

Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 9, Historical Criticism Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 9, Historical Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. Mathewson's hermeneutics course examines historical criticism as a method for interpreting biblical texts. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical context—both the history surrounding the text's creation and the history referenced within the text—to properly interpret the text. The lecture cautions against solely focusing on historical reconstruction while neglecting the theological aspects of the biblical text. Specific examples from the books of Ruth and Colossians illustrate how historical and cultural understanding illuminate the text's meaning. Finally, the lecture introduces source, form, and redaction criticism as related methodologies within historical criticism.

2. 15 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 9 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).



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3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture excerpts on historical criticism:

Briefing Document: Historical Criticism in Biblical Interpretation

Introduction:

This document summarizes the key points from Dr. Dave Mathewson's lecture on historical criticism as a method of biblical interpretation. The lecture emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical context of biblical texts while also acknowledging their theological nature. It distinguishes between the "history of the text" and the "history in the text" and introduces source criticism as a related method.

Main Themes:

1. Historical Criticism as a Method:

- Historical criticism is defined not as destructive judgment but as a method providing "sound reasoning" for one's beliefs.
- It emerged as a distinct approach from theological or tradition-based interpretations, viewing the Bible as a historically conditioned text.
- It is based on the principles of:
 - **Human Reasoning:** Emphasizes the role of logic and common sense in examining biblical texts within their historical context.
 - **Cause and Effect:** Assumes that historical events and documents are part of a closed continuum of cause and effect.
 - **Analogy:** Requires historical events to have analogies in modern experience to be accepted as true.
- Mathewson states, "historical criticism developed as a specific way of interpreting the biblical text in contrast to more theological, tradition-oriented approaches to interpreting the Bible."
- Mathewson notes that, under this method, "there is no supernatural, there's no room for unique events...Instead, those must have explanations that are consistent with these principles operating with historical criticism."

1. Validity and Limitations of Historical Criticism:

- While often associated with anti-supernatural assumptions, historical approaches are valid and necessary when bracketed from those assumptions.
- Mathewson argues that "when bracketed from these negative and anti-supernatural assumptions, historical approaches to the Old and New Testament are valid and have played an important role in biblical interpretation."
- The Old and New Testaments claim to be records of God's redemptive acts in history, making historical understanding crucial.
- Biblical texts are "more than just historical documents;" they are also theological, requiring faith that is rooted in but not contrary to historical reasoning.
- Mathewson emphasizes, "the Old and New Testament texts are more than just historical documents...It's a faith not contrary to history or at odds with history, but instead faith that is rooted in that and consistent with that."

1. **Two Aspects of Historical Approach:**

- **History of the Text:** Focuses on the production of the text, including the author, readers, and historical circumstances surrounding its creation.
- **History in the Text:** Examines specific historical persons, events, cultural references, and customs within the text itself.

1. **Examples and Applications:**

- **Old Testament:Book of Isaiah:** Understanding the historical situation of the Israelites facing exile for their sins helps contextualize the book.
- **Book of Ruth:** Interpreting phrases like "uncovering Boaz's feet" or the concept of a "kinsman redeemer" requires understanding the cultural context.
- Mathewson notes, "One cannot read through the book of Ruth, for example, and try to understand it without coming to grips with some of the unique history in the text..."
- **New Testament:Book of Colossians:** Debates around authorship (Paul vs. pseudonymity) and the historical situation (potential false teachings) are explored. The analysis of Colossians 2 highlights the possibility of syncretistic Jewish and Greco-Roman influences or a more mystical, apocalyptic type of Judaism behind the false teaching.

- Mathewson remarks, "...some who approach the New Testament documents from a historical, critical perspective would suggest that pseudonymity was a valid phenomenon in a biblical text."
- **Gospel of John:** The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and the parable of the Good Samaritan, cannot be understood without understanding the conflict and relationship between Jews and Samaritans.
- **Gospel of Luke:** The parable of the prodigal son includes historical references, such as the son's request for inheritance as an insult to his father, and the father's running to greet his son as an act of undignified love.
- Mathewson states, "...a failure to understand the background for this reference to a Samaritan. Can actually result in misunderstanding."
- Mathewson notes, "This at the very least this would have been an extreme insult to the father...[and] simply was not done in the first century. For a father to run perhaps. But especially to run out and greet a son who had insulted him in the way he had. Was extremely undignified."

