

Some Reflections on the Historical-Critical Approach to Scripture
Germain Grisez, *Flynn* Professor of Christian Ethics
Mount St. Mary's College; Emmitsburg, Maryland
17 November 1984

Because this paper is intended to start a discussion, I articulate quite bluntly views which in part I hold only tentatively. So, though I am prepared to argue for every statement in what follows, I also am prepared to be corrected by those who have given more thought to many of these matters.

I agree with Dr. X.'s important initial clarification that there is no single coherent way of studying Scripture referred to by the phrase: *the historical-critical method*. Rather, this phrase signifies a collection of assumptions, techniques, and nonformal inference rules. Among the disparate and not entirely coherent items in this collection, the unifying factor is merely sociological: all these assumptions, techniques, and nonformal inference rules can be used without fear or shame by those who wish to obtain and keep the status of respectable members of that part of the academic establishment which is interested in Scripture.

Obviously, this criterion is no guarantee that every item in the collection has earned its place by its logical value for attaining truth about the subject matter. So, the various elements in the collection ought to be disengaged and critically examined one by one. This paper offers a few examples of the sort of criticism of the historical-critical method that I think is needed.

Raymond E. Brown, S.S., in his book, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), tells us that the principal modern objection or chief scriptural argument against the virginal conception is that the "high" christology implied by it is incompatible with the widely accepted critical theory of a gradual development of New Testament christology. Brown says (53):

The explicit and high christology of the infancy narratives centering on the virginal conception is hard to reconcile with the widely accepted critical theory of a gradual development of explicit NT christology, unless the virginal conception is considered to be a late christological theologoumenon. If the christology associated with virginal conception was known from the first moments of Jesus' earthly career, the whole critical theory falls apart. This difficulty is not insuperable if scholars can work out a distinction between *the fact* of virginal conception and *the christology* that surrounds it in the infancy narratives, but that has not yet been done in a satisfactory way.

In other words, if the virginal conception really happened, the accepted critical theory of development of New Testament christology is falsified. But the accepted theory must not be falsified. Therefore, the virginal conception did not really happen.

Brown does not unqualifiedly assert the premises and conclusion of this argument, and he allows for a possible theoretical development to overcome the difficulty. Hence, what follows should not be taken as an attempt to convict Brown of heresy. Rather, it is an attempt to look at the logic of the argument.

Most treatments of inductive logic say that when data conflict with a hypothesis offered to explain them, the satisfactoriness of the hypothesis should be questioned. For example, the

observations which conflicted with the Ptolemaic theory should have led late-medieval scientists to doubt its soundness and to look for a better theory, as Copernicus did. Those who clung to Ptolemy's theory despite the observations inconsistent with it are usually considered dogmatists with extrascientific axes to grind. Yet their logic was the same as that of the principal argument against the virginal conception. The Ptolemaic theory was widely accepted and it would fall apart if observations inconsistent with it were accepted as veridical.

Of course, there are times when a very well-grounded theory deserves such confidence that reasonable people are more inclined to doubt apparently conflicting data than to abandon the theory. Even if there is no way to impugn the data, they may be set aside as "anomalies" and the theory maintained in spite of them. Is that strategy appropriate for those who deny the virginal conception because of its inconsistency with the widely accepted critical theory of a gradual development of explicit New Testament christology?

No. As Brown himself explains (46–47), one can argue forcefully from many New Testament data that the historical Jesus came to his ministry well aware of his own identity and mission. This awareness can be plausibly explained in part if he was indeed virginally conceived and informed of that fact by his parents. Thus, the widely accepted critical theory of gradual development of high christology is challenged not only by the story of his virginal conception but by a substantial set of other New Testament data, all of which have to be explained away if the widely held critical theory is to be maintained.

Why, then, is a theory so logically vulnerable used so confidently as the premise of what Brown considers the principal scriptural argument against the virginal conception? I think it is only because the supposition that high christology develops gradually satisfies two conditions: (1) it provides some naturalistic explanation of the high christology present in the New Testament, while (2) avoiding explaining it by miracles or other direct divine interventions in history.

Logically, a naturalistic explanation, if it covers the data, should be preferred according to the simplicity principle—that is, Occam's razor. However, if the preceding analysis is correct, the precise ground for the credibility of the widely held critical theory of gradual development of high christology is that this theory is consistent with the denial of the historicity of supernatural occurrences such as the virginal conception of Jesus. Yet the principal scriptural argument against the virginal conception of Jesus simply is that it would be inconsistent with this theory. Thus, the argument is circular, and its circularity explains why the theory of gradual development of high christology enjoys immunity from the canons of inductive logic. The theory of gradual development is not so much a conclusion established by historical-critical method as an *a priori* assumption in that approach.

