



1893 - Leo XIII

‘Providentissimus Deus’

‘to protect Catholic Interpretation from the attacks of rationalist science’ (1993, §3)

1943 - Pius XII

‘Divino Afflante Spiritu’

‘to defend Catholic interpretation from attacks from those who oppose the use of science in exegesis’(1993, §3)

1965 - Vat II ‘Dei Verbum’

1993 - John-Paul II ‘The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church’

‘The Church is not afraid of scientific criticism. She distrusts only preconceived opinions that claim to be based on science, but which in an underhand way cause science to depart from its domain’(1993, §4).

What we are seeking, as with any scientific exploration, is a convergence of probabilities to guide us in our pursuit of truth. The science of biblical hermeneutics is advancing by leaps and bounds in our day, especially by the application of what is called the historico-critical method (see 1993 35-42).

The word 'critical' is used here not in the popular sense of fault finding, but in the scientific sense of applying the mind in a systematic way. The word 'criticism' derives from the Greek *krinô*, meaning 'to distinguish, decide or judge'.

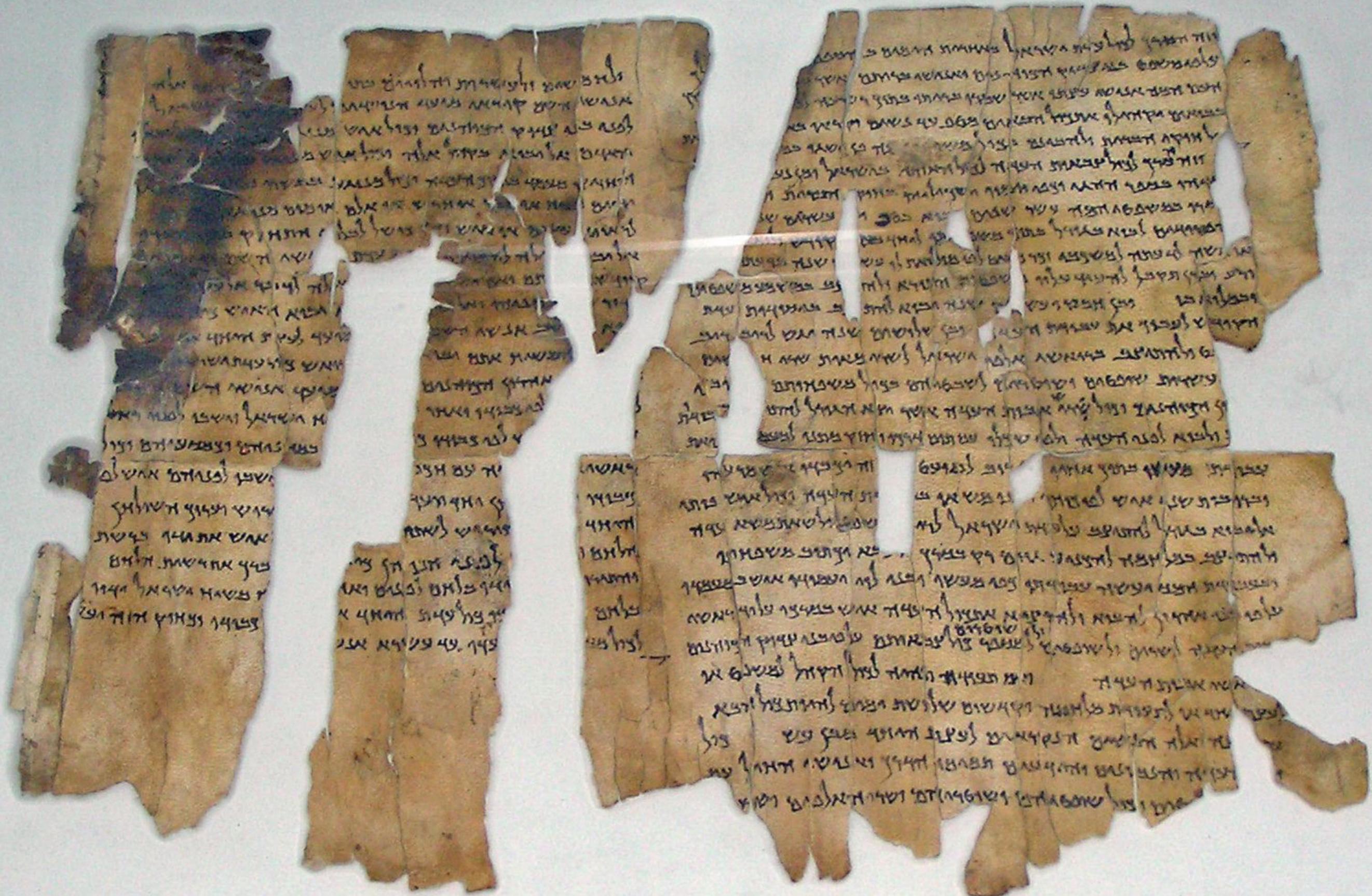
It is called 'historico-critical' because those who carry out the research recognise that God's revelation occurs in specific historical circumstances and is revealed to specific people. The more we can understand the circumstances in which the revelation occurred the more confident we can be in grasping the content of the revelation.

