

**The Challenge of Reading the Bible Today:  
Can the Bible be read both Critically and Religiously?  
Jewish, Catholic and Protestant Perspectives**

**University of Pennsylvania, October 25, 2010**

**Pete Enns**

“Can the Bible be read religiously and critically?” That is the question, and I get to talk about the Protestant perspective. Which is tough, because Protestantism is as big as the sky in Montana. You have everything from American young earth creationists to German liberal Lutherans to Chinese Pentecostals to Korean hyper-Calvinists. There is certainly no one “Protestant perspective” on anything, let alone the Bible and higher criticism.

But for our purposes, I can think of three general groups of Protestants. The first two are not relevant. On one end of the spectrum are Fundamentalists. They are not asking the question we are asking today, because they essentially *reject* higher criticism as an enemy to the faith. Then there are Protestants at the other end of the spectrum entirely. They also are not asking the question we are asking, but for the opposite reason. They don’t expect as much from the Bible to inform their faith, so there is little pressure, if any, to ask how a religious reading of scripture can co-exist with higher criticism.

The Protestants I have in mind today make up a very large and a diverse middle group. This group feels the tension; they get it. They are committed to “taking the Bible seriously” but they also sense that the modern study of the Bible is a real challenge that has to be dealt with one way or another. That recognition may be on a very sophisticated, learned level, or it may be more occasional: someone watches a History Channel special on the Bible or takes a course at Penn, and what they hear makes a lot of sense, but it is VERY different from what they are used to hearing. And so the familiar struggle begins between a Bible they once knew and the Bible they are now getting to know.

So, for these Protestants, can they read the Bible religiously and critically? Yes, and in fact it must...but...they may have to be willing to make some adjustments, give up some things that don't work very well. That is a very hard thing to do.

If your faith is rooted in a sacred book, which is a fundamental Protestant conviction—a book *where God speaks to you*—then higher criticism is bound to create some trouble.

Higher criticism says in effect: “Yes, I know you and your tradition have always thought ‘X’ about the Bible but *now we know better*—it’s really ‘not X’ or ‘Y.’” Genesis—is not *history* but myth; Abraham—is not a man but a *legend*; Moses—if he even lived, did

not write the Pentateuch; Exodus and conquest narratives—at best distorted histories, if not simply fabrications, same with the Gospels and Acts—and on and on.

This is the tension of higher criticism, it is felt acutely in Protestantism, and here's why—this is where we get to the distinctly Protestant problem of religious faith and higher criticism: *in Protestantism the Bible is pressed into the role of supreme religious authority*. Of the three perspectives represented here, Protestantism in particular *needs* a very different kind of Bible than the one higher criticism delivers. That is a problem because Protestants like being Protestants and higher criticism, well, it's not going anywhere either.

My comments today are going to be largely diagnostic. I want to focus on the *reasons* why Protestants have the particular problem they do with higher criticism, and then offer some brief suggestions about how to move beyond the impasse. I attribute the Protestant dis-ease to three factors: (1) the Reformation concept of *sola Scriptura*, (2) Protestant identity coming out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and (3) the very nature of the Christian Bible.

## *Sola Scriptura*

The reason Protestant faith and higher criticism are in such conflict today is actually built into the very nature of Protestantism. The clarion call of the Reformers was “*sola Scriptura*,” meaning scripture and scripture alone is *God’s word, the church’s final* authority on all matters pertaining to faith and life. For many, this phrase is the very heart of Protestantism.

Higher criticism messes with that. Protestants locate authority in a book. To function authoritatively, it has to be *clear and consistent*—higher criticism introduces *ambiguity and diversity* in the Bible. It has to be somehow truthful, trustworthy, functionally without at least major blunders—higher criticism points out *errors and contradictions*. It is hard for the Bible to function as a final authority if it’s got so many problems. Higher criticism calls into question the core Protestant conviction of *sola Scriptura*.

