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Candida R. Moss
University of Notre Dame

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Hubristic Specialists: Catholic Responses to Higher Biblical Criticism

Candida R. Moss

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM as it takes place within specific denominational contexts is, to my mind, interesting not only to members of those groups, but also to anyone who wants to understand the history of the guild and the history of scholarship, as well as those who want to understand the history of ecclesial relations with the academy.

I want to state at the outset that I am a Roman Catholic historical critic. This may not seem to be noteworthy; after all, a relatively large number of high-profile Roman Catholic historical critics are in the academy today. However, it is important for me to identify myself because in official documents and in the intraecclesial conversation about biblical scholarship in the Roman Catholic Church, there is at least an implicit distinction between biblical interpretation in general (which includes theological interpretations, academic publications, and homilies) and historical criticism. The magisterial work of luminaries like Raymond Brown and John Meier should not lead us to believe that the Catholic Church's relationship to historical criticism is either unproblematic or settled.¹

1. In keeping with the subject matter of this workshop and because only historical criticism sparks controversy, I am going to restrict my comments to higher criticism. Thus in this paper biblical scholarship should be understood to mean historical criticism.

For many Roman Catholics, however, and in many theology departments at Roman Catholic universities, historical criticism is considered something separate from and subordinate to theologically grounded study of the Bible. In his biography *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was published under the name Joseph Ratzinger, then-Pope Benedict XVI describes his work in the following way: “I have merely tried to go beyond purely historical-critical exegesis,” he writes, “so as to apply new methodological insights that allow us to offer a properly theological interpretation of the Bible.”² The statement in many ways encapsulates the very ambivalent relationship that the Catholic Church has had with biblical scholarship in the past three hundred years. Historical criticism is here presented as something that can and indeed should be “gone beyond.” It is portrayed as a chronologically constrained discipline, one that is—in distinction to Catholic Church teaching about the church—the product of its time and ultimately is subordinated to “proper theology,” of which historical criticism is presumably not a part.

The characterization of historical criticism as somehow separate from the rest of theological inquiry is not limited to Ratzinger’s biblically focused writings. On the contrary, he views them as difficult upstarts unwilling to know their place. In his “On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” he calls the historical method to a humble self-limitation by which it can mark out its own proper space.³ Cardinal Henri de Lubac, a colleague and ally of Joseph Ratzinger in the post-Vatican II era, made a very similar comment about modern biblical critics when he remarked that “they are primarily specialists, and their function has become very necessary and very important during the last few centuries. They must realize (and this realization is something they have occasionally lacked) that their very specialization imposes limitations on them; that their ‘science’ thus cannot be the whole of scriptural science; but they are not required, in

2. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxiii.

3. Joseph Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on the Bible and the Church*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 7.

their role as scientific exegetes, to give us the whole of scriptural science; and they should not even aspire to do so.”⁴

The view that historical critics are audacious, lacking in self-awareness, uppity, and ultimately inadequate is an interesting one. Historical criticism is an intellectual attendant to the proper scriptural work of the church and is repeatedly “other-ed” by de Lubac and Ratzinger as something external. To understand why it is that historical criticism is characterized in this way it is necessary to look—albeit briefly and incompletely—at the history of the church’s interactions with historical criticism. What I would like to do in the rest of my presentation, therefore, is briefly discuss the history of the church’s engagement with historical criticism as a discipline, review the ways the church has responded to and adapted historical critical methodologies, and then finally consider those areas that continue to be a no-go for the church and what we might do about that.

History of the Catholic Church and higher criticism

The Catholic Church’s animosity toward historical-critical methods is well documented, but it was not inevitable—in the first place, the Catechism of the Catholic Church seems to be in alliance with many of the principles of historical-critical methodology when it reads: “In order to discover the sacred authors’ intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current. For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression” (par. 110). From the perspective of the historian: So far, so good.