## I. Establishing the text

Prior to the discovery of the Qumran scrolls (1947), the oldest manuscript of the complete Hebrew Bible was the Leningrad Codex, 1008AD. The Aleppo Codex is slightly older (930AD) but nearly all the Torah is missing. We also have the Cairo Codex from 895AD, which has the prophetic books.

The Qumran scrolls gave us manuscripts that are over a thousand years older. It is interesting to note that where there is more than one manuscript of a text, there are variations in the Hebrew. The Qumran scrolls pre-date the work of the Rabbis in the closing decades of the first century AD to establish an official, standard text.

# Qumran scrolls



The rabbis at Jamnia, in the closing decades of the first century AD, faced with the emergence of Christianity, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman army, were determined to establish a standard Hebrew text. This does not guarantee that what they produced represents an 'original text', or that it is necessarily 'more inspired' than other extant versions. In 1952 biblical manuscripts from the period of the second uprising (132-135 AD) were discovered in a cave at Wadi Murabba'at, eighteen kilometres south of Qumran. They witness to the success of the work begun by the Rabbis at Jamnia, for there is less variation.

In spite of the immense care taken in copying the sacred text, copyists are human and make mistakes. Copyists working from a written manuscript can unintentionally repeat a word, or, if the same word occurs at the end of two successive lines, they can skip a line. These are two standard and easily recognised errors.

If copyists are hearing a manuscript read out, another set of errors is possible through confusion of words that have a similar sound.

It is important also to remember that the cost of writing prohibited the disposal of manuscripts that were seen at the time to have made mistakes. The person checking the copy would arrange for the correction to be placed in the margin. A problem arises here from the practice of copyists writing their own reflections in the margin. These extraneous marginal notes are called 'glosses'. When a person was copying from a copy that had glosses, it was possible for them to think that a scribal comment was in fact a correction and so include it in the body of the text, thus introducing extraneous material.

Ancient translations play an important role in our attempt to establish the true Hebrew text. The Greek Septuagint (LXX) from the second century BC is especially significant. Not infrequently there are differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text developed by the Masoretes (MT), the scholars whose aim it was to oversee the accuracy of copies of the Hebrew text. Each variant has to be examined and tested on its own merits. Sometimes the difference points to a misunderstanding of the Hebrew by the Greek translators. Sometimes the Septuagint indicates that copyist errors have found their way into the Hebrew text.

Sometimes the difference between the Hebrew and Greek Versions points to the Septuagint being a translation of a Hebrew text that is more original than the accepted Masoretic text. The fact that a text is older does not mean that later additions are not inspired. What comparisons with translations can help establish is the date of various strands of the material, and this, in turn, helps us understand the context within which additional material emerged, and therefore our understanding of it.

