

Introducing Biblical Criticism

Biblical criticism is not criticizing the Bible. To criticize is to point out what's wrong with something. We know that the Bible is inerrant, so we can't criticize it. Biblical criticism is something different. It means careful study of the Bible. There are four major types of Biblical Criticism that help scholars do exegesis, or four lenses for looking at what's going on behind the scenes in the Bible. With this information, we, as students, can better understand the Bible, in order to apply the literal and spiritual senses when we read.

The first type of study is called **historical criticism**. Historical criticism tries to determine the historical context of the biblical text. Historical critics try to figure out the answers to questions like "what was happening at the time?", or "what did the author mean?", "who was the audience?", "what were the people experiencing?". For example, a historical critic studying the First Letter to the Corinthians would probably research the life of St. Paul, and what life was like for the church at Corinth to whom he was writing, in order to help us better understand the letter.

The second type of study is called **source criticism**. Source criticism tries to discover where the biblical authors got their material. Source critics try to answer questions like "what sources did the author have available to him?". For example, Matthew and Luke are very similar. A source critic would study the common source of material used by the authors of these two gospels: a document called Q.

The third type of study is called **form criticism**. Form critics study small units of the biblical text in order to try to figure out how each book took shape in the period of oral tradition before its actual writing. Form critics also help us identify the literary genre of the text that we're reading. These scholars ask things like "how did this passage take shape?", "what genre is it?", "how should we interpret it?". Form critics can look at the creation stories, for instance, and determine that they are religious myth. They help us to know that when we read them, we should be looking for a religious truth, not a historical one.

Finally, the fourth type of biblical study is **redaction criticism**. Redaction criticism tries to determine what theological insight a biblical author had that influenced his organization of the material. So, "what is his thesis statement?", "why did he include the things that he did?". It also focuses on the way that various editors put together their sources. So, redaction criticism is about editing and organization. A redaction critic might ask, then, "why did the author organize the material the way that he did?", and "which parts of this story have been affected or altered by later editors?", and "why would they do that?". For example, the Gospel of Mark has two endings: a longer ending and a shorter ending. A redaction critic would help us understand why there might be these two endings.

All these types of biblical criticism are the work of scholars. But, as students, we can learn from their work, so that we can better understand God's word to us.