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## The Pros and Cons of Intertextuality

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# The Pros and Cons of Intertextuality

## H Ross Cole

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### Introduction

#### *The Pros of Intertextuality*

The last few decades have witnessed a growing scholarly recognition of the contributions that the application of contemporary literary perspectives and conventions can make to biblical studies.<sup>1</sup> In particular, there has been a growing awareness of the value of intertextual study. For many scholars, the emphasis on intertextuality comes as a breath of fresh air. It is as though source criticism had done a cut and paste job on the Bible, subordinating the authority of some parts to others, denying the possibility of effectively interrelating even adjacent passages of Scripture. Now we have the whole Bible back again:

For at least 150 years we have been accustomed to denying and pointing out the fallacies of a greater and greater atomisation of the Biblical text.

We have insisted that the present form of the text is the very word of God and have demanded that any interpretation with pretensions of validity take into account that present form.<sup>2</sup>

What a validation it is, then, to hear scholars of unquestioned stature make bold assertions like the following:

It is my objective not to study parts of texts but to study texts as wholes . . . By understanding biblical texts as structures or wholes, I am approaching them as systems with an internal logic . . . To analyse the text into bits and pieces and to read it in parts is to destroy the

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1. For a summary of some of the ways that modern literary criticism has impacted Old Testament studies in particular, see Paul R. House, 'The Rise and Current Status of Literary Criticism of the Old Testament', in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study* 26, edited by PR House (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 3–22.
  2. John N Oswalt, 'Canonical Criticism: A Review from a Conservative Viewpoint', in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987): 319.

system. It is to impose on the text an alien and an anachronistic set of literary conventions.<sup>3</sup>

Receiving back a whole Bible is one of the pros of the contemporary emphasis on intertextuality, but not the only one. This emphasis reinforces the importance of the contemporary application of Scripture, reminding us that no reader ever reads the text in a vacuum, but always comes to the text with his or her own baggage of questions and prejudices.<sup>4</sup> It can contribute significantly to homiletics:

The preacher is called on not merely to expound its 'meaning', but to enter into its rhetorical dynamics, feel its emotional power, and then to give of her own imaginative resources in letting that dynamism generate a sermon that will be a means of encounter with God through the text.<sup>5</sup>

However, along with the pros there are also significant cons.

### *The Cons of intertextuality*

Contemporary literary approaches to the text have tended to overshadow the historical-critical methodology that has been the dominant modern mode of discourse in academic dialogue, and even sometimes rejecting it outright.<sup>6</sup> Given the largely negative impact of historical-critical discourse on the acceptance of conservative positions, this trend would hardly seem to be a loss to some conservatives. On the other hand, 'historical criticism generally pursues the authentication of the non-fictional text . . . Literary criticism, in contrast, focuses on fiction.'<sup>7</sup> If we are concerned that historical critics have tended to minimise the historicity of Scripture, nothing would seem to be gained by supporting a method that reclassifies it as fictional rather than as non-fictional, for 'the commitment to historical validation' is not 'simply a fundamentalist aberration that we happen to share,

3. Edgar W Conrad, 'The Bible and the Reader', in *Colloquium* 23/2 (1991): 52.

4. John Riches, 'A Response to Walter Sundberg', in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew *et al* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 89.

5. Stephen I Wright, 'An Experiment in Biblical Criticism', in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew *et al* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 261.

6. So Conrad, 'The Bible and the Reader', *op cit*, 49–53. On the threat posed by contemporary literary method to historical criticism, see RN Whybray, 'Today and Tomorrow in Biblical Studies II: The Old Testament', in *Expository Times* 100 (1989): 364–368; John Reumann, 'After Historical Criticism, What? Trends in Biblical Interpretation and Ecumenical, Interfaith Dialogues', in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29 (1992): 55–86.