Another example of the criticism I think should be made of some elements of the historical-critical approach can begin from another book by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981). In this book, Brown claims (16) that "critical investigation points to religious limitations and even errors" in the Bible. He cites as an example passages in Job (14:13–22) and Sirach (14:16–17, 17:22–23, 38:21) which he thinks

“deny an afterlife.” Since I am not here interested in refuting Brown’s contention about inerrancy but in the logic of his argument, I will deal only with his reference to Job.

Marvin H. Pope, in his commentary, *Job*, Anchor Bible, 15 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), interprets the passage in Job differently than Brown does. Pope says (108) that Job 14:13–15 gropes toward the idea of an afterlife and (111) that Job 14:21–22 affirms that though “man is deprived of knowledge by death, he is still subject to pain.” So, if Pope is right, Brown is wrong when he says that this passage denies an afterlife. But, again, I am not interested in this error, if it is one. Rather, I am concerned about Brown’s way of interpreting this text.

The entire passage appears within quotation marks; it is a speech on the lips of the character Job, who is one of several participants in a dialogue. At a later stage in the dialogue, another character, Yahweh, begins to answer Job by saying: “Who is this that obscures counsel with words devoid of knowledge?” (Job 38:2), and at a still later stage, the author of the dialogue portrays Job repenting and recanting in dust and ashes (Job 42:6). Thus, although Job is the title character of this book, the statements he makes earlier in the dialogue, including the one Brown cites, should not be considered assertions of the book’s author.

Brown’s way of interpreting this text is defective because he ignores the canon of the historical-critical approach, which Dr. X. exemplifies by his discussion of the book of Jonah, to determine the literary genre of a book before trying to evaluate the truth claims made by its author. The question is: Why did Brown ignore this canon and the significance of the fact that Job is a dialogue rather than a scholastic treatise on eschatology?

I think the answer is that this use of Job by Brown occurs not in the context of a serious attempt at exegesis but in a polemic against those who defend the inerrancy of Scripture. To assert Scripture’s inerrancy is not acceptable within the historical-critical approach; all respectable Scripture scholars either admit Brown’s thesis that critical investigation points to errors in the Bible or carefully keep their conservative belief in inerrancy to themselves. Consequently, Brown exemplifies the view opposed to his by referring to an article in what he calls the (17) “ultraconservative Catholic *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*.” He says that this article’s author, a convert, “seeks (by a literalist interpretation of Church documents) to introduce into Catholicism a fundamentalist view of inerrancy similar to that which has vitiated the sincere efforts of Protestant evangelicals.”

“Ultraconservative,” “literalist,” and “fundamentalist”—this is not the language of logical criticism but the rhetoric of dismissal by labeling. In the contemporary academic world, the use of such rhetoric is common in every field of scholarship, and one finds examples of it in the writings of many Scripture scholars. As a technique Scripture scholars can use without fear or shame—without jeopardizing their status in their scholarly community—such rhetoric is an important but logically indefensible element of the historical-critical approach.

At this point, I’ll let Ray Brown rest for a while. For a third attempt to criticize elements of the historical-critical approach, I turn to Dr. X.’s handling of the three accounts of Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law.



Dr. X. emphasizes the many small differences between the three accounts. He seems to regard every difference as significant. I think there is an underlying assumption that nothing in Scripture is contingent—in other words, that the Scripture scholar confronts no inexplicable data. In carrying out exegesis on this assumption, differences among the three texts which could easily be read as expressing consistent propositions are read as if they pointed to inconsistencies among the three views. Thus, Dr. X. tells us that his schema for the event “fits about 65 percent of the gospel narrative material.” Also, his exegesis includes the claim that the mention of the woman’s service, which completes all three narratives, has a hidden meaning: “The notion that she served indicates discipleship.”

Now, it seems to me that the assumption that data are intelligible is a necessary heuristic principle in every inquiry, but not an absolute metaphysical truth. If it were an absolute metaphysical truth, Hegel would be right: The real would be rational and the rational real; there would be no free creation by God, no free choices by us, no chance occurrences in the world, and no irreducible concreteness about bodily reality.