Second, the historical response by Catholic scholars to the new methodologies of higher criticism has not always been negative. In fact, the seventeenth-century scholar Richard Simon, credited by

4. Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition* (Spring Valley, NY: Herder & Herder, 2000), 58n9.

historiographer William Baird as “the founder of modern biblical criticism,” was an Oratorian monk who was ordained to the priesthood in 1670. While he engaged in skirmishes with Jesuits, Jansenists, Protestants, and the Roman Catholic hierarchy over the publication of his *Critical History of the Text of the New Testament*,⁵ Simon’s ultimate conclusion about the nature of the New Testament was that it was not threatened by inconsistencies or minutiae. A number of important Roman Catholic exegetes, in particular in Tübingen—Johann Sebastian von Drey, Johann Adam Möhler, and others—made large contributions to the study of text criticism.⁶ There is a lengthy and established tradition of Roman Catholic historical critics, but they are dwarfed in our scholarly memory by their more impressive Protestant colleagues. In other words, the divisive relationship that led us to the current deeply ambivalent state of affairs was not at all a foregone conclusion.

The problem was that new intellectual movements of the eighteenth century that fostered the growth of biblical criticism were antitraditional and eroded “the normative character of the early tradition.”⁷ If biblical scholarship is primarily a question of interpretation, and biblical criticism defined itself in opposition to the Roman Catholic argument that the interpretation of the church is the only correct one, it is easy to see from where the origins of dissent grew. Even though the majority of early historical critics were Protestant, the authoritative interpretations against which they argued were still Roman Catholic ones, and this placed the church on the defensive.

A turning point in the church’s relationship to higher criticism came with the publication of David F. Strauss’s *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. Strauss’s work was poorly received in numerous circles.⁸

5. Richard Simon, *A Critical History of the Text of the New Testament* (London: R. Taylor, 1689).

6. James T. Burtchaell, “Drey, Möhler, and the Catholic School of Tübingen,” in *Nineteenth-Century Religious Thought in the West*, ed. N. Smart, J. Clayton, S. T. Katz, and P. Sherry, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2:111–39.

7. William Baird, *History of New Testament Research: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1:331.

8. David F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1835).

The Catholic response to these first efforts to recapture the historical Jesus is significant not only for crystallizing church responses to the historical-critical method but also in establishing key talking points among Catholic apologists.

Roman Catholic opposition to Strauss focused on three main issues. First, Catholic scholars rejected his philosophical assumptions. Strauss, they argued, had an understanding of God that precluded divine intervention and, thus, miracles. (This criticism, incidentally, is remarkably similar to the arguments advanced in the twentieth and twenty-first century by Luke Timothy Johnson.) Second, they objected to Strauss's methodology. His view of history precluded any notion of uniqueness. It was a perspective he had inherited from the history of religions school, and thus he was unable to engage with an event like the resurrection. In his response, Johannes Kuhn, professor at Tübingen, anticipated the words of Cardinal Ratzinger when he insisted that biblical scholarship must be enlisted in the service of theology.

Finally, Catholic scholars rejected then, as many continue to do now, the characterization of the gospel as mythology. The historical Jesus, in particular, is seen as holding a particularly important position in this conversation. Because, as Kuhn wrote, "New Testament faith . . . is essentially a faith in Jesus the messiah, the reconciler, and also the only necessary mediator of the salvation of humanity. . . . [New Testament teaching is] not abstract but historical."⁹

What we find, even in these early Catholic responses to historical criticism, are broad critiques of the discipline's claim to speak authoritatively about the truth of the gospel and the discipline's claim to impartiality, coupled with a defensiveness about certain specific scriptural moments. Foremost among them are the elements of the life of the historical Jesus that found their way into the Creed—in particular the resurrection and the virgin birth. To quote John Henry Newman: "It

9. Kuhn, cited in William Madges, *The Core of Christian Faith: D. F. Strauss and His Catholic Critics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 54.

