intending to provide an

¹⁹ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 525.

²⁰ Form criticism seeks to classify units of biblical text according to the genre and analyze the biblical literary stages of the text with respect to social background, “examining both broad categories of kinds of prophecies or stories, as well as their particular instantiation.” See C. M. Toffelmire, “Form Criticism,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Gordon J. McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 257; Maegan C. M. Gilliland, “Form Criticism,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); Logos Bible Software.

²¹ Source criticism is a method of biblical study that seeks to determine the literary sources behind a final text. It attempts to do three things: first, detect the presence of a source; second, determine the contents of the source; and third, understand how the source was used. See Charles B. Puskas and David Crump, *An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 55; Thomas E. Barker, “Source Criticism,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); Logos Bible Software.

²² Redaction criticism (New Testament) is a method that attempts to discover how the biblical source material was gathered to form a single narrative and express a particular theological point. See M. Goodacre, “Redaction Criticism,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 767; Maegan C. M. Gilliland, “Redaction Criticism, New Testament,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016); Logos Bible Software.

interpretation of the biblical text²³ that is compatible with reality.²⁴

K. Berger affirms that the form criticism method intends to reconstruct the “oral stages of transmission lying behind the fixed written products accessible to us now.”²⁵ D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo mention six assumptions that came to be the basis for form criticism that predominantly affect the stories and sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus’ stories and sayings circulated in small independent units, and they were transmitted like other religious traditions. These stories and sayings took on certain standard forms.²⁶ “The form of a specific story or saying makes it possible to determine its *Sitz im Leben* (‘setting in life’), or function in the life of the early church.”²⁷ As these stories and sayings of Jesus were passed down, the early Christian church put the material into certain forms and modified it to serve its own needs and situations.²⁸

Source criticism of the New Testament seeks to investigate the “written stage in the production of the gospels.”²⁹ And in the New Testament, source criticism is applied to the “Synoptic Problem.” The method seeks to determine what written sources were used by the writers of the Synoptic Gospels.³⁰ There are many theories that try to explain how the Gospels came into existence. The two-source theory

²³ Although the entire method is in view to interpret the Bible, these three methods represent important approaches when one wants to exegete the text.

²⁴ See footnote 66.

²⁵ K. Berger, “New Testament Form Criticism,” in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 121.

²⁶ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 80.

²⁷ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 80.

²⁸ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 80.

²⁹ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 85.

³⁰ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 85.

affirms that Mark was written first; Matthew and Luke copied from Mark, with which they agreed; then Matthew and Luke copied from a primitive hypothetical gospel that critical scholars call Q (“Quelle” in German means “font”), with which they agreed against Mark. The main flaw of this two-source theory is the nonexistence of the hypothetical Q-primitive gospel. However, to Carson and Moo, it seems that the “two-source hypothesis provides the best overall explanation for the relationship among the Synoptic Gospels.”³¹

The redaction criticism method combines form and source criticism to analyze the way the writers/editors used their sources, to determine the importance of redactional choices, and to define the theological purpose behind those changes (or choices).³² Carson and Moo say that redaction criticism may be used for study of the Gospels and it examines five basic elements. First, redaction criticism refers to the process of modifying that tradition as the Gospel was actually written. Second, it examines the material the editor/writer chose to include and exclude, the arrangement of the material, what the writer/editor added to and omitted from the material, and how the wording was changed by the writer. Third, it examines the patterns in these kinds of changes within the Gospel(s). Fourth, the redaction critic seeks to establish a setting for the production of the Gospel(s). Fifth, the redaction critic studies the literary and theological characteristics of the Gospel(s).³³

It seems that many conservative scholars have validated this method to study the biblical text without compromising the Christian faith or integrating all the

³¹ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 103. For a more detailed discussion on this topic see Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 85–103.

³² Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and expanded 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 201–2.

³³ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 106.

presuppositions of the historical-critical method into the exegesis. However, before evaluating this assumption and comparing the methods, it is important to turn our attention to the next section, in which the grammatico-historical method will be briefly considered.

