

The Roots of Scientific Bible Criticism

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INTRODUCTION

Every student of theology at some point has encountered historical-critical theology. Generally, this encounter produces two opposite types of reaction. While one person may seek a good refuting argument, another may not perceive historical-critical theology as wrong. On the contrary, he sees the logic in «scientific criticism,» i.e. a reasonable approach that demands further development. However, in order to approach historical-critical theology correctly and make proper assessments about it, one should realize that the issue is not merely comprised of some convincing or unconvincing arguments or theories, but is rather a particular, fundamental way of thinking, a specific worldview. Thus, we suggest that first of all one must discover the roots, the essence and distinct characteristics of this worldview. The author of this article, on the basis of Holy Scripture, recommends that the reader act in accordance with Ac 17:11: «...for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so» (NASB).

1. THE ESSENCE OF HISTORICAL-CRITICAL THINKING

Historical criticism starts with scientific methodological doubt. One of the standard textbooks for students of theology offers the following introduction to historical-critical exegesis:



The author of the article (born in 1960) grew up in Germany. He studied Protestant theology for five years in the theology departments of German state universities and was awarded the equivalent of a Master of Theology degree by the University of Heidelberg in 1987. During his studies he thoroughly examined scientific criticism of the Bible, which holds a monopoly in the theology departments of German state universities. Since 1994 he has been a faculty member of Saint Petersburg Christian University; from 1996-2002 he held the position of the Academic Dean of Undergraduate Studies at that institution.

In general, the starting point of modern interpretation of the New Testament is scientific doubt: i.e. ancient church traditions related to the Bible are called into question.

1. Were the New Testament books really written by those authors under whose names they have been passed on to us?

2. Do the accounts of the teachings and the acts of Jesus, first and foremost, correspond to historical reality, i.e. are the Gospels memoirs of eyewitnesses who heard Jesus speak?¹

The idea of acquiring knowledge through the method of «scientific doubt» belongs to one philosopher who has significantly influenced all scientific thinking from the Age of the Enlightenment to the present day: Rene Descartes (1596—1650). He pursued the goal of acquiring truthful knowledge, but he did it by means of systematic and radical doubt of everything. The sequence of his considerations is as follows: «What exists in reality? Does God exist? — It can be questioned! Does the world around me exist or is it a figment of my imagination? I doubt that, too! And what about myself? Do I exist or don't I? That should not be excluded either! I also radically doubt that!» The sequence of the philosopher's thoughts is interrupted by a discovery: «In this free fall of radical skepticism there exists something that is doubting, therefore something that is thinking, and thus — existing.» Hence his famous

expression: «Cogito, ergo sum» — «I think, therefore I am.» Thus, as the first truthful knowledge acquired by systematic radical doubt, the philosopher has determined: «I exist!»

Descartes' next step was to pose the question concerning the existence of God. The thinker arranged his logical arguments in this way: «When I meditate on God I discover in my own thinking an idea of some Infinite, Almighty, All-knowing, and Perfect Being. But where does this idea come from? It is not a product of my observation of surrounding objects, for they are all limited. My own thoughts cannot create it either, since I am imperfect as well. How could I have produced this idea of a perfect God from within myself? Where could I have borrowed this image? There is one possibility: such a perfect God must exist! He gave me this idea of a God-Being; He put knowledge about Himself into my thinking. Thus, the result is: God also exists! This is my second acquired knowledge.»

Descartes does not stop there. He continues: «Can I go one step further in my quest for truthful knowledge? If God is perfect, which we have firmly established, then He is honest. He does not 'pull the wool over my eyes.' This would be simply incompatible with His perfection. Therefore, if I see something around me - the world, a table, chairs, people, etc. — I can proceed from the idea that all this exists in reality. Otherwise, God would have deceived me in a special way, e.g. He would have impressed on me an idea that it is all real, though in fact it is false. The character of deception, however, is

¹ Hans Conzelmann and Andreas Lindemann, *Arbeitsbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 7th ed., rev. and enl. (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), 39.

incompatible with a perfect and honest God. Thus, I have acquired the third truthful knowledge: the world also exists!»

So we see that consistently-executed, radical, methodological doubt finally led Descartes to truthful knowledge. It is interesting to note that Descartes acquired, as if new, something that he had previously doubted, but now on the more solid foundation of radical doubt. What was the starting point of his new truthful knowledge? His personal ability to think: Descartes' reason!