1. **The Importance of Balancing Historical Reconstruction and Textual Interpretation**

- Mathewson argues, "...we need to be careful of not making our historical reconstruction the primary object of our interpretation...the primary locus of my interpretive activity...is the biblical text itself. Not the reconstructed historical background."
- Mathewson states that, "...the interpreter is always walking in a sense of tightrope. Between only interpreting the biblical text...Yet at the same time not ignoring the historical background that helps illumine that."

1. **Introduction to Source Criticism:**

- Source criticism seeks to uncover written sources used by biblical authors to understand how the text may have developed.
- It assumes that biblical authors relied on written sources, which can be reconstructed and examined.
- Mathewson notes, "source criticism in both the Old and New Testament is again basically an attempt to get behind the written text...to uncover particularly the written sources that the author may have utilized that lies behind the text."

- Examples are seen in references to "annals of the king" in 1st and 2nd Kings, and Luke's admission of using other accounts of Jesus' life in Luke 1:1-4.
- Mathewson states, "Luke appears to be aware of those and now drawing on those in his own composition. So therefore source criticism attempts to...ask what the written sources were that New and Old Testament authors utilized in producing their own composition."

Key Concepts:

- **Historical Context:** Understanding the historical, cultural, and social milieu in which a text was written.
- **History of the Text:** The production of a text, including its author, readers, and circumstances.
- **History in the Text:** Specific historical references, events, and cultural elements within a text.
- **Pseudonymity:** The practice of writing in someone else's name.
- **Syncretism:** The merging or blending of different religious beliefs.
- **Apocalyptic Judaism:** A type of Judaism characterized by visionary experiences and emphasis on the end times.
- **Source Criticism:** A method of biblical interpretation that seeks to identify the written sources that biblical authors may have used.

Conclusion:

Dr. Mathewson's lecture emphasizes that historical criticism is a crucial tool for understanding the Bible when it is not used to dismiss the supernatural. It helps to place biblical texts within their original historical contexts, recognizing that they are both historical and theological documents. By understanding the "history of" and "history in" the text, we can gain a deeper understanding of the biblical message. Source criticism, as a related method, seeks to go even further, identifying written sources that may have influenced biblical texts. The lecture encourages interpreters to balance historical reconstruction with a primary focus on the text itself.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 9, Historical Criticism

Historical Criticism Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the main focus of interpretation in historical criticism?
2. What are the three key principles or assumptions underlying the historical-critical approach to interpreting the Bible?
3. According to the lecture, what are the two ways to divide historical approaches to interpreting biblical texts?
4. What kinds of questions does examining the "history of the text" involve?
5. What does examining the "history in the text" focus on?
6. Why is the authorship of Colossians debated among scholars?
7. What was the most common proposal regarding the false teaching addressed in Colossians?
8. How does understanding the historical context surrounding Samaritans impact our understanding of biblical texts?
9. How was the action of the father running to greet his son viewed in first-century culture, and what does it reveal about God?
10. According to the lecture, what is the primary focus of our interpretive activity?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The main focus of interpretation in historical criticism is looking behind the text at the author and the historical circumstances that produced it. It seeks to understand the text in its original context.
2. The three key principles are the priority of human reasoning, the understanding of history as a closed continuum of cause and effect, and the principle of analogy, which assumes that history repeats itself.
3. The historical approach can be divided into examining the history of the text, which looks at its production, and examining the history in the text, which focuses on specific historical references within the text.