7. Ronald C Tobey, 'Critical Historical Methods for Intellectual History: Historical Criticism in *Horus Gets in Gear: A Beginner's Guide to Research in the History of Science* (accessed on [www.horuspublications.com/guide/tcl.html](http://www.horuspublications.com/guide/tcl.html), January 2, 2002).

interestingly enough, with higher critics. We take this position, as the critics do, because the Bible takes it.<sup>8</sup> The conservative scholar must thus always remain engaged with the historical issues raised by the text. In other words, such scholars must remain engaged with the sort of issues that historical critics have raised, even if rejecting many of their conclusions.

Another con to the contemporary emphasis on intertextuality is that final authority is often seen as lying with the reader rather than with the author.<sup>9</sup> This approach raises a serious challenge to the conservative position that the biblical writers were inspired rather than their receptor communities.<sup>10</sup> It also has the potential to introduce a dangerous subjectivity into the interpretation of the text.

The main body of this essay is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the issue of historical criticism and the Bible. The second part addresses the issue of the Bible and history. The third part addresses the issue of the way that an undue emphasis on response can introduce a dangerous subjectivity into the interpretation of the text.

### **Historical Criticism and the Bible**

It is a commonplace assertion that Christianity and Judaism are historical religions in a way that other religions are not. Other religions have a history, but the truth of their fundamental teaching does not stand or fall on the historicity of that history, *per se*. Buddhism's central assertions would remain just as true or false whether Buddha ever lived or not. Not so with Christianity, at least as conceived by most Christians through the ages. It is not enough that Jesus taught fine moral teachings. It is pivotal that he died and rose again. So also Judaism traditionally presupposes the historicity of the central salvation event of the exodus.

Past attempts to dehistoricise Christianity's content have not fared well. Gnosticism tried to define Christianity in terms of the timeless platonic realm of the ideal, but Catholic Christianity strongly resisted the encroachments of Gnosticism. The Protestant Reformation's move away from allegorical interpretation to the natural historical reading of the text has further underscored the importance of history to Christian thinking.

Historical criticism is often viewed as minimising the historicity of Scripture. It is therefore not surprising that conservative Christians have usually reacted against it. For the layman the very term 'criticism' is often loaded with negative connotations of destruction and scepticism. However, in an academic setting critical thinking is not about 'criticising' in the popular sense, but is about thinking

8. Oswalt, 'Canonical Criticism', *op cit*, 320, 321.

9. For example, Conrad, 'The Bible and the Reader', *op cit*, 49–51.

10. Oswalt, 'Canonical Criticism', *op cit*, 322.

with all one's mental faculties in full gear. Textual criticism is not about criticising the text. It is about determining the original text and is a discipline in which evangelical scholarship has had a special role to play.<sup>11</sup> Historical criticism defined as establishing the original history behind a passage would seem to be innocuous enough. But the situation is more complicated than we might suppose.

The systematic application of historical criticism to the Bible is an Enlightenment project. Historical criticism of the Bible has developed as a full-scale discipline with various sub-disciplines of its own. Source criticism seeks to identify the original written literary sources behind the text. Form criticism seeks to identify the oral backgrounds and *Sitz im Leben* (life situation) behind the text. Tradition criticism seeks to trace the development over time of the oral and written traditions underlying the text. Redaction criticism focuses on the editor's adaptation of his sources. However, while historical criticism as a discipline may be a product of the Enlightenment, it has earlier roots.

Constantine's transfer of his capital from Rome to Constantinople left a vacuum in civil authority that, in time, was filled by the Bishop of Rome. Subsequently, the medieval partnership between church and state was more like a war than a marriage, with each side struggling for the upper hand. Long-term consequences must not be confused with initial intentions. Certainly Constantine did not willingly hand over anything when he shifted the seat of the Empire eastwards. However, it suited the pretensions of later popes to claim that this is exactly what Constantine had in mind. The Donation of Constantine appeared centuries later purporting to be a statement by Constantine donating Rome to the Pope in thanks for healing from leprosy. It became a major plank in the defense of the ever-growing scope of papal civil power. However, not even the most ardent supporter of papal civil power today would advance the Donation of Constantine as evidence of Constantine's intentions. The reason is that in 1440 the Catholic Lorenzo de Valla decisively exposed the Donation of Constantine for what it was: a pious (impious?) fraud.