In fact, this trend of thinking is the essence of historical-critical exegesis with the starting point being «I,» my thinking ability, and my scientific reasoning. This method of personal thinking doubts everything at hand, then attempts to restore what has been doubted, and finally acquires new knowledge about an object of research based on critical analysis.

When the author was a student and applied himself to methods of historical-critical exegesis, he also had such feelings of satisfaction when, through the process of doubt and restoration, he finally arrived at the conclusion that everything written in the second chapter of the Gospel of Mark about the healing of the paralytic really happened that way! But this conclusion was achieved by the method of historical criticism, which led to a solid conviction concerning the authenticity of the content of the studied passage through the process of doubt.

Rainer Riesner, in his book *Jesus als Lehrer (Jesus the Teacher)*,

which contains many interesting facts concerning the historical situation of Jesus' time, declares a «critical sympathy»² in regard to the Jesus tradition in the Gospels. He writes, «The position rendered here concerning synoptic traditions does not exclude the test of critical authenticity; however, it expects positive results.»³

Is this not the equivalent approach to that of Descartes? What is doubted in the beginning (even though not so radically) is finally confirmed again, yet on a more solid foundation because it has gone through the process of doubt!

2. THE USE OF METHODOLOGICAL DOUBT IN HISTORICAL EXEGESIS: THE PRINCIPLES OF CRITICISM, ANALOGY, AND CORRELATION

How is this principle of historical-critical thinking applied in exegetical research work? In 1898, the theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) wrote a discourse, *On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology*, in which he pointed out the following presuppositions of historical studies:

I would like to explain what the historical method is, the historical way of thinking and the historical mind-set ... current, modern history, which involves a particular attitude

² Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Ueberlieferung*, WUNT 2/7, 2nd ed. (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), 84.

³ *Ibid.*, 86.

toward spiritual life in general, a particular method of study of the past and the present and thus contains extraordinary consequences. Here we discuss three crucial things: principally to get accustomed to historical criticism, the application of analogy, and correlation of all historical processes.⁴

The three fundamental principles for the historical-critical method in Bible interpretation have been named: criticism, analogy, and correlation.

2.1. Criticism

This particular principle assumes the approach to systematic doubt developed by Descartes. Troeltsch's version of it declares that, «...in the sphere of history there exist only judgments with various degrees of probability, from the highest to the lowest; thus it is necessary to determine the appropriate degree of possibility in regard to every tradition.»⁵

Thus, everything is doubted at first, and then an attempt is made to determine the degree of probability of a particular act, a described incident, or a statement attributed to Jesus.

In this context, the following argument is often put forward: «The Greek word κριτικη, from which our word 'criticism' is deri-

ved, means 'to see, to look through, to distinguish.' We should always do that while reading the Bible. We must attempt to separate things and look at them individually, so as not to blend them all into one big melting pot. Therefore, criticism is a well-grounded and necessary process.»

This is indeed true, especially in terms of understanding the Bible as the history of the divine plan of salvation for humanity, which embraces different stages. However, such argumentation on the basis of the Greek origin of the word is deluding. Criticism (in terms of historical criticism) implies, as we have seen, much more than «looking through and discerning.»

How, then, can the degree of probability of any historical material be determined? According to Troeltsch's teaching, this can be accomplished with the help of analogy.

2.2. Analogy

In order to find the degree of probability (credibility) of a fact, the principle of analogy needs to be applied. Analogy compares the reality of the present world with a given historical situation. Such a principle leads to the following reflections: «Whatever I see around me now, all that I can observe and experience at present, could have happened in the past, as well. Consequently, any similar event has a high degree of probability. On the other hand, whatever I cannot see around me, all that I cannot observe and experience today, also could not

⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, «Ueber historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie,» in *Theologie als Wissenschaft: Aufsätze und Thesen*, Theologische Bucherei, Vol. 43, ed. Gerhard Sauter (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1971), 107.

⁵ Ibid.

have happened in the past; that is, the event possesses a low degree of probability. Thus, for example, if I observe a street preacher, I may suppose that the tradition about a wandering preacher called Jesus and his message, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near, possesses a high degree of probability, that this event took place in reality. But I will hardly meet anyone walking on water. Therefore, the narrative about Jesus walking on water possesses almost a zero degree of probability.» Troeltsch even speaks of an «omnipotence of analogy.»⁶

The right to use the principle of analogy is provided by the third principle: correlation.