4. Examining the "history of the text" involves asking questions about the author, the readers, the historical setting, and the problems or circumstances that led to the text's creation.
5. Examining the "history in the text" focuses on specific references to historical persons, events, cultural values, customs, and places within the text that need to be understood for accurate interpretation.
6. The authorship of Colossians is debated because some scholars argue for pseudonymity, suggesting it was written by a later disciple of Paul rather than Paul himself, although others argue persuasively that Paul did write the letter.
7. The most common proposal was that the false teaching in Colossians is a syncretistic religious belief that combined Jewish elements with pagan religious or folk beliefs. There is also a proposal that it is a form of apocalyptic or mystical Judaism.
8. Understanding the historical conflict and animosity between Jews and Samaritans helps us grasp the shocking nature of Jesus' interactions with them and the parable of the Good Samaritan. It reveals that the hero being a Samaritan was unusual for the time.
9. In first-century culture, a father running to greet a returning son would have been viewed as extremely undignified and humiliating. This action reveals the depths to which God, our father, will stoop to welcome back those who repent.
10. The primary focus of interpretive activity is the biblical text itself, as it is considered the word of God. While historical context is necessary to understand the text, the text remains central in interpretation.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of historical criticism as a method of biblical interpretation. How can one use historical criticism effectively while avoiding its potential pitfalls?
2. Explain the distinction between examining the "history of the text" and the "history in the text," using examples from the lecture material. How does each contribute to a richer understanding of biblical texts?
3. Analyze the debate surrounding the authorship and historical context of Colossians. How do the various arguments and proposals impact the interpretation of the book?
4. Explore the role of historical context in interpreting parables and stories in the New Testament. Use the examples of the Samaritan woman at the well and the parable of the prodigal son to illustrate your points.
5. How can the insights gained from historical criticism be used in contemporary contexts when interpreting the Bible? Discuss the importance of balancing historical context with contemporary relevance.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Historical Criticism:** A method of biblical interpretation that focuses on understanding the text in its original historical, social, and cultural context.
- **Hermeneutics:** The theory and practice of interpretation, particularly of texts.
- **Pseudonymity:** The practice of writing a text under a false name, often attributed to a respected figure, which some scholars suggest occurred in biblical texts.
- **Syncretism:** The merging or blending of different religious beliefs or practices, often seen as a characteristic of the false teaching in Colossians.
- **Kinsman Redeemer:** A concept found in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Ruth, where a male relative is responsible for preserving the family line and property through marriage and redemption.
- **Gnosticism:** A religious movement that became prominent in the 2nd century that focused on secret knowledge and taught that the material world was evil. The lecture suggests Gnosticism did not exist as a fully formed system of belief at the time of the writings in Colossians.
- **Merkabah Judaism:** A mystical tradition in Judaism that focuses on visionary experiences, especially ascents through heavenly realms, where angels are sometimes the object of worship.
- **Apocalyptic Literature:** A genre of writing characterized by visions and symbolic language, often including strict adherence to the Old Testament Law and anticipating a cosmic conflict. Examples include Daniel and Revelation.
- **Qumran Community:** A Jewish sect that lived at Qumran during the Second Temple period, known for its ascetic lifestyle, strict interpretation of the Law, and the production of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- **Source Criticism:** A method of historical criticism that seeks to identify the written sources that biblical authors may have used in composing their own texts.
- **Form Criticism:** A method of historical criticism that focuses on the oral forms that lie behind written texts.
- **Redaction Criticism:** A method of historical criticism that explores how biblical authors used their sources and literary forms to shape their final text.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 9, Historical Criticism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ: Understanding Historical Criticism in Biblical Interpretation

- **What is historical criticism in biblical studies, and what are its core principles?**

Historical criticism, in the context of biblical interpretation, is a method that examines the Bible as a text produced within specific historical and cultural contexts. It emphasizes understanding the text by looking at the historical circumstances surrounding its creation rather than focusing solely on theological or traditional interpretations. Its core principles include: (1) the priority of human reasoning to analyze texts within their historical context, (2) the concept of cause and effect in understanding historical events, and (3) the principle of analogy, which assumes that past events should have parallels in modern experience. Importantly, it aims to provide sound, reasoned justifications for one's beliefs by examining the text's origins.

- **How does the historical-critical approach differ from traditional or theological interpretations of the Bible?** Traditional or theological interpretations of the Bible often focus on its divine inspiration and its application to contemporary faith, sometimes downplaying or ignoring the historical context. In contrast, the historical-critical approach treats the Bible as a historically conditioned text, examining its human authorship, historical setting, and the cultural and political factors that influenced its creation. It aims to understand what the text meant to its original audience within its specific historical setting, rather than solely focusing on how it applies to the modern reader's faith or theological doctrines. While not denying theological relevance, it views it as inextricably linked to its historical roots.