Of course, Dr. X. does not say that the intelligibility assumption is an absolute metaphysical truth, and he can argue that his procedure does not entail that thesis. Moreover, a work of literature, after all, expresses its author’s interpretations, and so one can expect it to be more consistently intelligible than the world at large. I concede that point, yet I still think that the intelligibility assumption is operating here as more than a heuristic device, because the exegesis seems to me to be overconfident in affirming intelligibility—that is, in finding meaning.

For example, when Dr. X. argues that the notion that the cured woman served indicates discipleship, his premises are that many people Jesus healed became disciples and that disciples served their masters. But these premises can lead to the desired conclusion only by way of the generalization that anyone who serves is a disciple. That hardly seems plausible.

Of course, for all we know, Peter’s mother-in-law may have been among Jesus’ disciples. But while the remainder of the New Testament tells us a good deal about Jesus, Peter, and their relationship with one another, it tells nothing more about this woman. If the narrators meant to convey anything about discipleship by this story, they must have been extraordinarily subtle writers who assumed that their readers would be equally subtle, infinitely patient, and quite enthusiastic about literary puzzles.

Hence, it seems to me one should settle for less intelligibility than Dr. X. anticipates. The incident can be read as significant primarily for Peter. For him, it must have been unforgettable. Jesus came with Peter and others to his home to have a bite of lunch; his mother-in-law was quite ill; Jesus ordered her illness to go away and helped her up from her sickbed; she recovered so quickly and completely that she was able to serve the lunch. “Serving” here is not unintelligible, but its significance is quite limited if we consider the

narratives as accounts of an actual miracle which happened to be occasioned by the vulgar, routine, bodily necessity of eating.

To this, Dr. X. might reply that I am making a mistake in thinking that the gospel writers are telling us what really happened that day at lunch time, whereas according to the historical-critical approach it is impossible and not important to know what happened. True, something happened, but the narratives are theological interpretations, which convey noncontingent truths, not statements of an event including its merely contingent aspects.

Whether we think this reply satisfactory depends on what we think of Dr. X.'s distinction between the story and its three interpretative narrations. He distinguishes the story or event—that Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law—from the threefold narration, which we have only because there were three acts of narrating in three different situations.

I think we must agree that there is some sort of distinction to be drawn between the event (or, as I would rather say, the action) and the narratives about it. It is only of the latter that I would use the word "story," and so I would like to state the distinction by saying there was an action done and we have three stories about it. Also, we plainly know about the action only by reading and comparing these three stories. However, it does not follow that the action itself was limited to some minimal residue which remains after critical acid has been applied to the stories—some least common denominator of grey facticity which serves as the vehicle of the theologically rich and important stories.

For the differences among the stories logically add not only meaning to what is common, they also make reference to various aspects of the state of affairs which either would not be referred to at all or would be referred to differently in a summary of what is common to the three stories. Thus, Jesus either went alone to Peter's house or he went only with Peter, or he went with Peter and others. Nothing in the three stories is at odds with the third possibility obtaining. If it does, there are elements not only of meaning but of reference in Mark missing from Matthew and Luke.

Similarly, either Jesus only touched the woman or he only took hold of her hand to help her up or he only rebuked the fever or his action involved some two or all three of these elements. In case the last possibility obtained, so did the others, but not vice versa. None of the stories attests to the obtaining of the last possibility, but none conflicts with it.

The whole of each story, including what is common to the three, interprets the action, in the sense that the whole of each story picks out some aspects of the complex state of affairs and claims that these aspects obtained. Some of the differences among the stories might, and almost certainly do, depend upon the three narrators' different interests and purposes, the different places this story has within their larger narrations, and so forth. Such aspects make it appropriate to call the three stories different interpretations of the action.

However, it would be a mistake to suppose that all differences among the stories result from differences in the understanding, intent, or other personal factors among narrators. For different stories about the same action also can differ because of accidental factors. For instance, if Jesus' action in healing Peter's mother-in-law involved both deeds and words,

Matthew's and Mark's stories could be based on the report of a deaf but sharp-sighted observer and Luke's on the report of a blind observer with good hearing. Or, more plausibly, different observers or narrators might by habit or various accidental aspects of the working of the nervous system be more visually or more orally oriented.

Someone might suppose that the preceding explanation is part of a strategy of reconciling different scriptural texts, out of a nervous concern about inerrancy, which would not admit that the three stories might include some pairs of contradictory propositions. In fact, I do not think that a reasonable reading of the three stories uncovers any contradictions, and I do think that pressing differences among the stories to create contradictions is logically groundless and exegetically perverse. Moreover, fundamentalist excesses take nothing away from the legitimacy and need to reconcile different stories when we interpret Scripture, just as we do when we interpret other documents in which we find different stories about the same actions.