A Brief Description of the Grammatico-Historical Method

The classical method of biblical interpretation, namely, the grammatico-historical method, focuses on the meanings of words and their relationships while considering the historical context.³⁴ The method is called the grammatico-historical method because it emphasizes “the fact that the meaning is to be determined by both grammatical and historical considerations.”³⁵

Many scholars see Theodore of Mopsuestia, one of the exegetes at Antioch in the fifth century, as the forerunner of the grammatico-historical method.³⁶ He “sought to uphold the plain, literal-historical sense of Scripture.”³⁷ However, the grammatico-historical method has its roots in the Reformation of 1517. During the Reformation,³⁸ interpreters abandoned the allegorical interpretation of Scripture and started to interpret the Bible in its plain sense, as Martin Luther wrote, “to give the

³⁴ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:166.

³⁵ Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Desilver Jr. & Thomas, 1833), 1:322.

³⁶ David Samuel Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 109–13, 156–258; Robert William Bernard, “The Hermeneutics of the Early Church Fathers,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 62–69.

³⁷ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 89.

³⁸ I am in debt to Richard Davidson, as I am following the summary he provided in “Biblical Interpretation,” 89–90.

literal, simple sense of Scripture, from which come power, life, comfort, and instruction.”³⁹

Also, the method received further elaboration with the development of Luther’s four principles of interpreting Scripture. The first principle was *sola scriptura*, in which Luther saw “the Bible only” as the final authority over tradition and human philosophy. Davidson observes that “Luther, of course, did not invent this biblical principle but powerfully applied it.” *Sola scriptura* went along with *sola fide* (by faith alone) and *sola gratia* (by grace alone).⁴⁰ Luther’s second hermeneutical principle was “Scripture is its own interpreter” (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). With a solid biblical foundation, Luther rejected philosophy, patristic interpretation, and ecclesiastical teaching authority as keys to interpreting Scripture.⁴¹ The third hermeneutical principle was known as the Christocentric principle. “His key phrase was ‘what manifest Christ’ (*was Christum treibet*).”⁴² The fourth hermeneutical principle was the dualism “between letter and spirit law and gospel, works and grace).”⁴³

Although the last two principles were considered problematic and were not followed by the Reformers,⁴⁴ though they have been revived by some modern interpreters,⁴⁵ this approach became a watermark for Christians, “the battle cry of the Reformation.”⁴⁶ It opened a door for interpreters to do exegesis of biblical texts with the Bible itself as the foundation. For instance, James Leo Garrett Jr. points out that in the same period, pietists such as August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) and Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752) contributed to the

³⁹ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 89–90.

⁴⁰ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 89–90.

⁴¹ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 89–90.

⁴² Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 89–90.

⁴³ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 89–90.

⁴⁴ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 92. For more detailed discussion see Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 249–453.

⁴⁵ Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 449–52.

⁴⁶ Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 449–52.

grammatico-historical method by ascertaining the “verbal grammatical exegesis.”⁴⁷

Davidson summarizes this method (period) as follows:

These Reformers consistently upheld the Bible and the Bible alone as the standard of truth and sought to utilize Scripture, instead of tradition or scholastic philosophy, to interpret Scripture.

The biblical principles of interpretation recovered by the Reformers, coupled with the advances in textual and historical-grammatical analysis of the Renaissance (Erasmus and others), led to a robust Protestant hermeneutic that has carried on until now and has become known as the historical-grammatical-literary-theological approach or (for short) the grammatico-historical method or historical-biblical method. This method has had able proponents since Reformation times, including nineteenth-century exegetical giants such as Ernst Hengstenberg and Franz Delitzsch.⁴⁸

The grammatico-historical approach is defined as the attempt to understand the meaning of the biblical text using methodological considerations from the Bible itself.⁴⁹ The basic presupposition is the authority and unity of the Scriptures as word of God, in which the Bible is the final norm with regard to content and method of interpretation (Isa 8:20).⁵⁰ The goal is to arrive at the correct meaning of the Bible according to the intended communication from God, whether or not it is fully known by the human author or his contemporaries (1 Pet 1:10-

⁴⁷ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:167; Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1950), 33.

⁴⁸ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 92.