One of the great ironies of *sola Scriptura* is that it helped produce *disunity* among Christians rather than the unity of all gathered around this authoritative word. *Sola Scriptura* tried to solve one problem and created another. Once you say “we will *only* listen to what *God* says in the *Bible*,” you are bound to pay *close attention* to what the Bible says—for yourself. Luther even translated the Bible into German to make sure more people could do just that. But when you read the Bible, as any decently trained

seminarian can tell you, you start seeing the ambiguities and tensions. You begin to see that it's not all that easy to understand what the Bible is authoritatively saying.

But if the Bible is your final authority, it is vital, central, that you *get it right*. That's one reason why the Reformation quickly splintered over formerly settled issues like infant baptism or the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Lo and behold, the authoritative word of God is not clear. And so you had Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and others, all claiming to provide that clarity, to get it right. That is why Protestants continue to form new churches and denominations, this is why they establish insulated Bible colleges, vigilant seminaries, and, more than once in history, why they kill or mistreat those they disagree with. This is God's book. *He* is speaking to *you* through it. A lot—everything—is at stake in how you handle this authoritative text.

*Sola Scriptura* might have been a good idea at the time, but it is hard to implement, as the history of Protestantism has shown. Nevertheless, the Bible as sole and supreme authority continues to be a deep impulse of Protestant ideology. Higher-criticism, which introduces novel readings and extra-biblical information, is seen to undermine that authority. And so it remains a common foe or at least a very distant and awkward conversation partner.

## *Protestant Identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century as a whole gave *sola Scriptura* Protestants fits. Picture the scene. First you had the enthronement of an older 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century European higher criticism, now making its way to America, challenging all sorts of traditional beliefs about the Bible. That was bad enough. But during that century you also had the rise of biblical archaeology. Among the more alarming finds was Mesopotamian creation and flood stories that were clearly mythic but that also looked uncomfortably similar to the stories in Genesis. These two factors did a good job of undermining the Bible as a source of history.

Let that sink in. Traditional notions of the Bible were *turned upside down*. The law of Moses was written not at the beginning of Israel's history as Israel's national foundation, but 1000 years later as an afterthought. If that is right, that pretty much screws up the entire history of Israel that the *authoritative* Bible presents. Then archaeology showed that the Bible looks like pagan literature. Genesis is a story, myth, just like the origins stories of the much older Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Canaanites.

If your faith rests on a Bible where God speaks, these were crushing blows that created great angst. And if that weren't enough on everyone's plate, you have science: geology

showing that the earth is far older than Genesis allows—so, again, the Bible is wrong. And then of course you have Darwin bird watching in the Galapagos Islands and decides we all came from monkeys. The truthfulness and accuracy of the Bible was disintegrating before their eyes.

We can't overstate how traumatic all this was. What do biblical *authority* and *sola Scriptura* even mean? People were frightened. *The dominoes were unraveling down the slippery slope*. Where was all this heading? Can we trust the Bible?—which is the same as asking Can we trust God?

If we want to understand the uneasy relationship between Protestant faith and higher criticism *today*, we need to understand what was set in motion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For many, these older higher critical conflicts are not over—they are actually *perpetuated*. A large measure of current Protestant religious identity was forged during *that* moment. Many Protestants today are the ecclesiastical children of these conflicts that have been faithfully handed down—the conflict is part of their DNA, their culture, their source of identity, their *narrative*.

To ask them “how can we read the Bible religiously and critically” is to ask them to rewrite that narrative. And rewriting one's narrative is always a threat, especially if that

narrative includes very clear ideas about matters of ultimate significance, such as: the nature of universe and your place in it, God, eternal life, etc., etc. If you want conflict, challenge a group's totalizing narrative. The Protestant tensions with higher criticism are as much about social-location issue as anything.

It is a common refrain: "If we allow that, if we go down that road, we are denying our past and therefore cease being who we are." To dialogue with higher criticism means being a traitor, defecting to the enemy, and the social pressures are enormous. Their very existence is a *response* to higher criticism, not a partnership. Continuing the conflict is a badge of honor for some, a sign of fidelity to the tradition—and therefore to God himself.

Until a new social narrative is written—which is happening and which is why there is some volatility in these circles—conflict will continue.