2.3. Correlation

This notion contains the word «relation,» signifying connection or relationship. Troeltsch understands correlation to mean that all events in this world, without exception, are related to each other. That is, each event has a cause within this world, as well as an effect within the same world. Each event exists in an «all-embracing correlated flow of relationship, which shows us that all things are interdependent with no single point where interweaving or a mutual impact would not be present.»⁷ In other words, correlation implies a closed cause and effect relationship in this world. There exists no force that could influence this closed system from outside. It means that conditions are

constant at all times, and that there is no factor unknown to us in any event, or in the interaction of forces in this world. If this is true, then we have the right to base our conclusions on today's experience, take it as a scale of probability of past events, and make proper conclusions by analogy.

Regarding the origin of Troeltsch's conviction concerning correlation, he states himself that, «it is a metaphysical presupposition.»⁸ And this is nothing but faith, an axiom. It is well known that any science possesses some essential presuppositions — initial data, so to speak — on which one or another system of views and beliefs is based. In this case, the initial point is Troeltsch's assumption of the existence of a closed system of cause and effect — and this is based on faith.

So, Troeltsch suggested three principles upon which «all principles of historical explanation are built...»⁹

2.3. Actuality of Troeltsch's Principles

Despite the commonly shared opinion among theologians that Troeltsch's principles have long become out-dated, we still encounter in theological works, directly or indirectly, argumentation built on such approaches. Leonard Goppelt, for instance, writes: «We desire to bring into a critical dialogue the principle of historical-critical study of Scripture, criticism, analogy, and

⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁹ Ibid.

correlation on the one hand, and our own idea of the New Testament on the other.» His own idea of the New Testament he describes as a concept that reflects the divine historical plan of salvation of the Old Testament. Then he continues: «As a result of the critical dialogue that we strive for, we would like to discover a picture of New Testament theology that is historically-critically reflected as well as being objective.»¹⁰

Edmund Schlink in his work *Oekumenische Dogmatik (Ecumenical Dogmatics)* discusses Troeltsch's principles:

The principles of analogy and continuous relationship cannot be proved either historically or theologically. They are more like heuristic principles, which have proven helpful for historical studies; however, they cannot claim to be ranked as final and commonly accepted criteria. The possibility of an historical event that makes a breach in certain historical analogies and relationships cannot be excluded either metaphysically or empirically. It is not possible to prove that the resurrection of a dead man is impossible.¹¹

A thorough analysis of the philological-historical method demonstrates that it is not just a formal method, but contains principles which have a considerable influence

on the substance of the result. Until today those principles, which Troeltsch pointed out at the beginning of our century, have been recognized obviously as inherent to the historical-critical method. These principles have been proven worthy in historical studies; they belong there so naturally that they are actually treated as dogma. Nevertheless, it is impossible to prove the correctness of these principles either from an historical or a philosophical point of view. They can be ranked only as heuristic principles.¹²

Despite his critical assessment of these principles, Schlink attributes some positive value to them: they still can serve exegesis as «heuristic principles,» that is, they help to «find out something.»

3. THE DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL APPROACH TO BIBLE TEXTS

3.1. Methodological Atheism

Historical-critical exegetical thinking and argumentation are characterized by a methodological exclusion of God's intervention from outside. However, the one who applies this method does not want to proclaim by this that God does not exist. No, in this case scientific exegesis eliminates the influence of God purely for the sake of the method itself. For it seems that only then is a researcher able to attempt to reconstruct, for example, the history of the origin of the Gospel of Mark. In

¹⁰ Leonard Goppelt, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3rd ed. Juergen Roloff (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 50.

¹¹ Edmund Schlink, *Oekumenische Dogmatik*, (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 364.

¹² *Ibid.*, 641.

his reconstruction he considers only human factors. All of the events described in the gospel he explains entirely on the basis of well-known immanent causes and laws of the world (the principle of correlation — see above). To adherents of methodological atheism, the supernatural influence of God would become an unknown factor generating speculative conclusions. Therefore, the influence of God must be eliminated in order to work purely methodologically and to be clear to other scientists.