⁴⁹ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 92.

⁵⁰ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 92.

12).⁵¹ This approach is currently utilized by conservative Protestants in modern-era scholarship.⁵²

Although the historical-critical method and the grammatico-historical method are both approaches to examine or exegete the text of the Scriptures, they are not fundamentally the same, and scholars have reacted differently to these methods. The next section presents some of the reactions to and comparisons between the approaches.

Reactions to the Historical-Critical Method

The central presupposition of the historical-critical method is the principle of criticism, in which the human interpreter stands as the final arbiter of truth, and reason represents the final test of the authenticity of a text.⁵³

Many reactions to the historical-critical method are due to its anti-supernatural presuppositions.⁵⁴ Carson and Moo have criticized this method mainly because it attacks the historicity of the Gospel.⁵⁵ Frank Hasel affirms that in this

⁵¹ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 92.

⁵² Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 166–67; William Bert Tolar, "The Grammatical-Historical Method," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 217–34; Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 92.

⁵³ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 96.

⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion see Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Lincoln, NE: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 61–69; 78–93; Ángel M. Rodríguez, "The Use of the Modified Version of the Historical-Critical Approach by Adventist Scholars," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid, Biblical Research Institute Studies (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006), 1:339–50; Blomberg, "The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," 27–41; Hasel, "Recent Trends in Methods," 426–61.

⁵⁵ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 80. See more detailed discussion.

method, the biblical texts are critically dissected and reconstructed (by exegeting them), alienating the biblical text from most readers.⁵⁶ He continues that the text is conditioned into a humanistic framework and loses its transforming power (with no space for divine revelation and inspiration).⁵⁷ Davidson states that in this method, history is seen as a closed system of cause and effect where there is no room for supernatural intervention⁵⁸ and faith as presupposition is excluded.⁵⁹ Osborne criticizes the theory promoted by this method that the early Christian communities forged the form and content of the tradition of the Christian text, in that the texts were shaped by their original smaller oral units and then hypothetically reconstructed by the communities that brought forth these forms.⁶⁰ Osborne concludes that by assuming each biblical writer had a unique theology, redaction criticism “tends to fracture the unity of Scripture, which is seen to contain not one but many differing, often contradictory, theologies.”⁶¹

On the other side, it has been suggested by David Law that the historical-critical method is concerned with the original sense of the Bible. In this view, the method aims to recover the original meaning or final form of the text. In other words, if they have this final canonical form of the text, both the interpreter and the church can use it in order to avoid “reading the biblical text anachronistically by imposing upon it meanings that do not do justice to the text.”⁶² Law concludes by affirming that the meaning of the biblical texts is historically

⁵⁶ Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 426–27.

⁵⁷ Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 426–27.

⁵⁸ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 90–92; Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 426–28.

⁵⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 4:392.

⁶⁰ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 4:392; Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 200.

⁶¹ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 200.

⁶² Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 15.

and culturally conditioned and arises in a particular time and place, reflecting the mode of thought, vocabulary, and cultural conjuncture; thus, a historical investigation of the text is important.⁶³ Carson and Moo write, “Source criticism itself, of course, should never be demonized. After all, some reflection on source criticism is transparently called up by the nature of some of the New Testament documents themselves.” In Carson’s opinion, it helps in the reconstruction of the Synoptic Problem.⁶⁴ Osborne seems to support that source and redaction criticism can help narrative critics avoid overlooking the historical element of a biblical text. He affirms that the “meaning is found in a text as a whole rather than in isolated segments.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 17.

⁶⁴ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 54.

⁶⁵ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 200.

Despite these negative reactions toward the historical-critical method (with its new nuances),⁶⁶ it has become a dominant method⁶⁷ of studying the Bible in the academic field.