While refinements are still going on, the task of establishing the text has, for the most part, been successfully completed. We can be very confident in the text we now have. It is rare to find variations that significantly affect the meaning of a particular text.

## II. Establishing the Meaning of the text

### 1. The meaning of words and grammatical constructions

Scholars are constantly refining our understanding of the nuances of different words and of different grammatical constructions in ancient Hebrew and in the Greek spoken and written in the East at the time of the translation of the Old Testament into Greek in the third and second centuries BC. Sometimes Hebrew words are found in the Old Testament only once. It is difficult, without comparison, to determine the exact meaning just from the context.

The discovery of the library of Ashurbanipal of Nineveh in 1853, the discoveries at Ugarit in the 1920's and other discoveries have greatly enlarged our understanding of ancient Semitic languages.

## 2. Literary Criticism

Literature has never consisted in simply adding words to words or sentences to sentences. Its aim is to communicate and to do this successfully it takes a certain shape. The role of literary criticism is: ‘to determine the beginning and end of textual units, large and small, and to establish the internal coherence of the text’(PBC 1993, page 39).

### a: Genre Criticism

To interpret the text accurately, it is obviously necessary to know what kind of literary form we are dealing with. ‘Genre criticism seeks to identify literary genres’(PBC 1993, page 39).

‘The reader who is ignorant of these forms is the one who is likely to deform the author’s work, just as would a musician who mistook the key or mode of the composer’(L. Alonso Schökel SJ).

For example, the creation account which opens Genesis is a liturgical hymn (not an attempt to give an accurate chronological account!)

## The key genre in the Old Testament is Story

There are many ways of communicating truth. The writing of history is one way. It involves the careful establishing of what actually happened, as well as a careful attempt to express something of the significance of what happened. There are limits to history's capacity to express truth. The kinds of answers we give are dependent on the kinds of questions we ask, and the perspective from which we approach the past.

Truth can also be communicated through other forms of art which aim to awaken the imagination – as distinct from appealing to the logic of discursive reasoning – and through the imagination to open the way to insight. A video can tell us something of what was actually going on, but so can a painted portrait or a film. These take us 'inside' the facts to what is really going on! A well-told story can have the same effect.

Prior to the Greek Period (late 4th century BC) writers in the Ancient Near East generally expressed their insights, not in 'history', but in epic, saga, song and story.

Other writings from the ancient world chose the elevated, poetic and sophisticated style of epic literature, a style typical of an aristocratic and ruling class. Not so, Israel. In the Bible we find a more popular style, open to everyone, the style of story-telling. This style links immediately with experience, and provides a simple and effective way of sharing experience, and so truth.

This brings us to a key insight that we must have as we approach this inspired literature. It is that, for the most part, the Older Testament offers us truth as truth is expressed in story. The stories draw on facts, but only rarely do we find in them what we would regard as 'history'.

This carries on into the Newer Testament

The parables of Jesus are good examples of this

The Gospels record what Jesus said and did.

They also offer an interpretive commentary.

Those responsible for the Book of Genesis, with its presentation of an Israelite perspective on ancient Semitic myths about the primeval 'beginnings' of the universe, those responsible for the presentation of the essence of Yahwism in the stories concerning Moses, and those responsible for the prophetic interpretation of the history of the Israelite tribes and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, were interested in history, in the sense that they were interested in real people and their lives, but their aim was to connect their contemporaries with the precious religious insights that had come down to them from their ancestors, and they had no trouble in using folklore and legend if this helped to achieve their aim.

Like all the writings of the Ancient Near East, they drew on oral tradition, in which on-going interest wields more power than concern for historical accuracy. They drew on written sources, too, where these were available. They wrote to engage the imagination, and encourage fidelity to tradition, so they relied heavily on story to communicate insight into the truth.