The explication of the date of origin of the Gospel of Mark may serve as an example of such an approach:

It is difficult to establish the date of the composition of the Gospel of Mark... Chapter 13, for example, gives us the feeling of the threatening imminence of the Jewish War. Since there are no clear indications of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the majority of scholars date the Gospel between AD 64 and 70; others consider a later date highly probable.¹³

What stands in the background that is not directly expressed? There is no intervention of God from outside; consequently, there cannot be any prophecy. Jesus could not foresee the destruction of Jerusalem forty years earlier! If it is mentioned in Jesus' discourse, there must be at least some evident signs that point to the destruction of Jerusalem. As

we see, the author of the quotation bases his position on a feeling of «the threatening imminence of the Jewish war.» Therefore, the Gospel of Mark could not appear earlier. This is methodological atheism.

The next example also demonstrates argumentation on the basis of the given method:

The problem of the determination of the date to a large extent depends on the question of whether to consider the destruction of Jerusalem, mentioned in Jesus' apocalyptic discourse (Mk. 13) as already completed, or as an assumption that it might happen in the nearest future. In any case, the book must have been written close to AD 70, that is, during the Jewish War.¹⁴

The alternative is either after the destruction of Jerusalem or right before this event took place; and the phrase «in any case,» followed by the conclusion «close to AD 70,» completely excludes any other assumption, namely that it is a prophecy made a few decades prior to the event.

Methodological atheism is closely connected to the second distinct element of historical-critical approach to Bible texts.

3.2. The Bible as a Product of Human Thinking

In essence, historical-critical argumentation is built on the assumption that everything written in the Bible is the creative work of human

¹³ Werner Georg Kummel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 21st ed., rev. and enl. (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1983), 70.

¹⁴ H. Conzelmann, A. Lindemann, *Arbeitsbuch*, 255.

beings. It is quite possible that these people had some real experience of a relationship with God, but it is much more important that the very same people have mentally organized, given an account of, interpreted, or reworked their experience and were not afraid even to invent things. The phrases used clearly point to the attitude of historical-critical exegesis. Thus, «concepts,» «ideas,» «motives,» «traditions,» and «interpretations,» are often talked about. Here is one example concerning the Gospel of Mark:

The concept of revelation in Mark... turns out to be well thought through theologically... Though he already counts on a rather long period of time between the present and the Second Coming of Christ, he has not yet developed the ecclesiastical idea into a theological concept... So far, he has not found a logical connection between Christology and the time to come... his thoughts about the present efficacy of the Ascended One have not yet been systematized. In this sense, Mark represents an interim phase between oral tradition and Luke or Matthew.¹⁵

Another historical-critical interpreter, Leonard Goppelt, writes the following in relation to the studies of the Synoptic Gospels:

What we identify as secondary (i.e. as not pertaining to Jesus himself, but added on later — *J. L.*) will bear significantly on the subsequent stage

of New Testament theology, for the material that has been identified, as such, contains the review of the tradition in the early church and, finally, the evangelist's editorial work.»¹⁶

3.3. Presupposition of the Evolution of Thought Development

Again and again we come across the historical-critical presupposition that in the beginning there were quite primitive notions and confessions of faith that were later theologically developed. One example is Jacob's struggle by the river Jabbok (Ge 32):

The mixture of various motifs itself allows us to draw a certain conclusion, because any attempt at an appropriate literary division, despite all the kinds of heterogeneity in the text, has not been successful. There must have been a long process of oral tradition because all three etiological elements have probably been added on later. Here is a rough division of the various traditional layers, which overlap on each other:

a) The oldest tradition that can be reconstructed gives an account of an extraordinary event: at night a river demon attacks a wanderer crossing a river and this man wins a mortal combat...

b) As we can see in the name «Pnu-El» or «Face-El», a demon is identified with God, «El,» though not clearly expressed as such.

¹⁵ Hans Conzelmann, *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1976), 161.

¹⁶ Leonard Goppelt, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 65.

c) On...the Israelite stage two different intentions come together: Jacob occupies the place of an unknown story hero and «Israel» is substituted for his name ...As a result, the strange story with a demon acquires a meaning for the whole people: Israel's etiology surpasses the etiology of «Penuel.» By means of the transfer of the action to Jacob, the former river demon or a Canaanite deity «El» is connected to Yahweh. However, their identification is not affirmed; apparently this story sounds too odd or even reprehensible for this...