may be almost laid down as an historical fact that the mystical interpretation and orthodoxy will stand or fall together.”¹⁰

Origen and origins

If there is one theme that emerges out of efforts to engage historical criticism constructively, it is the importance of continuity of tradition. In defending the notion that church tradition should be regnant in the interpretation of scripture, the church has appealed to the idea that its arguments are grounded in antiquity. This is best demonstrated by an example. Take the now politically fraught question of supersessionism and Christian efforts to assert ownership over the Hebrew Bible, a project that was rendered especially tendentious by the arguments of historical critics that the prophets of the Old Testament did not have Jesus in mind when they spoke about messiahs or salvation. In the preface to the 2002 Pontifical Biblical Commission Document *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, Ratzinger writes, “The Fathers of the Church created nothing new when they gave a Christological interpretation to the Old Testament; they only systematized what they themselves had already discovered in the New Testament.”¹¹ Church interpretation, therefore, could be validated by tradition.

If what was threatening about historical criticism was its irritating tendency to point out inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and contradictions in the Bible, the response of the church has been to insist that they were never biblical literalists anyway. In order to justify this position, the church has appealed to a host of church doctors and thinkers. This line of thinking has been especially prevalent since the publication of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* by Pope Pius XII in 1943 and even more so since the

10. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1989), 7:4.5.

11. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 2002 Pontifical Biblical Commission Document. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission of *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Regularly cited on this point is Thomas Aquinas, who wrote in the *Summa Theologica* that “the author of Sacred Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things in themselves” (1.1.10). Gregory the Great is also part of the regular supporting cast for this argument when he remarks that scripture “by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery” (*Moral.* 20.1). In other words, the church does not and has never held that the Bible is merely *literally* true and therefore cannot be subjected to the simplistic analysis of historical critics who assume that it should be.

One of the most interesting elements of this line of argument is the manner in which it has utterly rehabilitated the archheretic Origen. Origen was an Alexandrine Christian who believed, among other things, in the eventual redemption of Satan. He was condemned as a heretic at the Synod of Constantinople. But he was also one of the first early Christian thinkers to explicitly discuss the idea of multiple senses of scripture and to posit that scriptural texts have literal, symbolic, and allegorical meanings.¹² His importance in shaping this idea, and the fact that his exegetical theories proved so influential for Augustine, has meant that Origen has experienced a renaissance in the writings of theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar and in a number of church documents.¹³ The Catechism of the Catholic Church is suffused with the legacy of Origen when it makes this call to proper exegesis: “According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses. The profound concordance of the four

12. According to Origen, the fact that the spiritual meaning of scripture goes beyond the obvious (literal) meaning is a unanimous part of the Apostolic Rule of Faith, *De Principi*, 1.8. See also Augustine, who claims that “this form of understanding . . . comes to us from the Apostles,” *City of God* 15.2 (commenting on Galatians 4:24).

13. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen, Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, trans Robert J. Daly (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of American Press, 1984).

senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church” (par. 115). The Catechism later adds, somewhat proscriptively, that it is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules (par.119).

The course charted

Unsurprisingly, for a denomination and a response that involve an emphasis on tradition and continuity, Roman Catholic scholars have pursued an interest in the importance of canonical criticism and reception history. Allow me to unpack what I mean by that. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger writes that “canonical exegesis,” a method of interpretation developed by, among others, the Protestant scholar Brevard Childs, in which one reads “the individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole,” is the “truly theological” way to study scripture.¹⁴ The understanding that canonical criticism equals theological (and, thus, superior) readings of the Bible can help us understand why, to this day, some prominent Roman Catholic Old Testament scholars refuse to admit that the Pentateuch was composed out of discrete sources.

