



BIBLE CRITICISM (continued)

One episode of A&E’s “Great Mysteries of the Bible” asserts that there is a “problem” with the account of David killing Goliath. The “scholarly expert” (who I had never heard of) noted the traditional account in First Samuel 17, but then asserted that there is a “conflicting account” later on that tells us that it was really “Elhanan” who killed Goliath (2Samuel 21:19). The impression given is that there was some shabby editing going on and the Bible is trying to give David credit for what somebody else really did. Of course, if anyone bothers to investigate this by reading the context of both chapters, this “problem” is pretty easy to sort out. David did kill Goliath before he was Israel’s king (1Samuel 17) and a generation later, when David was an old man, his men encountered and killed the adult children of the original Goliath, one of them named after his father (2Samuel 21:15-22). The two events occurred at different times and places.

The point here is not to ignore the issues that really exist, but to emphasize that some “Bible Criticism” is performed by skeptics who are trying to find and, sometimes, even manufacture “problems.” I believe some of these folks, had they lived at the right time, would have stood around the edge of the crowd when Jesus spoke hoping they could “catch Him in something He might say” (Luke 11:53,54).

Beginning with the Enlightenment’s rejection of the supernatural, a strong current of “Gospel Skepticism” arose from men who took philosophically-based “pot-shots” at the traditional story. **Herman Samuel Reimarus** (1694-1768) asserted that the supernatural elements of Jesus’ life were later additions by writers who were knowingly embellishing and changing the message of Jesus to create a new religion – Christianity. **Johann Salomo Semler** (1725-1791) claimed there were two different versions of Christianity – Peter’s and Paul’s. **Johann Gottfried von Herder** (1744-1803) claimed that the Bible was just “religious literature” written by scientifically ignorant people and that the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) contained irreconcilable differences with John’s Gospel. **Heinrich E. G. Paulus** (1761-1851) offered naturalistic explanations for all of Christ’s miracles. **F. C. Baur** (1792-1860) rejected most of Paul’s letters as spurious and rejected all of the miraculous elements in the life of Christ as inventions of the later Church. **D. F. Strauss** (1808-1874) declared that none of the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses and eventually doubted that Jesus ever existed. **J. E. Renan** (1823-92) also rejected the supernatural elements of Jesus’ life. **Arthur C.H. Drews** (1865-1935) asserted that the Gospels are not “history” because Jesus never existed. You won’t find many new heresies floating around the academic world these days, just folks picking up and advocating one of the many skeptical alternative stories cooked-up in the past.

Upon this basis of European scholarly skepticism, the various “Synoptic” theories emerged in the attempt to explain the similarities and differences between the three Gospels that “see

together” the ministry of Jesus and follow a similar outline – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Rooted in the “evolutionary development” and literary dependence approach to explaining everything, theories emerged suggesting each of the Gospels as coming first and then how the others could have borrowed from this one and used some “source document” which was nothing more than a collection of Jesus’ sayings that all of the Gospel writers may have used in varying amounts. This alleged source document of collected “sayings” by Jesus (originally it was called “Q” for Quelle = source) has always been a fictitious invention of synoptic theorists, although in recent years some have decided that the Gnostic “Gospel of Thomas” is about what “Q” supposedly looked like and may even be it. You can buy English and Greek parallel Gospel accounts and try comparing and contrasting the three accounts (and I have), but it isn’t long before you realize why numerous theories arose and somebody has already suggested each of the three as the first one and then concocted many scenarios for who copied from who/what. Bubbling out of this same stew-pot in 1985 came the self-commissioned “Jesus Seminar,” armed with colored highlighters and predictable assumptions - they decided that only 18% of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were genuine.

When I was a student in Bible College in 1977, I was quite interested to read a syndicated editorial in the local paper by Sidney Harris asserting that none of the New Testament books were written by people who actually saw or knew Jesus, who had no intention of starting a new religion (well, that was what Harris read in a book by Edith Hamilton).¹ Harris asserted that this was a matter of history and “every Bible scholar of note” knows it. You can imagine my consternation when, a few months later, *Time Magazine* ran an article by Bishop John A. T. Robinson (Yep, the same one that wrote “Honest to God”) in which he asserted that he now believed that all the books of the New Testament were written in the first century A.D. by the traditional authors and defied anyone to prove him wrong. Why the big change? He said that in school all they heard were the critical theories presented as fact and that no one bothered to look at the Early Church Father’s comments about how the Gospels were produced.² Apparently, with his new perspective, Robinson was soon excommunicated from the “Bible Scholar of note” club. A former Bultmannian scholar, Eta Linneman, also rejected much of what she had been a part of and returned to a more conservative view of Scripture – her books are worth reading.³

You know, if you start with the right assumptions and apply (hostile) Historical and Literary Criticism just right, you can also make a good argument that the skeptical Bible critics never really existed or actually wrote any of their own books during their lifetimes – if you want to!

¹ Sydney Harris “Christians Obligated to Know Their Own Bible” *Kalamazoo (MI) Gazette: Viewpoint*, (5 January, 1977).

² “The New Testament Dating Game” *Time* (March 21, 1977), p. 95.

³ Linnemann, Eta. Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Translated by Robert W. Yarbrough. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990; Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels. Translated by Robert W. Yarbrough. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.