De Valla's skilful use of linguistic, legal, historical, and political arguments earned him the later accolade of being one of the founders of historical criticism.<sup>12</sup> Any of us reading de Valla's work today would admire his courage in taking the stand he did at the time he did. None of us would question the validity of his findings. There is no doubt that his research was a factor in preparing the way for the

11. Gerald Bray even lists the universal recognition of the quality of evangelical biblical interpretation in textual criticism as the first of its main strengths. "Thanks to the careful and patient work of generations of scholars, we now have biblical texts which are as close to the "autographs" as we are likely to get. Evangelicals have played an important part in bringing this about, and they continue to cultivate linguistic and textual skills to a degree scarcely paralleled elsewhere." Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 561.

12. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975), 8.

Reformation. However, it is one thing to suggest that the Donation of Constantine was a pious fraud. It is quite another to suggest that the Book of Deuteronomy was not just found in the time of Josiah, but also first written then. It is also quite another thing to claim that the Book of Daniel was a pious fraud, a *vaticinium ex eventu*, or history parading as prophecy in the times of Antiochus Epiphanes IV.

Given our respect for de Valla's work, we need to ask whether the problem is with historical-critical methods as such, or with the particular way in which certain historical critics have applied them to the Bible. Arguably, Scripture should not be treated in the same way as other writings. However, would we accept that the scriptures of other religions should be exempted from any and all historical-critical investigation? If not, how would we propose that claims of Divine inspiration be objectively tested? Certainly we cannot expect every question and objection to be answered this side of eternity. However, we would expect Scripture as the inspired Word of God to stand up to tests that a pious fraud could not bear. If faith is not blind, but based on the weight of evidence, we will surely expect to find historical evidence favoring Scripture.

It is significant that when historical critics challenge the historicity of Scripture, conservatives often respond by using the criteria of the critics themselves against them. Conservatives have used the criterion of dissimilarity to good effect to defend traditional dating of biblical material.<sup>13</sup> Niels-Erik Andreasen uses critical methodologies to establish that the Old Testament teaching concerning the Sabbath does not develop over time but appears full blown in its final form from the outset.<sup>14</sup> Gerhard Hasel uses critical methodologies to establish the authenticity of the passages he examines from Isaiah 1 – 39 in his dissertation.<sup>15</sup> Some Australian evangelists, as has been common for example, within the Adventist

13. For example, in defence of Mosaic authorship, Gleason Archer effectively points to the dissimilarities between the cultural customs, language, and historical and geographical details found in Genesis and Exodus on the one hand, and those applicable to the settings proposed for the traditional sources of Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis on the other. See Gleason L Archer, Jr, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1964), 101–107.

14. Niels-Erik Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Tradition-Historical Investigation*, SBLDS 7 (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972). Andreasen accepts the traditional Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly sources of the documentary hypothesis for the sake of argument. However, the more it can be demonstrated that various biblical themes appear full-blown in their final theme in even the earliest of the supposed sources, the more fragile the whole documentary hypothesis becomes.

15. Gerhard F Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, Andrews University Monograph Series, volume 5 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1972). Jerry Gladson asserts that "Hasel's dissertation, in fact, is really a tradition critical study of the word "remnant." Jerry Gladson, "Taming Historical Criticism: Adventist Biblical Scholarship in the land of the Giants", in *Spectrum* 18, No 4 (April 1988): 24, 25. Gladson not only sees the irony of classifying Adventism's foremost opponent of historical criticism as a practitioner of that criticism, he positively revels in it.

tradition, have long used archaeology and the findings of history to foster confidence in the reliability of Scripture.