In the past ten years Catholic scholars have also become interested in the methods of reception history. In general, reception history of the Bible takes a theme, text, or figure in the Bible and traces the interpretation of that theme, text, or figure over the course of history. It is a legitimate and interesting form of interpretation and one that Catholic scholars have truly pioneered.¹⁵ What’s interesting about reception history is the manner in which it does two things: First, it subconsciously works with an unwritten canon regarding which interpreters and modes of interpretation are important. (In Catholic studies, this canon often replicates that of the church: Augustine, Aquinas, and similar doctrinal luminaries appear prominently regardless of whether or not they were important figures in the history of interpretation.) Second, the methods of historical-critical interpretation are presented as products

14. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix.

15. I think here of my colleague Gary Anderson’s *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

of the Enlightenment in the same way that historians might say that Augustine was a product of fifth-century North Africa. Now of course this is true: historical criticism is a product of its day and is bound by the philosophical and cultural conventions of its time, but this is also a remarkably effective method of pushing back against the claims of early historical critics that authorial intent is the key to determining a text's meaning. Historical criticism is effectively defanged when it is reduced to a chapter in the history of interpretation.

If the notion of unbroken tradition transposed onto scriptural methodology and interpretation forms the centerpiece of Catholic responses to historical criticism, this argument is undercut by the presence of diversity in the early church. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Alphonse Turretin observed that the church does not always agree on the exegesis of scripture and throughout its history has disagreed on many points.¹⁶ This might seem to be an obvious point, but at the time it was a forceful one in destabilizing the claims of clerics that only the church could provide authoritative interpretation. In the past three hundred years, the implicit threat of early Christian diversity has been augmented and refracted. In the past fifty years in the broader academy, the discovery or rediscovery of apocryphal texts from the early church has led to an ongoing discussion about the many forms of early Christianity that dominated in the first three centuries of the Christian Era. Today it is a given at most universities that what came to be known as orthodoxy developed over many centuries and was in some cases predated by unorthodox or heretical views about the nature of Jesus, the resurrection, and many other foundational elements of Catholic belief.

The idea that early Christianity was diverse is not only rejected by some more conservative Catholic scholars and institutions but is treated as intrinsically anti-Catholic. For example, in his recent book *Bearing False Witness*, Rodney Stark argues that academic fascination with apocrypha in general and Gnosticism in particular is anti-Catholic and is often driven by a profeminist, antiestablishment sentiment in the liberal

16. Jean-Alphonse Turretin, *De sacrae Scripturae* (Dort, 1728), 2:3–136.

academy.¹⁷ In particular, he rails against the suggestion that gnostics were even Christian. In a chapter surveying literature by Karen King, Elaine Pagels, the late Marvin Meyer, and Bart Ehrman, he concludes in this way: “Which brings us to the greatest distortion of them all: to present these as Christian gospels. Any honest reading of the primary gnostic gospels reveals that, despite some Christian content, these are fundamentally pagan scriptures and thus are precisely the bizarre heresies that the early church fathers said they were!”¹⁸ Efforts to diversify early Christianity or claim that heretics were Christians are, he summarizes, part of a broader liberal project to discredit the church.

It is possible to expound at length about the origins of this argument and the roots of Catholic concerns about Gnosticism. In brief, the reason for the anxiety is that the Catholic Church sees Gnosticism as a type of heretical tendency that exists to this day. In the thinking of the church, it is tied to broader cultural movements like relativism; Pope Francis regularly cautions the church against the tendency to become gnostic.¹⁹ The important thing for us today is that holding the historically defensible position that early Christianity was diverse, or choosing to work on a particular area of Christian history, is itself worthy of suspicion. This perspective is not limited to Stark; there is a reason no specialists in Gnosticism are working at Catholic universities in the United States.

Perhaps even more remarkable than Catholic suspicion of scholarship that presents early Christianity as more egalitarian is the fact that these suspicions are grounded in reality. In 2012 Harvard scholar Karen King announced the discovery of *The Gospel of Jesus’s Wife* to

17. Rodney Stark, *Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History* (Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2016).