### *The Nature of the Christian Bible*

There is a third point I'd like to raise *briefly* that is even more fundamental than the previous two. It has to with the nature of the Christian Bible itself.

A few years back, one of my doctoral professors, the noted Jewish biblical scholar Jon Levenson, wrote an article on Judaism and biblical theology. In it he commented on the

overarching difference between how Jews and Christians view the Bible. It struck a chord with me that still resounds. He said, “For Jews, the Bible is a problem to be solved; for Christians it is a message to be proclaimed.” This is an important distinction that helps explain why Protestants have an uneasy relationship with higher criticism.

Not to oversimplify, but the history of Jewish interpretation of the Bible is notoriously comfortable with problems in the Bible. The Jewish Bible is not flat but complex, containing many peaks and valleys, gaps and gashes. Jewish interpretation understands this and works with it. That is because connecting with God through scripture is a journey, a conversation, an argument, a struggle. Hence, higher criticism—although still a challenge—is less of a problem, at least insofar as it, too, points out the peaks and valleys, gaps and gashes of the Bible.

For Protestants—and I should broaden this to all Christians—the Bible is not there to set us on an exegetical adventure where we discover God in the problems. It is there to *proclaim* what God has done in Christ. The Bible is a grand narrative that as a whole tells ultimately ONE story with a climax: the crucified and risen Son of God. The NT authors model this on virtually every page: they go to great lengths to explain how Jesus of Nazareth *completes* Israel’s story and gives it *coherence*. Taken as a whole, the Christian Bible has *a point*—*a message* to be proclaimed.

If the Bible is a message to be proclaimed, one can see why higher criticism would be an issue. Higher criticism does not unify the Bible but breaks it down into its various and conflicting messages. This impulse impedes Christian proclamation, and so accounts at least for part of the problem.

### *Way Forward*

Some brief thoughts. If I were elected the Protestant President, here is what I would say.

This middle group of Protestants—shaped by *sola Scriptura* and deep sociological factors—must try to create a culture where critical self-reflection is valued rather than being a threat. They must take steps to come to peace with the Bible as it is, not as it has been for their tradition.

There are higher critical insights that disturb familiar theological categories. Perhaps it is time to revisit those categories instead of defending them. Protecting boundaries—although always tempting—may not be the best way to preserve faith. There is actually *more* at stake by *not* thinking synthetically and creatively about some longstanding higher critical issues (top on the list: Hebrew Bible and history and the NT and

midrash). Stubbornly defending tradition ironically damages that tradition and those in it. Willingness to change and adapt is actually *necessary* to preserve *any* identity.

Such re-examination will likely mean looking outside of the Protestant story to see what wisdom can be modeled by how other faith traditions handle higher criticism. For example, picking up on Levenson's quote, what if Protestants would learn to be comfortable with a more dialogical approach to engaging the Bible rather than "getting it right"—where God is encountered in the conversation of reading rather than treating the Bible as a sourcebook of infallible information.

When Protestants sing hymns in church about the Bible, it is indicative of the problem. The Bible is not the center of the Christian faith: God is. And there is more to knowing and encountering this God than carefully reading a book, even an inspired one.

I think there is much Protestants can learn from some contemplative traditions that have been part of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Needing to get the Bible right, and fretting over whether one is getting it right, and what God thinks of us should we get it wrong, stem from spiritual and emotional dysfunction, not health; from a false and wounded self, not mature piety. Spiritual masters, not only of Christianity but of other faiths, are quick to remind us that living in your head and controlling others and God through a text hinder communion with God and spiritual

growth. It is a great Protestant irony that one's devotion to scripture can wind up being a spiritual barrier.

The way forward may be a willingness on the part of Protestants to evaluate how well things are working and to make changes where necessary. Some might say that such a program would compromise the very Protestant spirit. I disagree. I think it calls upon the true spirit of the Reformation, but now turned inward, not simply on the enemy lurking outside of the walls. Critical self-evaluation is the first step to answering the question before us in the affirmative. The Protestant predicament, however, is that it may also be the hardest step to take. Where all this is headed is beyond me but will certainly be interesting to watch unfold.