

The Bankruptcy of Biblical Paradigm

The infamous opening line of this slim volume—“Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt”—defines the arc of Walter Wink’s scholarly career. Faced with a scholarly discipline that was no longer commensurate with, or even cognizant of, its primary purpose—the spiritual transformation of individuals and communities—Wink courageously named the elephant in the room and set himself the task of both delineating and demonstrating an alternative approach to biblical studies. Wink notes that the writers of the New Testament were writing “from faith to faith” with the intention of eliciting or strengthening faith. He then argues that modern historical critical study of the Bible has abandoned the intention of the scriptural texts by adopting a false stance of “objective neutrality” over against those texts. This professed “objective standpoint” from which historical critical scholars approach New Testament texts, Wink asserts, masks the scholars’ unavoidable but unquestioned subjectivity while negating the intention of the texts to address questions of faith arising out of the realities of life as it is lived. It also allows the biblical scholar to avoid being examined by the texts he or she examines, thereby subverting the intention of those texts to examine the examiner, to question the questioner, to interrogate the interrogator. Wink notes that the discipline’s legitimate concern for objectivity has devolved into the ideology of objectivism and thus ignores to its own peril the role of subjectivity—emotions, will, interests, or bias—in the encounter with the text. This, together with a certain “technologism” that elevates technique over text, thereby limiting the scope of questions that can be asked and answered, leads to a discipline that, in Wink’s view, has “outlived its usefulness as presently practiced.” This did not make him popular with the guild of biblical scholars.

Source: Wink 1973: Chapter 1

Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt.

I use “bankrupt” in the exact sense of the term. A business which goes bankrupt is not valueless, nor incapable of producing useful products. It still has an inventory of expensive parts, a large capital outlay, a team of trained personnel, a certain reputation, and usually, until the day bankruptcy is declared, a façade which appeared to most to be relatively healthy. The one thing wrong—and the only thing—is that it is no longer able to accomplish its avowed purpose for existence: to make money.

It is in this precise sense that one can speak of the historical critical method generally, and of its application to biblical studies in particular, as bankrupt. Biblical criticism has produced an inventory of thousands of studies on every question which has seemed amenable to its methods, with a host of additional possibilities still before it. It has a method which has proven itself in earlier historical periods to be capable of remarkable achievements. It has in its employ hundreds of competent, trained technicians. Biblical criticism is not bankrupt because it has run out of things to say or new ground to explore. It is bankrupt solely because it is incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.

How did biblical criticism become insolvent? Here are at least a few of the reasons.

1. The method as practiced was incommensurate with the intention of the texts.

The writers of the New Testament bore witness to events which had led them to faith. They wrote “from faith to faith,” to evoke or augment faith in their readers. Ostensibly, historical criticism is not hostile to these intentions, but should serve to make the same decision for faith or unfaith accessible across the gulf of centuries to readers today. In actual practice, however, this seldom happens, and for good reason. For the very essence of scientific and historical inquiry in modern times has been the suspension of evaluative judgments and participational involvement in the “object” of research. Such detached neutrality in matters of faith is not neutrality at all, but already a decision against responding. At the outset, questions of truth and meaning have been excluded, since they can only be answered participatively, in terms of a lived response. Insofar as they are retained at all, “truth” is reduced to facticity, and the text’s “meaning” is rendered by a paraphrase.

Such “objective neutrality” thus requires a sacrifice of the very questions the Bible seeks to answer. But if our questions do not anticipate a certain type of answer, how can we hope to receive it? If our methodology is not designed

to reveal meaning, the possibility that meaning might emerge is blocked in advance, through the manner in which the problem is stated. Having initially turned to the text seeking insights about living, we find ourselves ineluctably drawn by our method further and further from the place where the text might speak.

This detached, value-neutral, ahistorical point of view is, of course, an illusion. For all empirical work can be carried out only on the basis of certain meta-empirical, ontological, and metaphysical judgments, and the expectations and hypotheses which follow from them. "He who makes no decisions has no questions to raise and is not even able to formulate a tentative hypothesis which enables him to set a problem and to search history for its answer."¹

Historical criticism did operate, although covertly, on the basis of such meta-empirical underpinnings: a faith in reason and progress and an ontology of naïve realism. In the context of belief in progress, historical method became the means to delineate the development of ideas and institutions toward that historical apex modern times. It is clear in all this that the "objective standpoint" is none other than the historically conditioned place where we happen to be standing, and possesses no neutrality or detachment at all.

We will see later that the historical critical method had a vested interest in undermining the Bible's authority, that it operated as a background ideology for the demystification of religious tradition, that it required functional atheism for its practice, and that its attempted mastery of the object was operationally analogous to the myth of Satan and the legend of Faust. For the time being the point is solely that the fiction of "detachment" made vital relatedness to the content of the text impossible. By detaching the text from the stream of my existence, biblical criticism has hurled it into the abyss of an objectified past. Such a past is an infinite regress. No amount of devoted study can bring it back.