Most of the texts of the Older Testament do not provide the kind of evidence needed to establish a secure history. What they do, however, is offer us powerful stories which carry a rich variety of attempts to come to terms with profound human experiences seen in the light of faith in YHWH.

In these times of insecurity that continue to spawn fundamentalism in many areas, including the reading and interpretation of biblical texts, it is important to emphasise the part played by imagination and story-telling in the Bible.

Robert Alter *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Allen & Unwin, 1981, page 189):

‘The Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning [depicting] of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an unexhausted source of delight for a hundred generation of readers. But that pleasure of imaginative play is deeply interfused with a sense of great spiritual urgency. The biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality, because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores Him, responds to, or resists, Him. Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.’

The faith of Israel is a historical faith, essentially related to ways in which God has been experienced in their history, but there are more ways, and often more effective ways, of expressing truth than by accurate statements of historical fact. The authors were real human beings whose aim was to alert their contemporaries to the meaning of their history for their current circumstances, not to establish an accurate historical record. Their explicit focus was not on accurate historical detail but on the way they understood God to have acted in their past and to be acting in their present.

‘History’ for those responsible for the writings of the Older Testament was a way of understanding their destiny in the world as a people special to YHWH. To be an Israelite is to share in the faith of a people who believe that God liberates from slavery, and that the way to receive the special blessings promised them by God is to listen to YHWH and do his will. The biblical writers are not seeking to give their readers historically accurate information about their past; they are interested in forming the consciousness of the nation by keeping before them the stories that remind them of who they are and what they are called to be.

If we are wondering how much of these stories is an accurate record of events, and how much is an imaginative statement intended to highlight the presence and action of YHWH in the lives of the ancient Israelites, and in the lives of those for whom the writing was intended, it is worth recalling that, for example, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are included in the Hebrew Bible as books of prophecy, not history. Their primary focus is on YHWH, not on Moses, Samuel, or the kings that led Israel and Judah in the years before the Babylonian Exile.

The 'truth' that is the primary object of their assertions is the truth of YHWH's choice of them as his people, and YHWH's fidelity to his commitment to his chosen people.

To be an Israelite is to share in the faith of a people who believe that God liberates from slavery, and that the way to receive the special blessings promised by God is to listen to YHWH and do his will. Though stories about Moses, Samuel, and David would have been told and retold over the generations, it was all far too long ago for the authors of the stories to attempt to establish the historical facts, nor was that their interest.

Their interest was in their contemporaries and they tell the story of their distant ancestors in such a way as to shed light on the situations the people were facing at the time of writing.

The question to be asked as we read these stories is not: 'Can we be confident that we are reading historically accurate accounts of past events? It is rather: 'Is God really the way God is presented here? and 'Are we to respond to God in the way this account states?' In light of the fact that so many good people are responsible for the writing, and that the stories have been reflected on, treasured, preserved and handed on by faithful people for centuries, we should surely trust that (allowing for the necessary imperfections of people and language) the inspired insights will guide us well.

The stories in the Older Testament do not claim to give us the complete truth. Furthermore, as disciples of Jesus we have his revelation to help us see some of their limitations. If we are to benefit from them, however, we must read them from within their own context. Otherwise we will miss the limited truths that they do convey.

They shape and re-tell the stories in order to keep Israel's faith alive so that their contemporaries will be faithful to their past in the way they live their present. Did the authors of the inspired books and those who read them and listened to them think they were enjoying a dramatic story, or did they think they were recalling past events? In a sense the answer is both one and the other, so long as we remember that they were not asking the question as we would ask it. The fine (and important) distinctions we make did not enter their consciousness. The picture presented of their past is a true one. It is true that they as a people have a special place in YHWH's heart. It is true that those who lived faithfully the covenant Israel has with God found communion with God in doing so. It is also true that the history of Israel is littered with human infidelity and consequent suffering.

The authors wanted their contemporaries to learn the lessons of the past, and to be faithful to the faith of their ancestors. It is this faith that is expressed powerfully, memorably, and truly in the 'stories' presented in the Older Testament.