- **Why is understanding the historical context important for interpreting biblical texts?** Understanding the historical context is crucial because the Bible claims to record God's redemptive acts within history. The Old and New Testaments are not just theological documents; they are also historical documents that are rooted in and claim to record God's activity in history. This means that to properly understand the text, one must examine the historical, cultural, political, and social circumstances surrounding its creation. Recognizing the original context allows us to appreciate the text's intended meaning for its first audience and understand how it functions within its specific historical environment, thereby preventing present-day readers from misinterpreting it by reading it through an anachronistic lens.
- **What is the difference between examining the "history of the text" and the "history in the text"?** Examining the "history of the text" involves asking questions about the text's production: who wrote it, when was it written, for whom, what issues or circumstances prompted its writing, what historical setting gave rise to the text? It includes questions of authorship, date, audience, and the historical situation surrounding its composition. The "history in the text," on the other hand, refers to examining specific historical references, cultural customs, events, people, or places mentioned within the text itself. It looks at allusions, historical persons, geographical locations, cultural values and customs referred to in the text. For example, in the Book of Ruth, examining the "history of the text" might include questions about the authorship of the book and the audience being addressed; the "history in the text" might involve defining the role of a "kinsman redeemer".

- **How do questions about authorship and historical background contribute to our interpretation of biblical texts, as illustrated by the example of Colossians?**

Questions about authorship and historical background are critical in understanding biblical texts. In the case of Colossians, debates surrounding the authorship of the book impact the way it is interpreted. Furthermore, exploring the historical and social situation of Colossae and its church helps us understand the reasons behind Paul's letter. Determining if there was a specific false teaching addressed in the letter and what that teaching might have been can shape our understanding of the purpose of the letter. For instance, understanding that the letter may be responding to a syncretistic mix of Jewish and pagan practices, or perhaps a form of apocalyptic Jewish mysticism, allows us to see why Paul emphasizes the supremacy of Christ and the inadequacy of religious legalism as a means to salvation.

- **How can an understanding of the cultural context of specific references, like "uncovering Boaz's feet" in Ruth or "Samaritan" in the New Testament, affect our interpretation?** Specific references, like "uncovering Boaz's feet," carry cultural weight that can be missed without knowledge of the historical and cultural context. This idiom is potentially sexually charged, but a modern reader might miss the significance without understanding its original connotation. In the New Testament, the term "Samaritan" reflects centuries of conflict and animosity between Jews and Samaritans. This historical context is essential to understanding the shock and counter-cultural element of the Good Samaritan parable, where a Samaritan, an individual from a despised group, is presented as the hero, challenging societal norms of the time.

- **What are some of the challenges of using historical criticism, and what precautions should interpreters take?** One of the primary challenges in historical criticism is the potential to let the historical reconstruction take precedence over the biblical text itself. We must not assume that our historical reconstruction *is* the text or that understanding the historical circumstances *is the same thing* as understanding the message. Another challenge is that the historical context is never perfectly reconstructed. We are always working with incomplete data and are forced to make educated guesses. Therefore, interpreters must be mindful of balancing their historical inquiry with a focus on the inspired biblical text and avoid letting their historical findings become the sole determinant of the text's meaning. In short, the historical approach should illuminate the text rather than overshadow or replace it.
- **What is the significance of source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism as sub-disciplines within historical criticism?** Source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism are all sub-disciplines within historical criticism that further seek to understand how biblical texts came to their final form by examining the sources, genres, and editorial processes involved in their creation. Source criticism attempts to identify and reconstruct the written sources that biblical authors might have used. Form criticism examines the different literary genres or forms that existed before they were incorporated into the biblical text, often analyzing the oral traditions behind them. Redaction criticism focuses on how biblical authors edited and arranged the source material to communicate their own theological and literary agendas. These three methods provide more insight into how individual stories or sections of the Bible were shaped, edited, or combined, helping to uncover a more complete picture of how the Bible was put together.