Linked to the Book of Genesis, this legend finally acquires a meaning which brings to mind Abraham's temptation (Gen. 22): Jacob returns from a foreign land with the rich blessing of his family and wealth, and right before entering his homeland he finds himself in a dangerous situation, which threatens that he might lose everything again. The received blessing becomes uncertain and then it becomes newly granted, after having been exposed to temptation...»¹⁷

Thus, out of a pagan legend an important epoch in the history of Israel has been built — by means of the evolutionary development of theological thought!

3.4. Separation of Truth from Reality

Historical-critical exegesis often separates truth from the reality of biblical statements. The argument is:

«This narration contains an important truth, a significant message; however, the described events have not taken place in reality,» e.g. the healing of a man with an unclean spirit (Mk 1:21-28):

It is not appropriate to ask what 'the demon' or the sick person desire. But it is necessary to inquire, 'What kind of idea does the narrator imply for him?' The narrator wants to give a certain message to the reader and this particular message contains the essence of the story. Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear that accounts of Jesus serve the purpose of proclaiming faith in Him: where Jesus is, demons find their end (surely in accordance with the worldview of that time) and have to admit their helplessness before 'the Holy One of God'... Ultimately, the subject matter of this account is the real power of the One whom the church confesses as 'the Holy One of God.'¹⁸

3.5. Inconsistency of Application

One frequently encounters inconsistency in the application of the historical-critical way of thinking and research. For example, some exegetes accept the bodily resurrection of Jesus as fact because it is integral to their faith; but at the same time they do not treat Jesus' walking on water as actual fact. They either eliminate the account of Jesus walking on water by the historical-

¹⁷ Werner H. Schmitt, *Alttestamentlicher Glaube in seiner Geschichte* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 32-34.

¹⁸ H. Conzelmann, A. Lindemann, *Arbeitsbuch*, 51.

critical method or explain it away as symbolism.

At this point it must be mentioned that some students of theology get into a condition similar to schizophrenia: «Here lies a Bible on my desk, which I study according to the rules of critical scientific exegesis. But there, on a side table, lies my Bible and I believe that everything it says is addressed to me personally.»

3.6. The Binding Character of Biblical Statements

How does this general approach treat the question of the binding character of Bible texts? Let us quote Stuhlmacher, the New Testament scholar from Tuebingen, who by no means holds to radical views. He believes that an interpreter must enter into a dialogue with the Bible text:

In this dialogue between the tradition of the text and the modern interpreter there exists full freedom; an authoritative dictatorship is ruled out. The tradition of the text presents its truthful evidence for consideration, whereas the interpreter, with his acute sense of truth, takes this evidence into account; he can accept it only if it convinces him!¹⁹

This means that a subjective «sense of truth» has presented itself as the decisive factor. It becomes the decisive criterion. The very word «criterion,» by the way, is derived from Greek κριτεριον, which also means «judgment.»²⁰ That is, Bible statements must pass an examination judged by subjective reason!

3.7. Scientific Thinking as Neutral Value

Reading between the lines, it can be said that historical-critical thinking ascribes a neutral value — beyond good and evil, sin and obedience — to human reason and the power of the mind. Essentially, its goal is simply to acquire the highest possible degree of objectivity.

3.8. The Asserted Right for Historical Criticism

Where does the right for historical-critical exegesis come from? What is the basis for it? Generally, two arguments are presented:

1) Historical-critical exegesis allows understanding of a text, i.e. it allows understanding of previously difficult passages. Troeltsch writes:

The affirmation and fruitfulness of the method... the effectiveness in acquiring understanding and relationship is decisive. No one can deny that amazingly clarifying results have been accomplished wherever it was applied, and our hope that other unclear parts would be explained has been justified, too. This is the only, but quite sufficient, proof.²¹

¹⁹ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments. Eine Hermeneutik*, Neues Testament Deutsch, vol. 6 (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 221.

²⁰ Langenscheidts *Grosswoerterbuch Griechisch Deutsch*, 27th ed. (1987), 405.

²¹ Ernst Troeltsch, *Ueber historische und dogmatische Methode*, 110.

In other words, this method is acceptable since it satisfies human thinking.