## b: Drawn into the Narrative World

Because much of the text has its origins in storytelling, we need to grasp the styles of story-telling in the ancient Near-East. We need also to observe the effects such stories still have upon a community of listeners.

‘Narrative analysis insists that the text functions not only as a “window” giving access to one or other period (not only to the situation which the story relates but also to that of the community for whom the story is told), but also as a “mirror” in the sense that it projects a certain image – a “narrative world” – which exercises an influence upon readers’ perceptions in such a way as to bring them to adopt certain values rather than others’(PBC 1993, page 47).

‘What is written in the Book of Genesis is expressed in the form of a symbolic narrative’(J-P II, ‘Mulieris Dignitatem’, 1988, n.9)

## Stories in Genesis I-II

How we got to be the way we are and God's faithful love

Created in God's image (1:26)

But failed to rely on God (3:5)

We are created to live in the paradise of intimacy with God (3:8).

Though we long for this we feel like outsiders (3:24),

but God continues to care for us (3:21)

Farmer Vs Shepherd (4:8), but God protects Cain (4:15)

Violence brings creation to the edge of extinction (Flood; 6-9),

but God enables us to begin again (temple rising above the chaos)

Folly of trying to achieve heaven by our own power (Babel; 11)

but God calls Abraham (12:1)

## Stories in the Gospels

Marriage Feast at Cana (John 2)

Feeding the multitude and walking on the water (Mark 6)

Raising of Lazarus (John 11)

Mary Magdalene and Jesus' tomb (John 20:1-18)

On the way to Emmaus (Luke 24)

Thomas and Jesus' wounds (John 20:24-29)

## c: Rhetorical Criticism

Much of the Old Testament is a written record of words spoken in the liturgy or uttered by a prophet. It was, for the most part, written to be spoken by a preacher and heard by the assembly. Its aim was not simply to communicate meaning, but also to persuade and to inculcate religious values. This affected the style, and grasping ancient techniques of persuasive language can help us recognise irony, humour and exaggeration in the text – all of which helps us grasp its intended meaning. Without the insights that come from such a study we might take literally what is meant rather to startle, impress, please or persuade.

‘Rhetorical Criticism aims to penetrate to the very core of the language of revelation precisely as persuasive religious discourse and to measure the impact of such discourse in the social context of the communication thus begun’(PBC 1993, page 45).

Flood covering the whole earth (Genesis 7:17-24)

Sun standing still (Joshua 10:13)

Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel (1Kings 18:20-40)

How blind we can be (Mark 8:14-26)

We are resistant to change (Luke 5:37-39)

d. Disciplines seeking to discover the pre-history of the text

The above disciplines are supplemented by disciplines that aim to establish how the written text as we have it came to be.

Of primary importance, of course, is the actual text that the believing community has accepted as inspired and so as communicating divine revelation.

However, our understanding of the texts can be enriched by knowing 'the social milieu that give rise to them, their particular features and the history of their development'(PBC, 1993, page 39).

## (d.i) Source Criticism

‘Source Criticism consists in the identification and investigation of the discrete written sources of which the narrative was composed. The source critical model envisions ‘primary’ authors and ‘secondary’ redactor, the latter of whom works like a frugal tailor, fashioning new garments from the old clothes entrusted to him by patching them together as best he can. The mended appearance of the finished product has been the critic’s clue to the identities of the original fabrics, the literary antecedents of the received text’(R. Cohn).

- Origins in oral traditions
- Different traditions of Israel and Judah

## (d.ii) Tradition Criticism

This attempts to supplement Source Criticism by reconstructing the genesis of the text from its origins to its final transmitted form, uncovering the pre-history (oral and written) of each literary unit.

‘Tradition criticism situates texts in the stream of tradition and attempts to describe the development of this tradition over the course of time’(PBC 1993 page 39).