The major problem with historical criticism has been the prevailing assumption that history is a closed continuum. God, if he exists at all, does not actively intervene in history. Any miracle or revelation must therefore be explained in purely naturalistic terms. On the other hand, conservatives have long proposed criteria by which prophecy and miracles can be evaluated.<sup>16</sup> What if such criteria were accepted, or at the very least the possibility of periodic divine intervention were conceded? Could such a purified form of historical criticism not only be harmless to the cause of conservative Christianity, but actually be a positive tool in its defense? Or is talk of a purified form of historical criticism oxymoronic? Can one be no more slightly historical critical than be slightly pregnant?

The appropriateness or otherwise of the title 'historical critical method' for what is being described here is a matter of debate, for example, in Seventh-day Adventist scholarship.<sup>17</sup> The discussion may soon be moot. Changes in the use of language are not subject to individually preferred canons of reasoning. One of the problems with creeds is that language changes meaning. Many conservative evangelicals have long believed that a modified form of historical criticism is not only possible; it is also necessary.<sup>18</sup> Liberals are beginning to abandon historical

criticism for alternate literary methods and evangelicals often still want to engage in something they call by that name. Something called historical criticism may therefore become the domain of conservatives sooner than we would think, whether we like it or not.<sup>19</sup> What is critical is not the name for what we are proposing, but its practice. It is essential for conservatives to remain engaged with the historical issues the text present, and to seek to establish the history behind the text as well as within it. The reason is that history remains an essential category for Christian thinking. However, the relationship between the text and its underlying history is not always as straightforward as it might seem.

## The Bible and History

That Scripture itself takes the category of history seriously is beyond dispute. We have already noted that Christianity with its emphasis on the death and resurrection of Christ and Judaism with its emphasis on the exodus are uniquely historical religions. Jesus falls out of focus if his historical context is ignored.<sup>20</sup> If Christ has

16. For example Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences: A Textbook of the Evidences of the Truthfulness of the Christian Faith for Conservative Protestants* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1953); Daniel P Fuller, 'The Resurrection of Jesus and the Historical Method', in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 34 (1966): 18–24.

17. It has been argued that there was some formal denominational acceptance of the validity of certain historical-critical methodologies in the early 1980s. See Alden Thompson, 'Theological Consultation II', in *Spectrum* 12, no. 2 (December 1981): 40–52. On the other hand, any compromise with such methodologies is apparently rejected in the General Conference, 'Methods of Bible Study Committee Report', in *1986 Annual Council Booklet*, 7–23. That the issue is far from settled in everyone's minds has been recently demonstrated by Bert Haloviak, 'The Perennial Quest for the Word of Life: Seventh-day Adventists and the Synoptic Problem', in *Spectrum* 30, No. 4 (Autumn 2002): 5–10. Cf Robert K McIver, 'The Historical-Critical Method: The Adventist Debate', in *Ministry* 69, No. 3 (March 1996): 14–17.

18. As far back as 1895, the undisputedly conservative James Denney rejects 'a criticism which denies the supernatural on principle, and refuses to recognise a unique work of God as in process along this line'. James Denney, *Studies in Theology: Lectures Delivered in Chicago Theological Seminary by the Rev. James Denney, D. D.* (NP: Hodder & Stoughton, 1895; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 212. However, he immediately adds, 'within these limits criticism has its own work to do', *ibid.* George Eldon Ladd speaks of 'the necessity of historical criticism' and 'the basic validity of the prevailing scientific method', while insisting on 'its limitations at the point of redemptive history where God has entered history in self-revelation and redemption'. George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 181, 191. 'We have argued that since revelation has occurred in historical events, the student of the Bible must employ historical criticism to understand these events in terms of their historical setting,' *ibid.*, 189. 'To be non-critical means simply to ignore altogether the historical dimension