However, the preceding explanation is not offered as part of a strategy of reconciliation. Moreover, it is plain that there are plenty of pairs of contradictory propositions in Scripture. (Incidentally, it seems to me that this fact in no way conflicts with the Catholic doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture.)

My concern here is with a fairly basic point of semantics: Any interpretation of an action must refer to that action. If a proposed interpretation includes references to states of affairs which do not obtain, to that extent the proposed interpretation is faulty. Faulty interpretations, insofar as they are faulty, fall short of being interpretations. Narrators who tell stories knowing that the states of affairs they refer to did not obtain either are liars or tellers of fictional tales, not interpreters.

If Matthew's account said: "Jesus, without uttering a word, touched her hand, and the fever left her," and if Luke's account said: "Jesus, standing ten feet from her, rebuked the fever and it left her," the two stories would refer to different and incompatible states of affairs. One story, at most, would be true in this respect. If the difference arose because the narrators added to the evidence for their own purposes, to that extent they would be liars or fiction writers, not interpreters (and since they pretend *not* to be fiction writers, we should be left with having to consider them liars).

If the difference arose because of someone else's dishonesty or due to honest mistakes in observation and/or communication, the narrators would perhaps have included one or the other version because it was the only one available to them. Or they might have selected the more plausible among the available versions. Only in this last case, which is common enough, do the factors which make a story an interpretation affect the narrator's judgment about which of two contradictory propositions to include in the story. But even in this case, the honest interpreter would suppose that the state of affairs picked out by the more plausible version did obtain and that the other did not.

In sum, I think that Dr. X. makes too strong an assumption about the intelligibility of the data on which he and other practitioners of the historical-critical method approach works. It seems to me that this approach mistakenly overlooks the accidental factors which contribute

to what we find in Scripture. In doing this, an unnecessary gap is opened between the stories and the actions they tell us about.

This brings me to a fourth example of an element of the historical-critical method which needs criticism—namely, the readiness to deny the historicity even of aspects of scriptural stories which are vital to the central doctrines of Christian faith. For instance, a footnote in the *New American Bible* on Acts 2:1–41 calls in question the historicity of the Pentecost manifestation:

It is likely that the narrative telescopes events that took place over a period of time and on a less dramatic scale. The Twelve were not originally in a position to proclaim publicly the messianic office of Jesus without incurring immediate reprisal from those religious authorities in Jerusalem who had brought about Jesus's death precisely to stem the rising tide in his favor. But according to the narrative, the public proclamation was made at once, and "there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

What is at stake here is Jesus' sending of the Spirit, the apostles' receiving of the Spirit, and the reality of the Spirit's work in the salvation of Christians and the growth of the kingdom. This reality simply is not reducible to some naturalistic, gradual process, and if the reality is to be allowed anywhere, the Pentecost story might as well be accepted as veridical.

Had the apostles not received the gift of the Spirit or had they lost this gift due to infidelity, then undoubtedly they would have reasoned that they could not carry out Jesus' mandate to proclaim the gospel without immediately incurring reprisal from the religious authorities in Jerusalem who had brought about his death. But if they did receive the gift of the Spirit and if they were faithful, why doubt that they considered themselves to be in a position to carry out Jesus' mandate, that there was a supernatural manifestation at Pentecost, and that the apostles explained it along the lines narrated?

The hypothesis proposed in the footnote is so weak that it looks more like a rationalization than a reason for doubting the historicity of the Pentecost story. The authorities, who had some difficulty securing Roman authorization and cooperation in the execution of Jesus (see Jn 18:28–19:22), doubtless would have found and did find Pilate unwilling to do additional crucifixions in an effort to stem a movement which to him probably seemed more religious intoxication than political insurgence. At the same time, the new covenant did rather quickly acquire many adherents.

If the Pentecost story is not veridical, we must suppose that to win these adherents, the apostles went about Jerusalem, drew people off into corners, and cautiously whispered, so as not to be overheard by any Roman or Jewish informer, something like: "You know Jesus, who was crucified some days ago, after we all abandoned his cause as hopeless because we were afraid to stand by him? Well, we feel pretty sure he is not really dead and that his cause lives on. You see, we've had this remarkable experience. Uh, hold it a second until these people go by. They could be informers. Now, as I was saying"

The *New American Bible* footnote I am criticizing meets the standards of the historical-critical approach. The person who wrote it need not fear being shunned by fellow Scripture

scholars, need not be ashamed of naïveté. But this note seems to me to reflect uncritical conformism to inherently questionable assumptions, which a Catholic exegete ought to confidently reject in the light of faith.