2) Stuhlmacher says that Scripture interpreters have an «obligation to tradition» as well as an «obligation to the modern sense of truth.»²² Since we are obliged to the modern sense of truth, we should apply a reasonable, clear method, such as the historical-critical method.

The adherents of this method often bring forward a missionary basis for it, by saying that this supposedly reasonable and generally accepted method can make the Bible accessible to people.

It should be mentioned that one may not always come across all of the distinct elements of historical-critical method discussed, though most of them are used frequently.

We have observed how historical criticism studies the Bible. Now let us do the opposite and study historical criticism in the light of the Bible.

4. HISTORICAL CRITICISM IN THE LIGHT OF THE BIBLE

4.1. The Initial Point: Scientific Methodological Doubt

What do the Holy Scriptures say concerning the application of methodological doubt as the initial point for a correct understanding of Bible texts? Is it an appropriate position in relation to the Bible? The Bible itself says that it is not. On the

contrary, the appropriate attitude to the Bible, according to its own words, is one of trust, faith, submission, and obedience.

2Pe 1:19: «And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.» Note that this quotation is followed by one of the most famous passages concerning the inspiration of Scripture (vv. 20, 21).

2Th 3:14-15: «If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed... warn him as a brother.»

Jos 1: 8: «Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.»

Luke wrote his gospel for Theophilus so he might know «the certainty» about the things he had been taught (Lk 1:4). He must and can trust the writings without being skeptical.

Jn 7:17: «If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.» Jesus made the possibility of acquiring knowledge dependant on obedience.²³

We have shown earlier that through doubt Descartes finally acquired truthful knowledge. How shall we assess this in the light of

²² P. Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments*, 206.

²³ Cf. Gerhard Maier, *Biblische Hermeneutik* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1990), 47. Other passages in Scripture: He 2:1-3; 4:2; 1Th 2:13.

Scripture? Such a way of thinking is similar to the one in evidence at the Fall (Ge 3).

1) In the beginning there is doubt concerning God's word (v. 1): «Did God really say...?»

2) The next step counterbalances all I have doubted and discovers my own personality as the basis for all further steps. Descartes says, «Cogito, ergo sum.» From here the rest can be developed. Genesis 3:5 also speaks about the discovery of one's own personality as the initial point for further developments: «You will be like God.»

3) The third step based on the human personality leads to truthful knowledge (acquiring truthful knowledge about God and the surrounding world). Genesis 3 declares, almost like Descartes: «You will be like God, knowing (or acquiring knowledge — *J. L.*) good and evil.»

This means that if a person starts from doubt concerning God's revelation, and then finds the source of truthful knowledge in his own personality and thinking, and finally acquires knowledge on these grounds, then, in the light of God's Word, the whole process can be perceived as thinking leading to the Fall! In other words, the study of the nature of historical-critical thinking and research should not simply deal with the question of correct or incorrect exegesis or its appropriateness. *The question is whether historical-critical thinking and research an activity of obedience, or an activity of sinful thinking and research?* Therefore, the historical-critical method must

be evaluated on this ultimate level, not on a lower one!

In historical-critical thinking, as well as in other research work, human reason and power of mind, as has been previously discussed, are ascribed a neutral value, which lies beyond good and evil, sin and obedience. But what does Holy Scripture say about human thinking? It bears the mark of the Fall, of rebellion against God. It has not been excluded from sinful human nature; more that that, the Fall had its beginnings in that very area.

Ge 8:21: «every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.»

Eph 4:17-18: «So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.»

More passages from Scripture could be quoted that clearly demonstrate that human reason does not have a neutral value; it is controlled by Satan and is under the deserved judgment of God (Mt 15:19; 1Co 2:14; 3:19-20; 2Co 4:4). Thus, human reason, as well as the whole life of man, is in urgent need of repentance, a return to God and obedience to Christ (2Co 10:3-5).

