

# The Problem of Biblical Criticism and Modern Translations

## 1. A New Approach to the Scriptures:

In our day there is a new approach to the Scriptures which has taken root even among the historic Orthodox Churches. This approach, which was invented by Protestants a little over a hundred years ago and later adopted by Roman Catholics, is based on a “scientific method” approach to the Word of God. It seeks to approach the Bible with a critical eye and scholarly expertise. In this method, correct Biblical interpretation and insight are no longer seen as fruits of divine guidance and the holiness or faithfulness of the interpreter. Nor is continuity with the teachings and interpretations of the Holy Fathers of the Church considered to be of any importance.

Instead, interpretation of the Sacred text is based on scientific methods like “Word Studies” which even an atheist or any non-believer could employ. In fact, many Biblical scholars express in their writings a “faith” which is not very different than that of atheists, with denials of everything from the Virgin Birth to the very “Bodily” Resurrection of our Lord. Yet despite their lack of faith in the veracity and inspiration of God’s Holy Word, we are expected to blindly trust their interpretations because they have expertise in Biblical languages and cultures.<sup>1</sup> The audacity they have can be seen in the very title of their method, i.e. “Biblical Criticism.” After two thousand years, if we can be sure of anything, it is that God doesn’t need us to criticize His Word. God doesn’t call us to be critical of His Word but rather to be faithful and obedient to Him through it.<sup>2</sup>

It is strange that Orthodox Christians, who are known to typically be rather suspicious of Western Scholasticism and scholarship, would be so open to this new form of *Hyper-Scholasticism* which basically reduces the Bible to a collection of fabricated stories which were produced to teach religious principles. At least the old Latin Scholastics still sought to be faithful to God’s Word while expressing theology through the language of Aristotelian philosophy. But, as the Jesuit Fr. Kenneth Baker, S.J. points out about Biblical Criticism, this new Western Biblical Scholasticism, is in perfect accord with a “Bible without the Church” mentality. This has become the dominant Western approach since the invention of the Protestant doctrine of “Sola Scriptura” and it has devolved to the point that, when it concerns Biblical interpretation, faith is seen as irrelevant.

In an interview about modern Biblical Criticism, Fr. Baker, S.J. points out, “The two philosophical denials of today’s modernist Biblical Criticism are:

- (1) There cannot be a kind of thing such as a miracle.
- (2) There cannot be a kind of thing as a prophecy foretelling the future.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I for one would rather listen to an old, blind and illiterate holy monk’s interpretation of God’s Word than a thousand Biblical scholars who employ this blasphemous method against God Word.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that the Word of God is a person (cf. Heb 4:12-13). The Holy Scriptures are one essential revelation and manifestation of our Lord.

<sup>3</sup> Stated by Fr. Kenneth Baker, S.J., in an interview on the EWTN Television show *Mother Angelica Live*.

He points out that this approach to the Holy Bible is based primarily upon rationalism. Such rationalism flies in the face of the very purpose God gave us the Holy Scriptures. Fr. Baker explains that the purpose of the Scriptures is to “nourish our faith and the growth of the life of charity.” Yet Biblical Criticism, with its denials of the miraculous and insistence on the sufficiency of human intellect for Biblical interpretation, falls far short of this purpose.

## 2. Non-traditional Translations:

Another fruit of biblical criticism is very poor and untraditional translations. Traditional words which have always been seen as referring to subjects like priests, bishops, baptism, fornication, homosexuality, the divinity of Christ, etc. have been completely translated out of the New Testament. This, in fact, is the reason why many Orthodox and other traditional Christians retain the use of older English translations. It is not because they prefer out-dated language due to sentimentalism (as they are often accused). Rather, it is primarily because these older translations are more faithful to traditional theological terminology, phrases and concepts which are attested to by the Church’s two thousand years of Holy Tradition.