18. Stark, *Bearing False Witness*, 35.

19. See, for example, the Vatican reader’s guide for bishops that accompanied the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*, in which he remarked: “Some reduce their own being to what they know or feel (he calls this ‘gnosticism’); the others reduce their own being to their strengths (he calls this ‘neopelagianism’).”

great media fanfare.²⁰ King did not think that the text was an accurate depiction of Jesus's personal life, but she did claim that it was evidence of an ongoing conversation about the status of women in the early church. In other words, it was evidence of a more prowomen faction. It was evidence of diversity. There was considerable back-and-forth in the academy about the authenticity of the text. Throughout this period, my coauthor Joel Baden and I consistently argued that it was a forgery.²¹ At the time of the text's discovery and announcement, Catholic authorities and online commentators intimated that this text was an attack on the Catholic Church. The response seemed paranoid, but when an investigative journalist uncovered the man responsible for the hoax it became clear that the forger did in fact have anti-Catholic motivations. His construction of this document seemed designed to throw the traditional history of the church into question, and his personal agenda was evident in his interviews.²² All of which is to say that the ongoing hostility of the church toward a rational and reasonable subfield of historical-critical inquiry has foundations, even if they are shaky.

Conclusion

Given this fraught and deeply politicized history, it is worth thinking as I conclude about the opportunities created by Catholic responses to higher criticism. The emergence of historical criticism as a challenge to ecclesial authority and key dogmatic principles set a deeply antagonistic tone for the conversation. But the church's appeal to the multiple senses of scripture is one that is consistent and deeply rooted in history. It allows us to appreciate the tangled history of biblical texts and

20. The history of the fragment can be found on the Harvard webpage dedicated to this subject <http://gospelofjesuswife.hds.harvard.edu>.

21. Joel Baden and Candida Moss, "The Curious Case of Jesus's Wife," *The Atlantic*, November 17, 2014: <http://m.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/12/>.

22. Ariel Sabar, "The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus's Wife," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/07/>.

the improbability of biblical events without negating the importance of scriptural texts themselves as sources of inspiration.

The observation of Catholic critics that historical criticism overestimates both its impartiality and its ability to speak positively about the past is well made, particularly when it comes to the quest for the historical Jesus. It is certainly the case that as, George Tyrrell first observed, historians have looked down the well of history and seen themselves reflected back at them.²³ The observation of Catholic biblical scholars, as early as the eighteenth century, that naturalist interpretations are as biased as supernaturalist ones is something we should take seriously.

Additionally, the interest in the history of interpretation is a novel and interesting line of inquiry, provided that it appreciates the historical contexts in which *all* interpretation takes place. It simply isn't playing fair to say that historical critics are products of the Enlightenment while Augustine channels "truth."

Some missed opportunities, however, are concealed by the insistence on continuity of tradition. The whitewashing of biblical and early church history into a narrative of continuous and harmonious agreement is unhistorical and creates unapproachable—you might say Pelagianic—models for the modern church. Certainly no denomination has ever approached the era of collaboration and agreement portrayed in fantasies about orthodoxy in the early church. Perhaps an appreciation of the fierce debates of church councils, sharp disagreements between noncanonized thinkers, and the strained relationship between Peter and Paul would permit us to embrace a range of divergent interpretations of scripture. Insisting on agreement when there was none only sets us up to fail and seems fundamentally unnecessary.

Finally, at some point we Catholic scholars must do better than simply refuse to discuss the more fragile biblical warrants for key portions

23. This concept is best attributed to George Tyrrell, who wrote: "The Christ that Adolf Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well." *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), 44. This analogy is usually attributed to Albert Schweitzer.

of doctrine. In educating university students we are content to discuss mythological analogies and compositional theories but will not allow students to suggest, or “orthodox” scholars to argue, that the virgin birth is just mythology. There must be a better way to respond to such challenges than “we cannot talk about it.”

Candida R. Moss is professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of Notre Dame.