of the Bible and to view it as a magical book,' *ibid.*, 38. Richard Coleman states, 'It is now only a common misconception that liberals accept the [historical-critical] method and its conclusions without reservations and that evangelicals do not recognise the validity of critical analysis. Even the hardened sceptic has come to depend upon the dictionaries, atlases, grammars, critical texts of the Old and New Testaments, and general introductions, all of which are products of historical criticism.' Richard J Coleman, *Issues of Theological Conflict: Evangelicals and Liberals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 144. Duane Garrett is the author of a major work opposing Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis of the writing of the Pentateuch, entitled *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991). He states, 'Historical criticism is a neutral term. That is, it does not imply that the document under scrutiny is either true or false. . . . Historical criticism is necessary and indeed universally practiced.' Duane A Garrett, 'Historical Criticism of the Old Testament', in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation: A Complete Library of Tools and Resources*, edited by DS Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 187. Note also the recent comments of Grant R Osbourne, 'Historical Criticism and the Evangelical', in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 193–210.

19. It is easy to dismiss Gladson's identification above of Hasel as a practitioner of historical criticism as an example of internal denominational politics. It is even easier to dismiss it since Gladson is no longer an Adventist. However, it is more difficult to dismiss the statement that Edgar Conrad made a couple of years ago to my Pacific Adventist University colleague, David Thiele. Conrad is an Old Testament scholar at the University of Queensland who identifies himself with the 'new literary criticism'. He was the external examiner for David Thiele's unpublished 1998 Avondale College Master of Theology thesis, 'The Identity of the "I" in the "Confessions" of Jeremiah'. David Thiele's conclusions on Jeremiah are no more radical than Hasel's on Isaiah. However, his research is just as historically oriented. Conrad stated to Thiele that the major problem with the thesis was that it was too conservative, that is, it is historical-critical in approach when historical criticism is now passé.

20. Cyril E Blackman, 'Is History Irrelevant for the Christian Kerygma?', in *Interpretation* 21 (1967): 435–446.

not been raised from the dead, we are still dead in our sins. We are left with hope only in this life and Christian self-sacrifice and struggle are in vain (1 Cor 15:13–19, 29–32). The Biblical stress on history is the natural corollary of its strong emphasis on the theme of the covenant. An important component of Ancient Near Eastern treaties and Biblical covenants is the inclusion of an historical prologue, outlining all that the superior partner in the agreement had done for the inferior. When covenants are made and renewed, the historical prologue often takes pride of place, and when they are broken, the recital of the history is often used to underscore the heinous nature of the rebellion. Loyalty and obedience are simply the only appropriate responses to the display of such grace. Blessings and curses are also a frequent feature of Ancient Near Eastern treaties and Biblical covenants. These blessings and curses are first of all fulfilled in the context of history.<sup>21</sup>

History will clearly remain an essential category of thinking for the Christian who wants to take the Bible's own internal perspectives seriously. However, historical thinking is not the only type of thinking that the Bible countenances; nor is the relationship between the text, and the history underlying it, always as straightforward as it seems. It is the tension created by this paradox that makes it important for conservative Christians exegete to read with eyes that are sensitive to the role of history in Scripture and to ally themselves in some ways more closely with the historical critics of the past than with some of the literary critics of the present. The crucial issue is to discern when historicity is fundamental to a biblical faith claim and when it is not.

Biblical historiography does not always work in ways that we would anticipate. The past is not recounted in full nor is it repeated for its own sake. It is told selectively in order that we might believe (John 20:31; 21:25). However, sometimes it is almost as though the past is reconstructed for one reason or another. At the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew goes to great lengths to stress that there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the Babylonian Captivity, and fourteen from the Babylonian Captivity to the birth of Jesus (Matt 1:1–17). History is being schematised here and the point is clear. It took fourteen generations for the Davidic king to appear, then fourteen generations for the Davidic king to be taken off the throne. Now that another fourteen generations had gone by, it was time for the Davidic kingship to be restored in the Christ. However, the 'artificiality of the arrangement is indicated by the fact that in the second series the writer omits the names of three kings between Joram and Uzziah; viz. Ahaziah, Joash, and Azariah, descendants of the infamous Athalia who attempted to destroy the Davidic Royal Line (2 Kgs 11).<sup>22</sup> There are thirteen generations in the

second and third series, but 'Matthew's observation here is statistical rather than theological!'<sup>23</sup> Attempts to rectify this situation by double counting of names between series<sup>24</sup> only serve to illustrate how much the facts are being made to fit the point.