4.2. Correlation and Methodological Atheism

If historical-critical exegesis desires to eliminate God's impact from outside for the method's sake, it does not formulate merely a sci-

entific-methodical statement but does much more; it makes a fundamental theological decision for its *modus operandi*. It affirms a particular worldview and a statement of faith in relation to God, namely, «a God that does not interfere with the world.» It is often said that we make the assumption, «as if»: «as if He did not exist,» and — to make it sound more scientifically attractive — this expression is put into Latin: *Etsi Deus non daretur*. Although this hypothesis is applied in the area of methodological research only, it is still a fundamental presupposition of faith. Troeltsch himself openly stated that the affirmation of the correlation principle of the closed system, which is the main presupposition of all historical-critical research, is a «metaphysical presupposition,» i.e. one of faith! As we deal with historical-critical thinking and research we encounter a position based on a particular foundation of faith. The issue is not contrasting science with dogmatic faith, as historical-critical exegetes claim, but rather contrasting one faith with another faith; one foundation of faith with another one! We think it is not even necessary to present Holy Scripture's assessment of such a metaphysical presupposition of a closed correlation system when Scripture itself continuously speaks about God's intervention in the affairs of this world (Cf. Ge 1; Ps 78:12-55; Jn 1:14; He 2:4, etc.). We hope it is also clear what Holy Scripture's assessment is of the suitability of methodological athe-

ism for better understanding of the Bible, which itself claims divine origin.

We would like to add a few words concerning a frequently used concept of «method.» One often hears at seminars on the historical-critical method that, «you will obtain methodological instruments for further scientific exegesis.» However, this method based on such profound presuppositions of faith is not just a collection of instruments that simply need to be applied correctly to achieve correct and positive results; it is more accurate to compare it to a train that runs in a certain direction, and this direction is set by the rails, rather than by the passengers.

4.3. The Bible as a Product of Human Thinking

Historical-critical exegesis holds to the presupposition that the Bible is a product of human thinking. What does the Bible itself say concerning such a statement? The authors of the Bible texts are strictly opposed to all that has its origins based in humanity:

2 Pe 1:20-21: «Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.»

1Co 2:13: «This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual

truths in spiritual words.»

Gal 1:12: «I did not receive [the gospel] from any man, nor was I taught it: rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.»

Here it is clear that the Bible texts speak about their creation under God's influence, however it was done. We should keep in mind 2Ti 3:16, that all Scripture is inspired by God. At the same time, Bible texts inform us that they have been written in a «human,» quite natural way, e.g. with the help of historical research (see Lk 1:1-4). Thus, God's influence and human efforts are closely connected with each other. However, it is impossible to reconstruct God's extraordinary influence on the creation and the development of these texts since as a rule they do not explain it, except for commentaries on quotations. Hence, the reconstruction of the history of the creation of Bible texts, provided their own statements are taken seriously, is not possible in the majority of cases, and it is not necessary for their correct understanding.²⁴

Historical-critical exegesis frequently attempts to point out where the authors of the Bible texts have adopted the religious beliefs of their environment and then further developed and reworked them.²⁵ On the basis of Holy Scripture we must respond that the Bible texts, without any exception, are strictly opposed to any idea of the adoption and reworking of the religious beliefs of their environment: «...be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.'» (Dt

12:30). Calling upon God, on the contrary, means radical separation from the surrounding religious world: «...how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God» (1Th 1:9; see also Ro 12:2; 2Co 6:14-16; Eph 4:17; 1Pe 4:3-4; Col 2:8).

4.4. The Presupposition of Evolutionary Development of Thought

Historical-critical exegesis assumes an evolutionary development of thought. This might sometimes appear as parallel to evolving revelation, which is actually confirmed by Holy Scripture, but here we deal with something totally different. The issue is not an evolving revelation of truth which has been established by God himself prior to the creation of the world, but the idea of the reworking and further development of human ideas.

²⁴ Cf. Stadelmann's opinion: «Since we can perceive the Gospels as authentic historical documents and as revelation simultaneously, there is no need to go beyond the limits of the existing text in order to look somehow for the 'historical Jesus'. We accept the text of the Gospel as the only theological norm and as the only basis for exegesis, just in the form in which it is written» (Helge Stadelmann, «Die Entstehung der Synoptischen Evangelien. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der formgeschichtlichen Synoptikerkritik,» *Bibel und Gemeinde* 77[1977]: 65.)

²⁵ E.g. Ernst Jenni considers it possible that, «Israelite tribes adopted their faith in Yahweh in some shape from the Midianites or Kenites.» (Ernst Jenni, «Jhwh Jahwe,» E. Jenni and C. Westermann, eds. *Theologisches Handwoerterbuch zum Alten Testament* [Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1971], 704). Another example: «Jesus is God's Son through His wonderful conception. This idea finds its origin in polytheism.» (H. Conzelmann, A. Lindemann, *Arbeitsbuch*, 97.)