This is never an easy task and the results vary in their degree of probability. However, the general insight is valid. It is important, for example, to realize that many of the psalms as we have them had a long pre-history. As hymns sung by the assembly they were edited and supplemented as circumstances changed.

Be gracious to me, O God, according to your kindness;  
according to your tender compassion blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my guilt;

PURIFY me from my sin.

For I know my TRANSGRESSIONS my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,

and done what is evil in your sight,

so that you are acknowledged as just in your sentence,

and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born in guilt, in sin when my mother conceived me.

You DESIRE truth in my innermost being;

therefore in my hidden depths make me know wisdom.

Purge my sin with hyssop, and I shall be PURIFIED;

wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have CRUSHED rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my guilt.

**Create in me a PURIFIED heart, O God,**

**put a new and right spirit within me.**

**Do not cast me away from your presence.**

**Do not take your holy spirit from me.**

**Restore to me the joy of your salvation,**

**and sustain in me a generous spirit.**

**Then I will teach TRANSGRESSORS your ways,**

**and sinners will return to you.**

**Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation**

**and my tongue will sing aloud of your JUSTICE.**

**O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.**

**For you have no DESIRE for sacrifice;**

**if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.**

**The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;**

**a broken and CRUSHED heart, O God, you will not despise.**

## Postscript

**Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,  
then you will delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.**

### (2.iii) Redaction Criticism

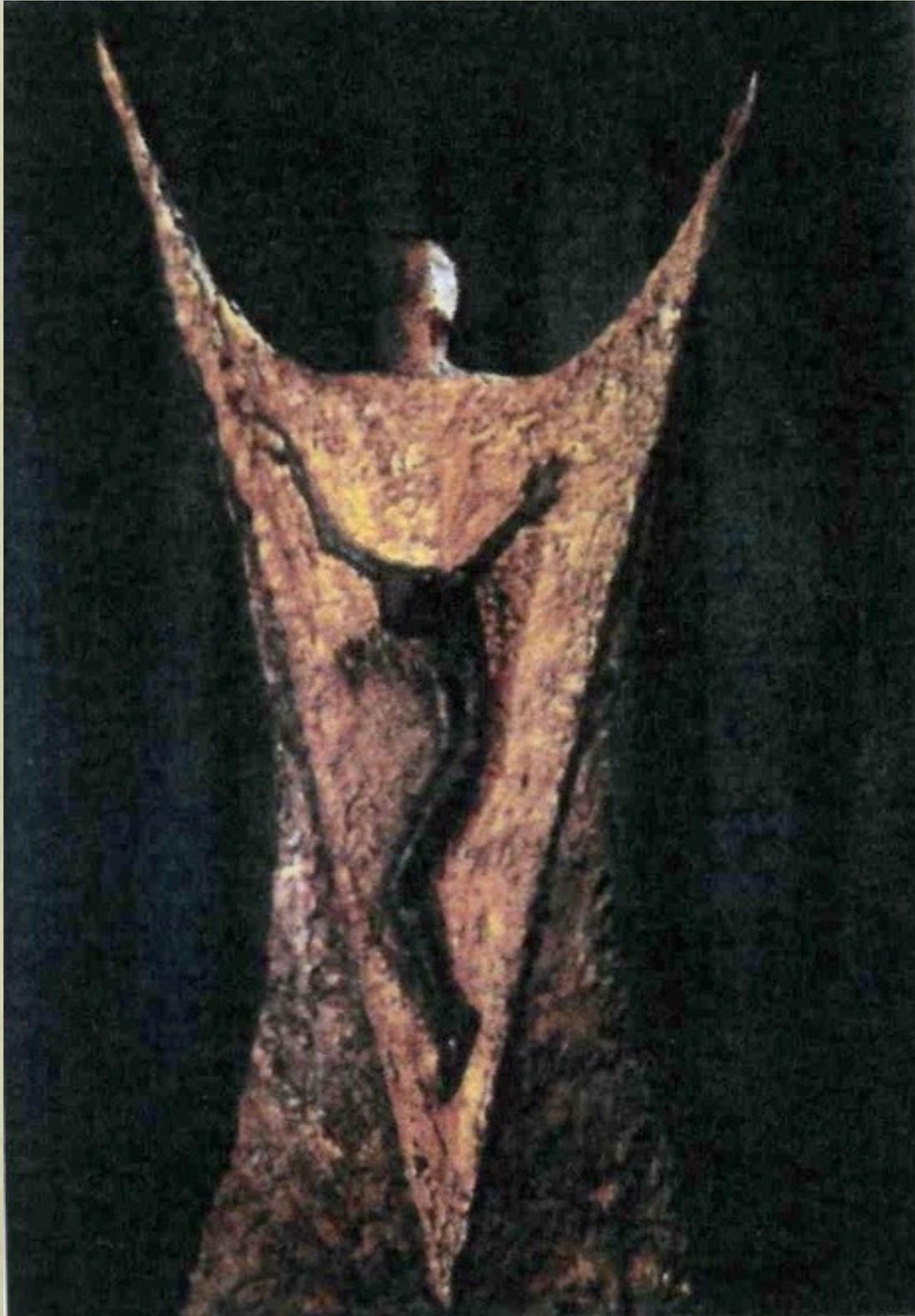
This takes the text in the form in which we now have it, and by analysing the editorial and compositional techniques of the **editor** (redactor) attempts to establish his meaning, and so the meaning of the text as it was received into the Canon.