The biblical writers themselves never treated their own past in such a manner. Their past was a continual accosting, a question flung in their paths, a challenge, and a confrontation. But because the scholar has removed himself from view, no shadow from the past can fall across his path. He has insulated himself from the Bible's own concerns. He examines the Bible, but he himself is not examined—except by his colleagues in the guild! This disregard of the voices of the past, this systematic stopping of the ears and restraint of the will do not constitute objectivity but are instead the negation of the manifest intent of the subject matter.

The historical critical method has reduced the Bible to a dead letter. Our obeisance to technique has left the Bible sterile and ourselves empty. The further we have advanced in analysis the more the goal has receded from our

sight, so that today many of us might well say with Nietzsche, “Ich habe meine Gründe vergessen”—I have forgotten why I ever began.²

2. The ideology of objectivism drew historical criticism into a false consciousness.

Objectivism as used here refers to the academic ideal of detached observation of phenomena without interference by emotions, will, interests, or bias. It can be spoken of as an ideology because it does not correspond to reality and is incapable of realization. The error of objectivism as an ideology lies in its intellectualism, its blindness to the irrational or unconscious, and its separation of theory from practice. Its falsehood lies in the systematic repression of its error.

Objectivism is intellectualistic. Intellectualism, says Mannheim, is “a mode of thought which either does not see the elements in life and in thought which are based on will, interest, emotion, and *Weltanschauung*—or, if it does recognize their existence, treats them as though they were equivalent to the intellect and believes that they may be mastered by and subordinated to reason.”³ Intellectualism is characterized by a complete separation of theory from practice, of intellect from emotion, and finds emotionally determined thinking intolerable. When it encounters a mode of thinking which is necessarily set in an irrational context, as political or religious thought always is, the attempt is made so to construe the phenomena that the evaluative elements will appear separable from a residue of pure theory. Left obscured is the question of whether in fact the emotional is so intertwined with the rational as to involve even the categorical structure itself, thus making the sought-for isolation of the evaluative elements *de facto* impossible.⁴

Here the problem of the academy becomes unavoidable, with its endemic separation of theory from practice, mind from body, reason from emotion, knowledge from experience. Is anything but intellectualism possible when our questions do not arise primarily out of the struggle with concrete problems of life and society, from the blistering exposure to trial and error, from the need for wisdom in the ambiguous mash of events? Can historical criticism, practiced in the academy, ensnared in an objectivist ideology, ever do more than simply refer the data of the text away from an encounter with experience and back to its own uncontrolled premises?

In such a context biblical study is rendered innocuous from the start. Here we are trained to think in a framework which strives to negate every evaluation, every trace of mundane meaning, every proclivity toward a view of the whole. The result is a hermeneutic with whose categories not even the simplest life-process can be thought through. The outcome of biblical studies in the academy

is a trained incapacity to deal with the real problems of actual living persons in their daily lives.

Objectivism is not simply in error, however. It is a false consciousness. Error is unintentional. Falsehood knows but has sought to forget its own face. Objectivism is a false consciousness because evidence of its error is systematically repressed. It pretends detachment when in fact the scholar is attached to an institution with a high stake in the socialization of students and the preservation of society, and when he himself has a high stake in advancement in that institution by publication of his researches. It pretends to be unbiased when in fact the methodology carries with it a heavy rationalistic weight which by inner necessity tends toward the reduction of irrational, subjective, or emotional data to insignificance or invisibility. It pretends to search for “assured results,” “objective knowledge,” when in fact the method presumes radical epistemological doubt, which by definition devours each new spawn of “assured results” as a guppy swallows her children. It pretends to suspend evaluations, which is simply impossible, since research proceeds on the basis of questions asked and a ranked priority in their asking. But such judgments presuppose a system of values and an ontology of meanings which not only give weight to the questions but make it possible to ask them at all. Even the choice of syntax and vocabulary is a political act that defines and circumscribes the way “facts” are to be experienced—indeed, in a sense even creates the facts that can be studied.⁵ And finally, objectivism pretends to be neutral when in fact the scholar, like everyone else, has racial, sexual, and class interests to which he is largely blind and which are unconsciously reflected in his work. (Why, for example, do German scholars persist in using the offensive term “Spätjudentum,” as if Judaism ceased to exist with the rise of Christianity? Why are there so few women and Black biblical scholars in this country? Why has hermeneutical scholarship so long ignored the rich tradition of Black preaching?)