The problem is that Matthew skips a number of generations to keep the number at fourteen per division. Is his argument fraudulent? Hardly. His Jewish readers had access to the same Scriptures Matthew. He is making a statement rather than trying to prove a point. But what a circuitous route to follow! Matthew's logic here is quite different to any that I would use myself. But that is the point. If the Bible writers do things with history in ways that I find hard to understand, I should be wary of facile statements as to how they work. We need to read with eyes that are discerning of the facts, but deeply critical of our own assumptions about how things should and do work.

Two quite different statements of the Ten Commandments occur in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. One of the major differences is in the reason given for Sabbath-keeping. Another is in the specifications of what is not to be coveted at the end of each list. It is interesting to see how different interpreters emphasise one passage or the other for different reasons. For example, Adventists generally cite Exodus while non-sabbatarians generally cite Deuteronomy. The reason is that Adventists want to emphasise the universal dimensions of the Sabbath, something that is easy to do when the reason for Sabbath-keeping is tied to creation itself, as in Exodus 20:11. On the other hand, non-sabbatarians generally want to portray the Sabbath as simply being for Jews, so they emphasise the deliverance from Egypt as the reason for keeping it, as in Deuteronomy 5:15. However, there is no doubt that Exodus 20 has the more universalistic ring!

At the end of the day the differences can be readily explained. In Exodus 20 we have something akin to the original statement of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, whereas in Deuteronomy 5 we have an editorialised, summarised, then expanded account of the same, specifically tailored to fit the context of Moses' sermon in Deuteronomy.<sup>25</sup> We can reconcile the two accounts. However, in

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981; London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1981), 76.

23. RT France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1985; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 75.

24. For example, Barclay M. Newman, 'Matthew 1:1–18: Some Comments and a Suggested Restructuring,' *Bible Translator* 2 (1976): 209–212.

25. It has long been noted that the philanthropic motive assigned for sabbath-keeping in Deuteronomy 5:15 is in harmony with passages such as Deuteronomy 12:18; 14:26; 16:11. The recollection of servitude as a motive for showing kindness to others is reflected in a similar way in Deuteronomy 15:15; 16:12; 24:18–22, with remembrance of deliverance being specifically mentioned in Deuteronomy 15:15; 24:18. SR Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, International Critical Commentary, third edition (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 85. In Exodus 20:17, the prohibition against coveting of the neighbour's house precedes that prohibition against coveting the neighbour's wife (Exod 20:17). In Deuteronomy 5:21, the order

21. The classic work on parallels between Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and biblical covenants is Meredith G Kline, *The Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963).

22. David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, softback edition, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand

the process we find evidence of direct quotations from God's own mouth being updated to fit a changing later situation. Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the need to read the history reported in Scripture in terms of the historical context of a writer, as well as in terms of the original context of the events themselves.

The difficulty in distinguishing between original statement and commentary particularly comes to the fore when we look at the parallel reports of Jesus' ministry contained in the synoptic gospels. Did Jairus's daughter die before the woman who had bled for twelve years touched Jesus (Matt 9:18), or afterwards (Mark 5:22, 23, 35; Luke 8:40-42, 49)? Well did Ellen White comment that not everything is in perfect chronological order in the gospel accounts.<sup>26</sup> Given the similarities of the synoptic accounts, it is hard to believe that such differences are coincidental. We would do well to study the differences in their context, and to attempt to understand the reasons for them.<sup>27</sup>

Adventist scholar John Brunt has suggested that a modified form of historical criticism be adopted. He argues from the three accounts of Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard that no writer was creating material out of a vacuum. However, he also argues that there was a discernable process of modification going on to meet the needs of each of the writer's communities.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not

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is reversed. In Exodus 'house' is probably used metaphorically for 'household,' with the rest of the commandment listing what the household consists of. In Deuteronomy the word 'house' probably simply denotes a building. ADH Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 171. The literal rather than the metaphoric meaning would assume special importance on the border of the Promised Land after a long period of wandering in the wilderness. The shift from nomadic to settled conditions would also explain the adding of the neighbour's land to the list of items not to be coveted.

