

# History of Biblical Criticism

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## Definition of “criticism”:

the scientific investigation of literary documents (as the Bible) in regard to such matters as origin, text, composition, or history.

Criticisms of the Bible are in the sense of careful analyses; there is no negative connotation.

## Church History of Biblical Criticism<sup>1</sup>

Until the late 1700s, most Christians had a simple conservative understanding of both the Old and New Testaments. For example, people believed that the New Testament gave a clear and accurate account of the life of the historical Jesus.

This changed in the late 1800s with the advent of **historical criticism** of the New Testament in Protestant circles. Scripture books were submitted to the same kind of historical and literary analysis as other ancient literature.

The Church (Pope **Leo XIII**, 1893) initially insisted on using traditional interpretations of scriptural passages. This view spared Catholics a problem that would trouble many Protestants in relation to human evolution. It pointed out that the biblical authors who shared the “scientific” views of their times do not teach answers to the problems raised by the natural sciences of our times.

In the early 1900s many scholars were saying that the Old and New Testaments were not simply history. This caused conservative Protestants to band together to protect “the fundamentals” by insisting on the literal historicity of everything described in the Scriptures—hence the name “**fundamentalism**.”

The Roman Pontifical Commission in about 1910 rejected most of the positions taken by contemporary Protestant academicians.

Suddenly the Catholic position changed in 1943. Pope **Pius XII** judged it was safe for Catholic scholars to take up the methods that were previously forbidden. It was recognized that the Bible includes many different literary forms, not just history.

In 1948 the **Pontifical Biblical Commission** stated that the Pentateuch, rather than being composed at one time by Moses, was composed from sources and developed in the course of history. While the early chapters of Genesis (including the Adam and Eve story) relate fundamental truths, they do so in figurative language and do not contain history in a modern sense. Within the past decade, the Book of Exodus has also come under discussion as to whether the exodus from Egypt historically happened.

These concepts became the basis of the final Vatican II document on scripture (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation—**Dei Verbum**— <http://christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/v5.html>)

The Gospels, while retaining the sense of the sayings of Jesus, were not necessarily expressing them literally.

In the southern and southwestern United States, fundamentalist and literalist preachers defend the word-for-word historicity of the Bible—they reject much modern Catholic and mainline Protestant explanations. See the Overview section of [http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr\\_otbk.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_otbk.htm)

Because of much being read into the Bible in its early interpretation, attention was turned on the authors by focusing on the historical background of the Bible. Thus, historical-critical movement began by considering what the author meant since he was affected by his historical, cultural, and religious settings.

Today, attention is being focused on the receiver of the message. New methods of criticism reveal that the way the text is understood depends to a large extent upon the sociopolitical and religious perspectives of the interpreter. The oppressed view the message differently than the comfortable.

Scriptures are more than literary works—they are inspired tradition of an ongoing believing community.

The most recent (1993) Church document on the Bible is **The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church** by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, available online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PBCINTER.HTM>. A very important part for we Catholics in Oklahoma who live within a fundamentalist culture is found in Part I, Section F.

## Summary of *Dei Verbum*

### Vatican II Council’s goal

- set forth authentic doctrine on divine revelation
- and how it’s handed on

### God chose to reveal himself to man through

- Adam & Eve, Abraham, Prophets, Jesus
- Revelation is complete!

### Revelation handed on to

- Apostles, bishops, priests, deacons, catechists

### Handed on as Sacred Deposit of

- Sacred Tradition (doctrine, life, worship)
- Sacred Scripture (came from Tradition)

### Sacred Scripture is inspired

- By Holy Spirit
- Through men with their powers & limitations
- Writing only what God wanted
- Inspired parts are for *our salvation*
- Using literary forms of their times
- (not written down in Bible while being dictated directly by God)

### We must interpret them

- In our time/culture
- Using context of whole scripture

<sup>1</sup> R.E. Brown, *The Fundamentalist Challenge*, Catholic Update CU 0590, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1990.

<http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0590.asp>