There is also the further difficulty caused by hyper-textual criticism which has now given us severely truncated Bibles. Time after time, words and passages are deleted from the Biblical text (sometimes without explanation for their removal) because some obscure, slightly older translation was found without these texts in them. This is despite the fact that the far majority of ancient manuscripts include these deleted texts.<sup>4</sup> This practice of deleting Biblical texts on the grounds of ancient manuscripts, also ignores the fact that these same deleted passages were in the Biblical quotations of the great Fathers of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

So, thanks to modern Biblical Scholars, we now have Bibles which radically differ from those used by the Church Fathers. No wonder so many of these scholars are advancing doctrines which likewise radically differ from the teachings of the Holy Fathers.<sup>6</sup> Yet as far as I am concerned, if a passage was good enough for the likes of St. John Chrysostom and the other Fathers of the Church, it is good enough for me. Because I wish to cling to the Orthodox Faith which they witnessed to, I want to use the same Bible which they taught from and passed on to us. I don’t need some critic ripping these passages out of the Holy Bible in order to produce a Bible for me which he thinks, based on his advanced scholarship, is more correct. I trust the judgment and witness of the Church Fathers over these modern-day Bible critics.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., the passage about “The Woman Caught in Adultery” (Jn. 7:53-8:11) is “bracketed by [modern critical texts] as not original...” even though this passage is “present in over 900 ancient manuscripts” (Orthodox Study Bible).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., “For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water...” Jn 5:4. The O.S.B. note explains that St. John Chrysostom had this passage in his copy of the Scriptures as well.

<sup>6</sup> Like the conclusion that New Testament gives insufficient evidence for belief in the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### 3. Messianic Prophetic Passages:

The final Biblical travesty I will mention which has resulted from the “advances” of Western Biblical Criticism is the fact Old Testaments have been stripped of the far majority of Messianic prophecies about our Lord.<sup>7</sup> This is due partly to the Protestant idea of relying on the Masoretic Text rather than on the Septuagint. Such a practice, long used by the West, ignores the fact that the early Christians used the Septuagint as their primary Old Testament text. This was the practice from the very beginning and most ancient days of the Church. For example, it can be shown that more than 80% of the Old Testament quotes in the New Testament come from the Greek Septuagint. In fact, until the time of St. Jerome, the Septuagint was used almost exclusively by Christians of both East and West. The Septuagint remains the received, official Old Testament by most Orthodox Churches and many in the West continued to use of it even after the advent of St. Jerome’s Vulgate.<sup>8</sup>

But the main reason the prophecies about the coming of Christ have been translated out of modern Old Testaments is because the modern translators have abandoned a “Christocentric” approach to the Old Testament. This approach which is the historic and traditional one of the Church views the entire Old Testament as pointing to our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. So today, thanks to the Bible critics, we have not only a truncated and poorly translated New Testament devoid of traditional Biblical language, we also have Old Testaments which have been stripped of prophetic references pointing to the coming of Christ. This is due to the fact that the current editions are based on texts which are not in accord with historic Christian tradition. It is beyond me how any Orthodox Christian could accept such a situation or approach to God’s Holy Scripture.

Yet in writing all this, I do not mean to suggest that all modern Biblical scholarship is of no value. Like any science, it can be used for bad or good. When employed by those of the household of the faith and used to gain a greater appreciation for the God’s truth, it can indeed be of good value. But when it is absolutized as the sole means of interpreting God’s Word and used to tear down (1) Holy Tradition, (2) the teachings of the Fathers and (3) to deny the Holy Orthodox Faith, then it becomes a tool of deception, error and even heresy. May the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, protect us from such falsehood.

Trusting In Christ’s Inextinguishable Light,  
Sub-Dn. Lazarus Wm. Levont Der-Ghazarian (12-10-03)  
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<sup>7</sup> Cf. My essay, *The "Extra Books" or "Apocrypha" of the Old Testament Canon*

<sup>8</sup> In fact, St. Augustine took St. Jerome to task for the creation of the Vulgate which deviated in no small way from the traditional text of the old Latin version which was very close to the Septuagint.