⁶⁶ Because of the negative reactions, the historical-critical method has been modified to offer “new ways of looking at the biblical text” and to make the method more attractive. This would deserve a chapter in itself, but due to time and space concerns, I will not analyze the modified historical criticism methods. I only mention two things: first, these new nuances must be considered, but the main problem of these methods seems to remain—that is, the historical-critical method is the basis of these new approaches. They do not abandon the previous method but reform it. Davidson states, “The new nuanced approaches retain the critical presuppositions of the historical-critical method but focus upon goals other than hypothetically reconstructing the historical development of the biblical text. Some of these approaches build upon the new trends. Major examples include philosophical hermeneutics (the metacritical hermeneutical theory of Gadamer and the hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval of Ricoeur); hermeneutics of sociocritical theory, including sociological criticism (Gottwald), liberation (Gutierrez), and feminist hermeneutic (Trible); reader-response criticism (McKnight); and deconstructionism (Derrida). These approaches have some external norm—be it philosophy, sociology, Marxist political theory, feminism, postmodern pluralism, or the subjectivism of the reader.” Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 93–94. Second, Frank Hasel provides an outline for the methods as follows: Canonical Criticism raises questions about the form and function of Scripture, and how to appropriately interpret the Bible. Literary, Rhetorical, and Narrative Criticism focus on the literary structures or the literary qualities of the biblical text. The Postmodern Reader-Response Approach represents a radical shift where the focus is on the reader of the text, and not the text itself. Christological Hermeneutical Approaches consider Christ the key to the interpretation of the Bible (based

Reactions to the Grammatico-Historical Method

The grammatico-historical method affirms that the Bible, as the word of God, stands by itself, and the human interpreter has to approach the text with faith in the diligent enterprise of study. However, it has also raised some concerns among modern scholars.

D. A. Carson and Blomberg affirm that one of the pitfalls of the grammatico-historical method is the temptation to rely on the etymologies of words and forget that they do not necessarily produce meanings that people consciously reflected on centuries later. The exegete must avoid “semantic anachronism,” or attributing meanings to words that they will not have until later in the history of the language, and “semantic obsolescence,” or attributing meanings from an earlier time in the history of the language that had fallen out of use.⁶⁸ Blomberg points out the ambiguities that arise when one lacks enough information about the context. To him, the problem is who decides the right choice. For example, “does an adverbial participle introducing a dependent clause function temporally, causally, conditionally, or instrumentally, to mention just four possibilities? In Greek, the same form of a given participle could function in any of these ways. How do sentences relate to each other, and where should paragraph breaks, subsection breaks, and section breaks be placed?”⁶⁹ Who decides whether each one is the right one?

on Luther’s third and fourth interpretation principles). See Hasel, “Recent Trends in Methods,” 428–53.

⁶⁷ Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 155–69.

⁶⁸ See further D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 28–37; Blomberg, “The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View,” 38.

⁶⁹ Blomberg, “The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View,” 38.

Blomberg's main criticism of the grammatico-historical method seems to be that, in a broader view, the method does not study the "afterlife" of texts or take into consideration "the history of their interpretation through the centuries," and is not particularly interested in the "history of the effects" of a passage on other disciplines.⁷⁰ "It does not analyze a text to see if it can contribute to the creation of some overall philosophical or theological system of thought or because it fits in a preexisting philosophical or theological system held by the analyst."⁷¹

A comparison and contrast of responses to the grammatico-historical method and the historical-critical method is required. This is the subject of the following section.

A Comparative Evaluation of the Historical-Critical and Grammatico-Historical Methods

The purpose of this section is to concisely compare and contrast the primary characteristics of these two approaches.

The purpose of the historical-critical method is to arrive at a correct interpretation of the Bible that reflects the author's intention as perceived in his time. Conversely, the purpose of the grammatico-historical method is to arrive at the correct meaning that God intended to convey, regardless of whether the author or his contemporaries fully understood it.⁷²

The historical-critical method stands for the external norm, and uses the principles and procedures of secular historical science for evaluating the truthfulness of biblical data and interpreting its meaning. Contrastingly, the basic presupposition of the grammatico-historical method is that

⁷⁰ For the value of which, see esp. Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), as cited in Blomberg, "The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," 40.

⁷¹ Blomberg, "The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," 40.

⁷² Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 94.