‘Redaction criticism studies the modifications that texts have undergone before being fixed in their final state; it also analyses this final stage, trying as far as possible to identify the tendencies particularly characteristic of this concluding process ... At this point the text is explained as it stands, on the basis of the mutual relationships between its diverse elements and with an eye to its character as a message communicated by the author to his contemporaries’(PBC, 1993, page 39).

Interesting to compare the accounts in Samuel-Kings and Chronicles

#### (d.iv) Canonical Criticism

Our main interest, of course, is with the text in the final form in which we now have it, for this is the text that the community has accepted as inspired. This is the text which for centuries now has been a source of contemplation for believers. Enriched by the information gleaned from the various disciplines that we have noted, the exegete must go back to the actual written text for a richer and deeper synthesis of its meaning. A study of the function of the canon in the ongoing community of faith is also informative.



‘The Church reads the Old Testament in the light of the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – who brings a radical newness and, with sovereign authority, gives a meaning to the Scriptures that is decisive and definitive (Dei Verbum, 4). This new determination of meaning has become an integral element of Christian faith’(PBC, 1993, 54).

‘The canonical approach aims to carry out the theological task of interpretation more successfully by beginning from within an explicit framework of faith: the Bible as a whole. To achieve this, it interprets each biblical text in the light of the Canon of Scriptures, that is to say, of the Bible as received as the norm of faith by a community of believers ...

The canonical approach rightly reacts against placing an exaggerated value upon what is supposed to be original and early, as if this alone were authentic.

Inspired Scripture is precisely Scripture in that it has been recognised by the Church as the rule of faith. Hence the significance, in this light, of both the final form in which each of the books of the Bible appears and of the complete whole.’

PBC, 1993, 52-53

‘Each individual book only becomes biblical in the light of the Canon as a whole. It is the believing community that provides a truly adequate context for interpreting canonical texts. In this context faith and the Holy Spirit enrich exegesis. Church authority, exercised as a service of the community, must see to it that this interpretation remains faithful to the great Tradition which has produced the texts.’

It is important, therefore to read the text as part of the whole Bible (not in isolation from the rest).

It is important to read it within the believing community within which it emerged and was preserved.

It is important to read it 'in the Spirit': it is a prayer-text.

Finally, it is important to read it in the light of the revelation made in Christ Jesus; to read it with the mind and heart of Jesus. Jesus' disciples believed that he brought the part-revelation of the Older Testament to its fulfilment, revealing in fuller light what was inspired in it and correcting what is obscure and imperfect.