On the American scene the problem has been exacerbated by the struggle to gain standing for departments of religious studies in secular universities previously closed to all religious instruction. In order to dissociate religious studies from denominational and dogmatic stigmatization, it seemed necessary to assert the scientific character of the discipline. The descriptive approach became the magic key to academic respectability. This has in actual practice meant objectivism with a vengeance, and accounts at least in part for the virtual abandonment recently (regardless of theoretical leanings, which were often of the best sort) of the beachhead which Bultmann had established.

Objectivity is much to be desired. But objectivity must be separated off from the ideology of objectivism and given new footing. A new type of objectivity is attainable, not through the exclusion of evaluations, but through the critical awareness and proper use of them. Lest this be construed as counsel simply to try harder under the old presuppositions, let us be clear that what is demanded in the face of bankruptcy is not a pep talk to the sales force but new management. If all historical knowledge is relational knowledge, and can only be formulated with reference to the position of the observer, we are faced with the task of developing a radically different model for the role of the interpreter vis-à-vis the text.

3. Biblical studies increasingly fell prey to a form of technologism which regards as legitimate only those questions which its methods can answer.

Technique is absolutely essential in any field of inquiry. But technique is essentially value-blind. It depends for its functioning on orders given outside its area of competence. It is all the more crucial then that the technique employed be commensurate with its object, for techniques can only produce those results for which they are created. I have already argued above that the historical method as practiced has not been adequately commensurate with the biblical texts. In this case the carrying over of methods from the natural sciences has led to a situation where we no longer ask what we would like to know and what will be of decisive significance for the next step in personal or social development. Rather, we attempt to deal only with those complexes of facts which are amenable to historical method. We ask only those questions which the method can answer. We internalize the method's questions and permit a self-censorship of the questions intrinsic to our lives. Puffed with pretensions to "pure scholarship," this blinkered approach fails to be scholarly enough, precisely because it refuses to examine so much that is essential to understanding the intention of the text and our interest in reading it.

Preoccupation with technique leads to a self-perpetuating reductionist spiral. Existing technique determines the direction of further inquiry, including the developing of additional techniques, which themselves presuppose the previous techniques, ad infinitum. In this process there is no room for an examination of premises, nor is there any capacity to question the appropriateness of the techniques employed for answering the questions which the text might pose.

Technologism need not be disastrous, whether in oil production or in biblical criticism. But it must be subordinated—always, in every field, without exception—to an adequate hermeneutic. Yet, in spite of remarkable strides

in hermeneutical thought, biblical technologism reigns unchecked. The horse rides the horseman and the goal is not reached.

4. Biblical criticism became cut off from any community for whose life its results might be significant.

Historical biblical research, as long as it was situated in an antithetical position to orthodoxy, was the Wehrmacht of the liberal church. During this period its relationship to the vital centers of an entire community's life was crucial. Gradually, as success became assured, a shift took place. The community of reference and accountability became, not the liberal church, but the guild of biblical scholars. The guild, however, is not a community but a collective. It is simply a peer group on the model of any other professional guild, subject to the same virtues (preservation of high standards, rewards in terms of prestige to those deemed most worthy, centralization and dissemination of information, etc.) and vices (development of an "expert" ethos, invention of a technical esoteric language, repression of innovation, conformity to peer-group values) which characterize all other professional groups.

This removal of scholarship from a vital community had consequences disastrous for both. For the community it was disastrous because its own self-consciousness as a people under the Word was largely deprived of critical and constructive contributions. For scholarship it was disastrous because the questions asked of the texts were seldom ones on which human lives hinged, but those most likely to win a hearing from the guild. Historical criticism sought to free itself from the community in order to pursue its work untrammelled by censorship and interference. With that hard-won freedom it also won isolation from any conceivable significance. For since truth is not absolute, but only approximate and relational, its relevance can only emerge in the particularity of a given community's struggles for integrity and freedom.

Here the crisis in biblical studies links up with the crisis in the churches generally, since they themselves have become problematic as the locus of Christian community. For many liberal Protestant scholars in America, the most urgent question has become that of finding a context in which their interpretations of the Bible might have significance—or, stated more fundamentally, a context which would give that interpretation significance. Here, as at every other point, the crisis in biblical scholarship is seen as an epiphenomenon of a far more comprehensive crisis in the culture itself. . . .

To say that biblical criticism has now . . . become bankrupt is simply to summarize the entire discussion to this point. It was based on an inadequate method, married to a false objectivism, subjected to uncontrolled technologism,

separated from a vital community, and has outlived its usefulness as presently practiced. Whether or not it has any future at all depends on its adaptability to a radically altered situation.

Notes

1. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936), 89.
2. *Ibid.*, 20.
3. *Ibid.*, 122.
4. *Ibid.*, 123.
5. R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 62.