Scripture is the final norm for content and method of interpretation due to its authority and unity.⁷³

The historical-critical method relies on the principle of criticism (methodological doubt), where “the autonomous human investigator may interrogate and evaluate apart from the specific declarations of the biblical text.” On the opposite side, the grammatico-historical method claims that the Bible is the sole source of authority and is not amenable to criticism: Biblical data is taken at face value without being subjected to an external standard for truthfulness, sufficiency, validity, or understandability.⁷⁴

Form criticism in the historical-critical method aims to hypothetically reconstruct the preliterate (oral) development that lies behind the various literary forms. This is based on the idea that, like conventional folk literature, biblical material has an oral prehistory and comes from traditions that formed in accordance with the rules that govern the development of folk traditions. On the other hand, the grammatico-historical method attempts to describe and categorize the various forms of literature found in the canonical form of Scripture, taking into account the biblical data that show the context in which each form was written.⁷⁵

Literary (source) criticism in the historical-critical method has the premise that the Bible is a product of the life setting of the community that produced it—often in opposition to specific scriptural statements regarding the origin and nature of the source—and attempts to hypothetically reconstruct and comprehend the process of literary development that resulted in the text’s current form. The grammatico-historical method examines the literary characteristics of the biblical materials in their canonical form, accepts the truth of specific scriptural statements regarding the origins and nature of the biblical

⁷³ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 94.

⁷⁴ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 94.

⁷⁵ Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 94.

materials, and accepts the parts of the Bible that are presented as one.⁷⁶

Redaction criticism in the historical-critical method attempts to identify and describe the sociological and theological motivations for a redactor's selection, modification, or reconstruction of traditional materials in order to make them say what was appropriate for his own life setting and theological concerns. The method holds that each redactor had a unique theology and life setting differing from his sources and other redactors. In contrast, the grammatico-historical method follows an analytical theology in which the particular theological emphasis placed by each Bible author (in accordance with his own mentality and comprehension capacity) is studied within the larger context of the unity of the entire Bible, allowing the Bible to function as its own interpreter and the various theological emphases to coexist.⁷⁷

Finally, the historical-critical method emphasizes that the Bible contains but does not equal the Word of God; therefore, the human and divine elements of Scripture must be distinguished and separated. In contrast, the grammatico-historical method affirms that the Bible equals the Word of God, and thus, the divine and human elements in Scripture cannot be distinguished and separated (2 Tim 3:16, 17).⁷⁸

The differences between these approaches become clear when they are contrasted, which has implications for the exegesis of the text. This will be the subject of the following section.

⁷⁶ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 94.

⁷⁷ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 94.

⁷⁸ Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 94.

Implications for Exegesis

The foundation for exegesis is the presence of the document, usually called “textual criticism.”⁷⁹ This helps to establish a truthful text for the exegete. Historical-critical source criticism seems to help in the reconstruction of the most original or authentic form of a text.⁸⁰ However, although this approach seems to be helpful, it brings negative consequences. Firstly, it assumes that the Bible is a product of the community that created it, and secondly, it attempts to hypothetically recreate and comprehend the literary development process that led to the text’s current form. In contrast, the grammatical-historical method examines the literary characteristics of the biblical materials in their canonical form, accepts the specific scriptural statements regarding the origins and nature of the biblical materials as true, and accepts the portions of the Bible that are presented as one.

The nuance of the difference may appear insignificant, but when one intends to do exegesis, it has an influence on how the text is seen and taken to be exegeted because the critical approach may have doubts about the final form of the text and it does not necessarily imply “truth.” In contrast, the grammatico-historical method sees the text as reliable, implying that it contains a “truthful message.” I respectfully

⁷⁹ Craig L. Blomberg with Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), XI–XVII.

⁸⁰ Barton seems to deny that textual criticism is a type of historical-critical method. He says that “such a basic text-critical principle as preference for the harder reading—far from being a piece of method that can be applied without any entering into the meaning of the text—makes sense only if it can be assumed that the critic already understands what the text means, for only so can one judge a particular reading to be ‘harder,’ that is, less intuitively probable in its context and therefore less likely to have been introduced by a copyist.” John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 65.

disagree with Carson and Moo⁸¹ on this point, based on the nuance presented here and the absence of a hypothetical Q-gospel manuscript.