26. Ellen G White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:20.

27. Matthew's reports of Jesus' teaching tend to be more expansive than Mark's. His narrative of actions tends to be more contracted. Matthew accordingly appears to have concluded that the messengers coming to Jairus is extraneous to his message. Mark and Luke's accounts would therefore be the more historically accurate in the technical sense. See DA Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by FE Gabelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 8:230.

28. John C Brunt, 'A Parable of Jesus as a Clue to Biblical Interpretation,' in *Spectrum* 20 (December 1982): 35-43. Compare how Robert Stein elaborates on the value of distinguishing whenever possible between the *ipsisima verba* (very words) of Jesus and the divine word of the evangelist, as if doing so enables us to hear the text in stereo:

In trying to discover the present-day significance of the text (which is, after all, the ultimate goal of interpretation), how much better off are we if we are able to arrive at both the meaning in the original *Sitz im Leben* as well as that of the Evangelists! . . . If we are successful, we then possess both the original message and its divinely inspired interpretation, which is in turn a divine message as well. Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1988), 157.

For a sustained discussion on the value of making such distinctions from an Adventist perspective, see George E Rice, *Luke, a Plagiarist?* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1983).

we like Brunt's use of the appellation 'historical criticism' to define what he was doing, we can only benefit from a sensitivity to such differences.

### How the Loss of the Historical Dimension Can Introduce a Dangerous Subjectivity into the Reading of the Text

In reader-response approaches to the text, authority ultimately lies with the reader rather than with the author.<sup>29</sup> Literary criticism offers a timely reminder that nobody approaches the text free of bias or questions. Anyone who has ministered in an intercultural context over an extended period understands how much individual cultural context can impact interpretation. However, for anyone who would jettison historical criticism in favor of literary criticism, the question naturally arises, 'Can the biblical text mean anything a reader wishes it to mean? Is meaning indeterminate?'<sup>30</sup> Edgar Conrad answers, 'No,' and turns the implicit critique back on the questioner:

The tendency has been for readers of the Bible . . . to approach the Bible as if it were familiar, a text to be easily domesticated.

This is easy to see in fundamentalist readings of the Bible. The Bible is clothed in twentieth century garb. It is read in such a way that creation becomes science and prophecy headline news. Fundamentalist readers of the Bible construct the Bible in their reading so that the strange and alien character of the Bible becomes comfortably familiar. It ceases to be foreign and, therefore, ceases to communicate from its origins in the remote past. It ceases to be 'other'.

What is so difficult for many historical-critical readers of the Bible to recognise is that the reading strategies they bring to the Bible have the same taming effect. Historical-critical reading strategies literally re-shape [sic] the text in the reading process. The Pentateuch is not read as a single piece of literature but as the Yahwist, 'Elohist, Deuteronomic and Priestly documents. Isaiah is not read as a book but as three books, which require even finer adjustments in the construction. In short, what historical-critics [sic] understand as reconstruction is, from the point of view of reader response analysis, construction. This construction also clothes the text in modern garb so that it ceases to display the alien dress of the 'other' . . . Extinguishing the perceived problems destroys the

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29. So Conrad, 'The Bible and the Reader,' *op cit*, 49-51.

30. *Ibid*, 51.

text as 'other'. When reading strategies recreate the text to conform to contemporary reading conventions, the text ceases to be alien.<sup>31</sup>

It is true that the historical critic can end up taming the text too readily. However, the solution lies not in the abandonment of an historical emphasis, but in the marriage of an historical emphasis to a literary approach. A dialogical approach to the text offers the best protection against an unlimited subjectivity.

