

1-2019

Question 15 - What is the position of Higher Criticism in regards to the Bible?

Harold Willmington
Liberty University, hwillmington@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/questions_101



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Willmington, Harold, "Question 15 - What is the position of Higher Criticism in regards to the Bible?" (2019). *101 Most Asked Questions*. 35.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/questions_101/35

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the 101 Most Asked Questions About the Bible at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in 101 Most Asked Questions by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

15. What is the position of Higher Criticism in regards to the Bible?

In answering this question one must begin by distinguishing Higher Criticism from that of Lower Criticism. The former is destructive in nature while the latter is constructive.

Consider the words of R. Laird Harris:

“If you go to Washington, D.C., you can see in the Archives building the original Declaration of Independence. It is carefully preserved under glass, away from strong light, so that it will last a long time. You can still see the signatures of John Hancock and the other signers. Many people see this exhibit every day. But really it is of no special value except as a curiosity, for we have plenty of very accurate copies of the Declaration.

“In the case of the Old Testament, we no longer have the original documents written by Moses, Isaiah, Ezra and the others. They lived a long time ago and the ravages of time plus wars, persecutions, and neglect have destroyed the originals. But we have copies. The question before us in this chapter is, how good are our copies? How close are our copies to that which was written by David and others under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?

“This is what we call textual criticism. It studies the reliability of the text. It is to be sharply distinguished from destructive higher criticism, which argues, usually on subjective grounds, that certain passages in the books were inserted by a later author, that the books were not written by the author who claimed to write them, and that the books are generally untrustworthy. Higher criticism has brought a wave of disbelief in the Bible. Textual criticism is quite different. It is the study of the copying of ancient manuscripts. As such it is a little technical and requires us to put ourselves in the shoes (or sandals) of an ancient scribe to see how he worked.” (*Can I Trust My Bible*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1966, pp. 119, 120)

In essence it may be said that Higher Criticism, having previously assumed the Bible is not the Word of God, approaches it with axe in hand determining if at all possible to utterly destroy it! Lower Criticism however has but one goal, that is, to determine the original text.

The higher critic would thus scornfully reject the early date of Daniel (indeed, ever questioning his very existence), the unity of Isaiah, etc.

But their favorite whipping boy is the Pentateuch, as seen in the Documentary Hypothesis.

“The Documentary Hypothesis developed in the 19th century in association with the work of Hupfeld, K. H. Graf, and Julius Wellhausen, resulted in the analysis of the Pentateuch into four or more documents usually labeled J (Jahwistic), E (Elohistic), (Deuteronomic), and P (Priestly).”

(*Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, Mo., 1983, p. 144)

In essence, the Documentary Hypothesis, without the slightest evidence, boldly concludes Moses did not write the Pentateuch (in spite of repeated scriptural statements saying he did (see Deut. 31:24; Josh. 8:31; John 1:17), but that it represents a forgery, produced by at least four separate sources.

Jewish historian and novelist Herman Wouk, a man well versed in the religion and culture of his people has written concerning the Documentary Hypothesis:

"I have read Wellhausen's *Prolegomena*, and I have checked all his textual references in the Old Testament in Hebrew. It may well be that I am the last man on earth who will ever accomplish this feat. The book is a museum piece now, and even young Bible scholars are not required to plow through it. But I thought I owed it to the readers of this discussion to perform the task. I will try to describe the book, which was for a while a sort of inside-out Bible for non-believers."

Wellhausen starts by announcing his grand theme: the forging priests, the non-existent tabernacle, and the phony doctrine of central worship. Then he plunges into his main task: getting the Bible to retell its story according to Wellhausen, in its own words.

His method is simple, but the working out in detail is grandiose. Whatever passages of Scripture support his thesis, or at least do not oppose it, are authentic. Wherever the text contradicts him, the verses are spurious. His attack on each verse that does not support him is violent. He shows bad grammar, or internal inconsistency, or corrupt vocabulary, or jerkiness of continuity, every time. There is no passage he cannot explain away or annihilate. If he has to change the plain meaning of Hebrew words he does that too. He calls this "conjectural emendation."

"The puzzle today is how such a work ever captured, even for a few decades, a serious scholastic field. But the history of science shows that any vigorously asserted hypothesis can have a good run, in the absence of solid facts. The main thing, probably, was that in 1875 evolution was in the air. The battles over Darwin were still being fought, but it was obvious who was going to win. A theory that imposed evolution on Old Testament religion radiated chic and excitement, even though it stood the Bible on its head. Wellhausen's job of documentation, shrill and twisted though it was, lacking any scientific precision, nevertheless was overpowering in its sheer mass of minute scholarly detail. His construction lasted, with increasing shakiness, until the 1930s. It still lingers to some extent in popular culture, which does not turn on a dime. Serious Bible scholarship has dropped it." (*This Is My God*, pp. 275-276)