Another crucial tool for working on the exegesis of a text is a method to deal with literary form and grammar.⁸² Form criticism in the historical-critical method aims to reconstruct an understandable preliterate text that lies behind the various literary forms. It is alleged that this would let the Bible speak for itself rather than impose an “ecclesial” interpretation on it.⁸³ In a different way, the grammatico-historical method attempts to describe and classify the various forms of literature found in the canonical form of Scripture, taking into account the biblical data that demonstrate the context in which each form was written. At first sight, it seems that both methods claim to do the same thing: help the exegete to come up with a literary form of the text where grammar can be used to analyze its parts. Nevertheless, the points made by David Law should be carefully considered. On one side, he is right that the Bible needs to speak for itself without impositions. But, on the other side, he forgets to mention that the reconstruction proposed by the critical method considers the biblical material to be based on traditions that developed like folk traditions and not from the Bible itself. It looks to me like the Bible speaks for itself according to the human logical controlling method.

The next method needed to work on exegesis is one that deals with interpretative problems and theological themes.⁸⁴ Redaction criticism seems to help by comparing the texts to determine similarities and differences between them and seeking patterns and repetitions to connect the theological topics. The problem with this method is that it tries to describe

⁸¹ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 54.

⁸² Blomberg and Markley, *Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, XI–XVII; Blomberg, “The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View,” 41–42.

⁸³ Law, *The Historical-Critical Method*, 19.

⁸⁴ Blomberg and Markley, *Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, XI–XVII.

sociological and theological reasons for the redactor's actions to make the text say what was appropriate for his own life setting and his own theological concerns. Also, it sees division or contradictory theologies instead of a unifying theology in a diversified perspective or a broader meaning of the texts.

In contrast, the grammatico-historical method works on interpretative problems by analyzing and exegeting the text itself. As a result of these studies, theological themes appear. This process allows the Bible to function as its own interpreter and the various theological themes to coexist, creating oneness in the diversity. This responds partially to the problems raised by Blomberg.⁸⁵

In the opening pages of his book, Gordon Fee says that exegesis "provides an answer to the question: 'What did the author of the Bible mean?'"⁸⁶ I believe that the more convincing method to answer this question is the grammatico-historical method. This method is based on the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture as the word of God; it calls the interpreter to come to this enterprise humbly, allowing the Spirit to be a helper in the process of "discovering" the truth. Finally, in Fee's words, "the ultimate aim of the biblical student is to apply one's exegetical understanding of the text to the contemporary church and world," and, I would add, to oneself.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this paper was to provide a succinct comparative evaluation of the historical-critical and grammatico-historical methods, as well as a brief description of the responses to these approaches and their implications for biblical exegesis.

⁸⁵ Blomberg, "The Historical-Critical/Grammatical View," 38–40.

⁸⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1.

The paper showed that the historical-critical method is oriented toward using the methods and principles of secular historical science to confirm the accuracy and comprehend the significance of biblical data; thus, its approach to the biblical text for exegesis is determined basically by the logic and control of human reason. Conversely, the grammatico-historical method attempts to interpret biblical data in light of methodological considerations derived solely from Scripture. Exegetes using this method approach the text humbly and have faith that God will illuminate their minds to find the truth.

The paper has shown that historical context, literary characteristics, genre or literary type, authorial theology, theme development, and canonization are all examined by both the historical-critical and grammatico-historical methods. However, they do so differently. The grammatico-historical approach rejects criticism as a principle. It looks at the Bible but does not criticize it; it refuses to engage in the three-step process of dissection, conjecture, and hypothetical reconstruction that is fundamental to the historical-critical analysis. In addition, the grammatico-historical method accepts the Scripture text as the accurate word of God.

Finally, the paper demonstrated that the grammatico-historical method is the most convincing answer to the exegetical enterprise because, first and foremost, it is based on the idea that Scripture should be interpreted as the inspired word of God. The interpreter should approach exegesis with humility and allow the Spirit to be a helper, keeping in mind that this endeavor will bless “those who read and those who listen to” (Rev 1:3) the written word of God.