4.5. Separation of Truth from Reality

There is no truth for Holy Scripture that would not be closely connected to reality. The Bible continuously emphasizes that it describes real acts of God in space and time.²⁶ All Israel's faith is strengthened by the fact that God has indeed delivered his people from Egypt. Further, Lk 1:1-2 is, «...an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word» (see also Jn 19:35; 20:30-31; 1Jn 1:1-3; 1Co 15:14-17; 2Pe 1:16-18, etc.). There is another interesting point, namely the idea of separating truth and reality when the content of a statement is expressed in the form of a real event, which, however, has not taken place in reality (we do not mean parables here as they contain a direct indication of reality), is not strange to the New Testament. The New Testament calls it a myth. What does it say about myths?

«For we did not follow cleverly devised tales (μυθησι) when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty» (2Pe 1:16). In 2Ti 4:4 it is written that, «they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to

myths (μυθησι)». Thus, myth opposes truth (Cf. Tit 1:4). The Apostle Paul urges Timothy not to pay attention to myths, because they are useless (1Ti 1:4; 4:7).

4.6. Responsibility to the World

The right to carry out historical criticism is based on the «obligation... to the modern sense of truth,»²⁷ which demands the use of a generally understandable method. However, in the light of God's Word we should raise the following question: to whom are we obliged first of all? To our Lord and God! We must not conform to the nature and the way of thinking of this world: «Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will» (Ro 12:2). There is also no missionary endeavor in historical-critical exegesis. The proclamation of such an endeavor is a deception. When professional Bible teachers talk about this method in churches, they, in fact, themselves desire to learn to understand the Bible better with the help of historical-critical exegesis. But the missionary endeavor of building bridges from the Bible to every person, — which is our heart's desire, — is of a radically different nature! It cannot be built on an attempt to win unbelievers by means of an approach to Holy Scripture, which in

²⁶ «Christian faith is directly related to and dependent on historical facts of the past but at the same time it is independent of proofs or 'counter-proofs' of historic research of these facts» (J. Kaldewey, «Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition von Rudolf Bultmann und das Problem des 'historischen Jesus,'» *Bibel und Gemeinde* 78 [1978]: 178).

²⁷ P. Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen den Neuen Testaments*, 206.

its turn, is built on unbelief in the Living God's involvement with the affairs of the world.

CONCLUSION

Having studied historical-critical thinking and research in the light of the Holy Scriptures, the nature of this method has become clear: It is *disobedience to God, a sinful way of thinking, and a research work that entails sin*. If this is true (and the reader is given an opportunity to test the arguments according to the Holy Scriptures), then the appropriate reaction is not to replace pernicious critical arguments with the best historical-critical ones. Here, undoubtedly, we are dealing with two opposite convictions and two opposite spiritual forces. The only possible biblical withdrawal from criticism is to repent, to change the direction of thought, to leave all elements of historical-critical thinking behind, to confess this as sin before our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and accept the redemption which has been accomplished on the Cross of Calvary. If we meet people influenced by the elements of historical-critical thinking, our prayer and counseling must be for their repentance and liberation exactly in this particular area of human life: in the area of thinking. This is the only way in which historical-criticism can be truly overcome. The author of this article by no means wants to state that people who utilize such methods cannot belong to Christ.

However, on the basis of God's Word, it is necessary to point out that their life in this essential area does not conform to God's will. This is similar to a situation in which, for example, the love of money and material things may still play a major part in the life of a Christian, although he is a believer.

This article is limited to a critical study of the subject in view of the fact that a discourse about positive exegetical thinking would exceed the limits of the space given here. The author's conclusions do not have the intention of refuting human reason in general. On the contrary, he desires that Christians (and theologians especially!) would become more consistent in our thinking and would attempt to more thoroughly point out the presuppositions that influence our thinking. When those are clearly indicated, we can talk about precise thinking that has been renewed by Jesus Christ; thinking that consciously grounds its presuppositions and axioms in the Holy Scriptures, and not in philosophical thinking (Cf. 2Co 10:3-5). On this foundation we must fully, correctly, and effectively use our reason. It is necessary that in our thinking, in our research work and in all areas of our life we put into practice what the Apostle Paul wrote: «You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self,

which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be in

the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness» (Eph 4:20-24).

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