

studying the history of interpretation but for those studying the Old Testament itself, can hardly be overstated. It reminds us that one's doctrine of Scripture will affect one's hermeneutic, for better or worse.

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David R. Law. *The Historical-Critical Method: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: T&T Clark, 2012. Pp. ix + 332.

What you already think about historical criticism is what you will make of this book. Although it provides a mine of information and gives good account of the subject, it will probably not change any minds one way or the other. In fact, it could have a counterproductive effect by serving to illustrate what opponents of the historical critical method (HCM) have thought for many a day, that there is no single method in it, only a fascicle of conflicting opinions. Positively, the example of David Law's book encourages Reformed scholars to serious historical research, but on the basis of epistemologically self-conscious presuppositions and interpretations diametrically opposed to those of the critics.

For several decades now the foundations of this once unimpeachable method have been shaken by critics as diverse as James Barr and Wolfhart Pannenberg, or evangelicals whose scrutiny of the HCM goes back to the likes of Robert D. Wilson, O. T. Allis, or the early G. C. Berkouwer in the 1930s, to say nothing of those who preceded them. This book has nothing to do with them, nor is it the work of an uneasy evangelical of the Sparks-Enns-Hays-Ansberry ilk, the "new" generation of biblical scholars who identify themselves as evangelicals while dabbling with the methods and results of historical criticism.<sup>1</sup> No evangelical or Reformed scholar enters this account with a critical voice (or any other voice for that matter, a few footnotes aside), probably because none are deemed worthy of consideration, *academia oblige*. Nor does the noteworthy C. S. Lewis, who wrote scathing comments on biblical criticism in his famous essay "Fern Seeds and Elephants" get a mention in the sections where the HCM's fragility is in question, even though Lewis put his finger on the real problem in a way that the author seemingly has little desire to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Yarbrough, "Should Evangelicals Embrace Historical Criticism? The Hays-Ansberry Proposal," *Themelios* 39 (2014): 37–52. Cf. Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry, eds., *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

Law is reader in Christian Thought at the University of Manchester in the UK. He has published hefty works on Kierkegaard.<sup>2</sup> Even though he writes in a neutral and objective way in this essay and does not reveal his hand, he is, to all intents, sympathetic to the Dane's approach to the relation of history and faith, as presented on pages 220–23: “Kierkegaard holds ... there is no direct transition from history to faith .... Faith belongs to an entirely different sphere from historical knowledge and is dependent on a non-rational personal leap of faith on the part of the individual.” Law seems to espouse the dichotomy of human knowledge as limited and relative, beyond which lies the transcendent. No doubt some intimations of the Other exist (“ciphers,” Law calls them in his 2001 book on inspiration), pointing beyond the horizons of our limited knowledge, and which allow intuitions about the beyond. But these are not in the same domain as the rational exercise of the HCM, which can get on with its work without bothering with interferences in things immanent. This seems to provide sufficient warrant for engaging with the HCM, which is, after all, the main way the Bible has been examined by majority scholarship for nigh on two centuries. It is a considerable enterprise, and Law has given a lot of careful and well-documented attention to it, although the reader does wonder about the magnitude of the investment over against the paucity of the outcomes, other than as a bona fide academic exercise.

This book is from a series of “Guides for the Perplexed.” One supposes that as such it aims at those who want to get deeper into the subject, but it contains such a wealth of information and detail, including almost 100 pages of notes, bibliography, and indexes, that it would probably give the uninitiated indigestion. It moves from an introductory definition of historical criticism and the HCM as “generic terms given to a cluster of related approaches which all focus in some way on the historical character of the Bible,” a method “developed in order to address historical questions posed by the Bible” (pp. 1, 4), to the issues raised by the name HCM, and its presuppositions. This shows the author is sensitive to the old quip that it is neither historical nor critical nor a method; in a certain sense he is on his guard from the start, aware of the recent widespread disaffection from the HCM and the claims that it is on its last legs, which occupy the closing chapter. There follows a chapter giving a brief history of historical criticism in which “forerunners” are found and an attempt is made to confer some

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<sup>2</sup> David Law, *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* and *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001 and 2013). Law also published *Inspiration of the Scriptures* (London: Continuum, 2001).

ecclesial pedigree. The four subsequent chapters present the standard approaches of textual, source, form, and redaction criticism, considered in layered succession, each building on the previous practice and incorporating its insights. In these chapters the presuppositions, the methods, and strengths and weaknesses are presented together with working examples, using Genesis 2:4b–3.24 and Matthew 15:21–28. The conclusion presents the strengths and weaknesses of historical criticism.

Three comments can be made about Law's book that do not detract from its usefulness, as it is detailed, and the presentation is clear and readable in spite of the difficulties of the subject.