It is true that it is the present text that holds authority over us, but it would be dangerous . . . to abandon the attempt to understand the text's meaning in its first historical setting. Between them, literary and historical contexts provide the channel for us to determine the meaning of any passage for our lives. To destroy one bank of any channel is to move from the river to the swamp.<sup>32</sup>

An extreme reader-response approach to the text can be as subjective as any other. In responding to Conrad, Majella Franzmann decries the danger of denying the initial text's power over the contemporary reader.<sup>33</sup> There is now the possibility,

of rejecting/resisting what might be perceived as unacceptable introduction of ideologies. One is free, for example, to reject chauvinist or anti-Semitic tendencies or interpretive dependence upon the various mythological world-views [*sic*]. This has far-reaching political and theological implications, especially for believers within the mainstream Christian traditions.

For the latter, a whole new definition of the word of God, or what it means to experience God in the reading of Scripture, have [*sic*] become necessary. Even in the rejection of the Scriptural text as perceived by the reader, the revelation of God may be experienced.<sup>34</sup>

Teresa J Hornsby provides an example of the sort of interpretation that Franzmann fears.<sup>35</sup> For conservative expositors of the Book of Hosea, the story of the

31. *Ibid*, 51, 52.

32. Oswald, 'Canonical Criticism', *op cit*, 322. See also Thorsten Moritz, 'Critical but Real: Reflecting on NT Wright's *Tools for the Task*', in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew *et al* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 172-197

33. Majella Franzmann, 'Response to Edgar W Conrad, The Bible and the Reader', in *Colloquium* 23 (1991): 57.

34. *Ibid*.

35. Teresa J Hornsby, "'Israel has become a worthless thing': Re-Reading Gomer in Hosea 1-3', in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 82 (1999): 115-128.

prophet's response to his wayward wife provides a beautiful picture of what God himself suffers when his own people stray. It is surprising, then, to discover that Hornsby sees no marriage metaphor here, but only a picture of God as the 'jealous client of a prostitute who desires to possess an autonomous, strong woman.'<sup>36</sup> Yahweh is portrayed as a villain for using foreigners to bring the covenant curses on suffering autonomous Israel who finds ways to fight back.<sup>37</sup> Franzmann is correct. For this method, it is not only in 'the rejection of the Scriptural text as perceived by the reader' that 'the revelation of God may be experienced.'<sup>38</sup> It is even in the rejection of the revelation of God that God is allegedly seen. It is this sort of irrationality that leads Eric Osborn to denounce much of literary criticism as an enterprise beyond logic.<sup>39</sup> It is also such subjectivity that CS Lewis has in mind when he speaks of the danger of seeing 'only the reflection of our own silly faces' in allegorical reading.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The contemporary emphasis on intertextual study opens up many new opportunities. We have a whole Bible back again that we can study in the broadest of literary contexts. However, we should not embrace the new trend as an unmitigated blessing. It is associated with a declining emphasis on the historical setting of Scripture, despite the Bible's own emphasis on the importance of history. An awareness of historical background affords some protection from the dangers of the extreme subjectivity that has enmeshed some practitioners of reader-response methods. While affirming a modified form of historical criticism, Clark Pinnock rejects 'the kind of negative criticism that . . . consists of theories that collide with the text and its intentions and discredit the force of its assertions.'<sup>41</sup> Whatever we call the approaches we use, this is a helpful guiding maxim. Our approaches need to be broad enough to accept a variety of methods that respect the text, but narrow enough to reject those that go against the grain of the text itself. It is the Word of God itself that must ultimately shape us rather than the latest winds of change, however strong their promise of a successful journey may seem to be.

36. *Ibid*, 124.

37. *Ibid*, 127, 128.

38. Franzmann, 'Response to Edgar W Conrad', *op cit*, 58.

39. Eric Osborn, 'Literature, History and Logic in the Formation of the Christian Bible', *Australian Biblical Review* 41 (1993): 49-63.

40. CS Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Fount, reprint 1977), 12.

41. Clark H Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, Regent College Bookstore Reprints (Vancouver: Regent College, reprint 1993), 145.