For faith teaches that supernatural factors, including direct divine interventions such as miracles, do occur and that they are essential elements in God's self-revelation. Faith also teaches that the Holy Spirit asserts what the human authors of Scripture assert, with the result that these assertions are uniformly true. Since the author of Acts seems to assert the central propositions of the Pentecost story and since nothing in Scripture itself or the uses to which the Church has put this passage support the contrary view, the writer of the note should not have been so ready to deny the historicity of the Pentecost story.

For a fifth, and final, example of an element of the historical-critical approach which seems to me to need criticism, I return to Raymond E. Brown, S.S., in this case to his commentary, *The Gospel according to John (xiii–xxi)*, Anchor Bible, 29A (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980).

Brown translates (1018) John 20:23: "If you forgive men's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you hold them they are held fast." In his commentary, he notes (1041) that the meaning of the power to forgive sins has been divisive in Christianity. He cites the Council of Trent's rejection of certain readings of the text, but adds (1041):

Many modern Roman Catholic scholars do not think that this declaration of their Church necessarily concerns or defines the meaning that *the evangelist* attached to the verse when he wrote it; the import of the declaration is to insist against critics that the Sacrament of Penance is a legitimate (even if later) exercise and specification of the power of forgiveness conferred in this verse.

Brown's conclusion (1044):

In summary, we doubt that there is sufficient evidence to confine the power of forgiving and holding of sin, granted In John xx 23, to a specific exercise of power in the Christian community, whether that be admission to Baptism or forgiveness in Penance. These are but partial manifestations of a much larger power, namely, the power to isolate, repel, and negate evil and sin, a power given to Jesus in his mission by the Father and given in tum by Jesus through the Spirit to those whom he commissions.

Brown's conciliatory interpretation does not seem to be a good one, because there is nothing in this text about the larger power to which he refers, while there is specific reference to the contrary pair—forgiving, holding. These contraries obviously can refer to what the minister does in the sacrament of penance. But what do they refer to in all other cases in which Jesus' followers are called to isolate, repel, and negate evil and sin? To begin with, what do they refer to in the ministering of baptism?

However, the point I want to make has to do not so much with the implausibility of Brown's reading as with his brushing aside of the way Trent interprets this text. Trent says:

Now the Lord instituted the sacrament of penance then chiefly when, having risen from the dead, he breathed on his disciples, saying: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (DS 1670/894; Jn 20:22–23).

Whatever the unnamed Catholic scholars to whom Brown refers think of that, it seems clear that Trent's use of the text demands that it be read as referring specifically to the sacrament of penance.

It would have been in line with Catholic teaching had Brown interpreted this text in accord with Trent's use of it and invoked the authority of Trent as a good reason for accepting that interpretation. For, as Vatican II teaches: "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ" (DV 10). In mentioning the living teaching office (magisterium) of the Church here, Vatican II incorporates by reference the teaching of Pius XII in *Humani generis*, that theology must defer to the magisterium in interpreting the deposit of faith and that defined doctrines, understood *in the sense in which they have been defined by the Church*, should serve in theology as explanatory principles (see DS 3886/2314).

However, to treat the magisterium's doctrinal use of the Bible as a norm for interpreting it is not in accord with the historical-critical approach. Catholic Scripture scholars who defer to the magisterium in their professional work cannot afford to say that they are doing so or to be too obvious about it, for such deference is at odds with an important element of the historical-critical approach. This element, dear to the academic establishment at large, is that in matters which fall within their competence, the judgment of scholars is supreme and may not be judged by any authority apart from the scholarly establishment itself.

It seems to me that to follow this standard in matters of theology in general, including the study of Scripture, is implicitly to deny the unique and irreducible character of divine revelation, of authoritative testimony by which this revelation is kept alive through time and space, and of Scripture as a set of expressions of such authoritative testimony. For if the unique and irreducible character of revelation and its availability to us is affirmed, then we must hold that the same Holy Spirit who reveals divine truth and love both is a certain gift of truth to the leaders of the Church in their handing on of revelation and is the one who inspires the human authors of those expressions of revelation which the Church recognizes as God's word.

Of course, if I am right about this, Catholic Scripture scholars should challenge a central element of the historical-critical approach. By definition, that is a shameful, frightening thing to do. One who does it is sure to be called an ultraconservative and fundamentalist, and risks losing his or her status in the academic establishment. But a person cannot serve two masters, and so one must decide for whom and to what one will bear witness.