Firstly, while recognizing the complexity and the controversial nature of the presuppositions of historical criticism, Law indicates five of those presuppositions that underlie historical approaches to the Bible and distinguish the HCM from other ways of reading it (pp. 20–24): probability, analogy, correlation, antisupernaturalism, and the bracketing out of inspiration. Are these all presuppositions? I think not. Law refers to the first three, which were presented in synthetic form by Ernst Troeltsch, as *principles* of historic method; this indicates that they are axioms rather than presuppositions. The last two, in contrast, are more obviously of the nature of presuppositions and not consequences of the first three, as Law would have it. The first three function differently in the context of a supernaturalist worldview allowing for the inspiration of Scripture. Nor do antisupernaturalism and indifference to inspiration in themselves distinguish the HCM from any other approach to the text that shares this double presupposition, such as structuralism. In other words, probability, analogy, and correlation only have the naturalistic, relativistic, and one-dimensional character that Troeltsch demands for them when placed in the context of antisupernaturalist presuppositions, or belief in naturalism, which serves as a pre-established criterion and determines their function.

Secondly, Law makes no use of the distinction, often found in discussions such as this, between modernism and postmodernism. Whatever the justification and value of this distinction, it is surprising that Law makes so little of the radical nature of the change that came in hermeneutics with the impact of deconstructionism and the influence of writers like Lyotard, Derrida, and Ricoeur, none of whom are so much as mentioned. This absence gives the impression that the status of the HCM is more secure than it actually is at present, when the big questions seem to be about not the archeology of the text, but what the text itself says in the light of the preoccupations of a rapidly changing world. Even though Law refers to the rise of "reader response" hermeneutics, he hardly does justice to the

radicality of this new form of subjectivism, which is just the opposite of the neutral objectivity often claimed for the HCM. For this reason alone, the HCM may well be doomed, rather than because of any opposition from evangelicalism or elsewhere. It has been overtaken and left behind. Law's failure to face this more squarely surely lessens the present value of his work.

Thirdly, Law broaches the question of the end of the HCM, referring to the title of Gerhard Maier's book on the subject. He indicates four frequent criticisms. The HCM fragments the message of Scripture; it brackets out its theological meaning; it is of little use in terms of practice; and, under the guise of objectivity, it hides immanentist ideological biases. Law replies to these criticisms, referring several times to John Barton's *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, but it is not particularly compelling stuff, nor is it new. In fact, a good many such criticisms and rejoinders can be found in James Smart's 1970 book *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, absent from Law's bibliography. Nor does Law reply to the more trenchant criticisms of the HCM that are of a theological nature; for example, that it is in dissonance with the nature of the object with which it deals, and so fails to do justice to the self-witness of the biblical corpus as Scripture; that it makes no allowances for the fact that human reason is sinful, not autonomous or ultimate; or that it bypasses the personal nature of Scripture as God's Word addressed to man.<sup>3</sup> Quite logically it brackets these out, but in so doing it creates a watered-down history that has a different shape and content from biblical history, a form of religiosity that preserves biblical vocabulary but changes its meanings. This is not Christian theology, but another belief that has cast off its moorings to the historical faith of the church and, more seriously, to the apostolic witness expressed in the teaching of the New Testament. It is in fact faith within the limits of an enclosed secular world. The hypothetical constructions of the HCM are secular allegories originating in imaginative minds reconstructing sources or traditions that may never have existed. Is it little more than a ploy to avoid the embarrassment of miracles?

It is only in the last paragraph that Law finally comes clean, and here the real problems of the HCM appear in the light of day. "My view is that its claims to *hegemony* must be renounced ... it should not be regarded as the sole correct 'objective' method that can bring about assured results" (p. 237). This is quite an admission, because if these claims are to be abandoned, they were surely made, and are no doubt still being made. What then is the

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<sup>3</sup> See on this subject Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

role of the HCM? It “can play an important role in *limiting* the range of interpretations possible when reading a text.” But what does this mean practically? Is it wrong to suppose, the HCM being what it is, that it will rule Bultmann’s view of bodily resurrection in and Donald Carson’s out? Also, it “can help protect the rights of the text.” But that, according to structuralism, is just what it does not do. “It is one of the voices to which we must listen if we are truly to hear God’s Word in this ancient collection of texts.” But has God’s Word not been bracketed out to begin with? Troeltsch seems to have thought so: “Give the historical method an inch and it will take a mile. From a strictly orthodox standpoint, therefore, it seems to bear a certain similarity to the devil.”<sup>4</sup>

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Timothy Keller. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Viking, 2015. Pp. 309.

Timothy Keller was instrumental in planting Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA), a multisite congregation in New York City and has served there ever since it began in 1989. Since the success of his books *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God* in 2008, Keller has published over two books a year. One of his latest endeavors, *Preaching*, will likely be influential because of the significant growth of Redeemer Presbyterian under his ministry.

The book is a good read. Keller writes well. His thoughts are vigorous and his sentences simple. He expresses himself with both depth and clarity. He uses gripping word-pictures: “A good sermon is not like a club that beats upon the will but like a sword that cuts to the heart” (p. 21). Thus there is value in this book merely for the benefit of exposure to excellent communication, which every preacher needs.

The endnotes are a small book unto themselves (69 pages!). The notes demonstrate Keller’s interaction with a wide body of relevant literature ranging from John Calvin and William Perkins to the latest books on homiletics and culture. However, the endnotes also contain a number of Keller’s comments, some of which extend to multi-page essays. If Keller

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology” (1900), in *Religion in History*, Essays translated by James Luther Adams and Walter E. Bense (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 46.