Critical Approaches to Scripture

**Historical-Critical Approaches**
- Source Criticism
  - **Source critics ask:** Where did the author get this information? What were their sources?  
    - **They look for:** Characteristic vocabulary, particular themes, bias, theological perspectives.
- Form Criticism
  - **Form critics ask:** What type of text is this and what are the features of this text type?  
    - **They look for:** Structure of the text, rules and conventions of the text type, features of the text type.
- Redaction Criticism
  - **Redaction critics ask:** How has the text been edited and arranged to present a particular theological perspective?  
    - **They look for:** Parallel texts in other books, material that is shared across parallel texts, background information specific to each text.
- Socio-Historical Criticism
  - **Socio-Historical critics ask:** What is the social context of the world behind this text?  
    - **They look for:** Background on the social environment of the time, cultural and religious codes of behaviour, political climate of the time.

**Literary-Critical Approaches**
- Narrative Criticism
  - **Narrative critics ask:** What is the world like within this text? How do the parts go together to tell the story?  
    - **They look for:** Author’s purpose and audience, characters and setting, plot and themes.
- Rhetorical Criticism
  - **Rhetorical critics ask:** What rhetorical devices has the writer used to persuade the reader to think or act the way they want?  
    - **They look for:** Tenor or voice of the text, metaphors and similes, repetition of words or ideas, directive language, authoritative language.
- Advocacy Criticism
  - **Advocacy critics ask:** What world-view or ideology is being presented in this text?  
    - **They look for:** Which voices are silenced, which voices are heard, point of view, political and ideological perspectives.
**Source Criticism**

**Teacher Background**

Source criticism focuses on the study of the different components of a biblical text, based on the assumption that particular Biblical texts are composite works whose components originated in different historical periods and exhibit a variety of features and themes reflective of their composite historical sources. In antiquity, authors were not worried about copyright privileges; sources were never footnoted or otherwise acknowledged. The task of the source critic is to filter out the various ideological strains, to locate these in their historical settings and to evaluate the meaning of the complete text in light of the results. Source criticism attempts to uncover the origins or “sources” of ancient texts of the Bible. Source criticism assumes that particular Biblical texts underwent a complex oral and written process in their composition. Close study of many Biblical texts suggests that no one person wrote them. Some Biblical texts exhibit a complexity and variability and even “inconsistency” that suggest composition from a number of sources and thus a multi-source theory is needed to explain and interpret such texts.

Source criticism is used mainly in the study of the Pentateuch (the term Christians give to the first five books of the Bible) and the Synoptic Gospels. A so-called “documentary hypothesis” assumes four strands of tradition in the composition of the Pentateuch. These strands of tradition are named the Jahwist (J), the Elohist (E), the Priestly (P) and the Deuteronomist (D). Characteristic vocabulary, concerns, themes, biases, theological perspectives and so on, distinguish each tradition. Source critics also focus on an examination of the Synoptic Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke. For the most part, scholars claim that Mark is the earliest written Gospel and that Matthew and Luke used Mark’s text as a basis for their own Gospels. Scholars also believe that Matthew and Luke share a source that was unknown to Mark. Scholars name this shared source of Mark and Luke “Q”, which probably comes from the German word *Quelle* meaning “source”. In addition, Matthew and Luke have their own independent materials - their own source or sources that none of the other Synoptics uses.
Form Criticism

Form criticism points out identifies the variety of text types (genre, literary forms), that are present in the Bible such as poetry, law, narrative, letters, homilies, songs, letters and so on. Form criticism operates at the level of an entire work and of the discrete parts of that work. For example, while the letters of Paul belong to the text type “epistle” they contain within them other text types such as hymns and lists. The Book of Numbers, which at first sight seems to be an historical narrative, contains within it text types such as legal codes, poetry and liturgical rubrics.

Form critics, having identified the text type employed to develop a given scriptural text, interpret the text in the light of the rules and functions of the text type. For example, the creation account in Genesis 1:1 –2:4a is a poem and possibly a poem meant to be sung or performed by many voices in a liturgical assembly. Thus, it would be a mistake to interpret the account as if it was a scientific account.

In applying form criticism to the interpretation of scriptural texts, it is necessary to recognise the text type/s and the textual features, generic structure/s codes and conventions that make up the text type/s. Form critics recognise ways in which text type and the associated text features direct, open up, reinforce, limit and otherwise influence interpretation. Thus a legal code is composed in precise form and language to limit possibilities of ambiguity and misunderstanding. On the other hand, a poem is likely to contain text features such as metaphor, simile, imagery and evocative and emotive language designed to open up a diversity of interpretation and response. In applying form criticism it is also useful to imagine a social location for a given text type such as liturgical or worship setting, preaching, law courts, royal court, school, marketplace or the domestic setting of a home.

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is the study of the ways in which theological perspective of a Biblical text is evident in its collection, arrangement, editing and modification of the sources from which the text was composed. A redactor’s editorial activity is easiest to discern when we have several parallel versions of the same story, as we do in the four gospels. The redaction critic examines such parallel texts to determine what material is shared amongst them, what material is unique to each and how each author shapes the material for his/her own community. Insofar as we can discern this shaping activity, we can begin to reconstruct the life and perspective of the original community for which the text was composed.

In considering redaction criticism it is important to understand that the idea of “authorship” of a text is a very modern idea. Today we expect as a matter of course to see the name/s of the author/s attached to the texts they have written. But pre-modern people did not have this idea of the writer/s of a text as “author”. A writer was seen as the channel for a longstanding and valued tradition handed own from a number of authoritative sources. For most Biblical texts, a single author is not likely and so scholars suggest a creative editorial process (redaction). The final redaction of a biblical text is therefore attributed to some few creative redactors (editors or compilers). Thus, redaction criticism focuses on the editorial process that produced a text we now have in the Bible.

For example, in interpreting parallel texts in the Synoptic Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, a redaction critic first compares a selected text against parallel texts in the other synoptics. Then the critic identifies material that is shared and not shared across the parallel texts, listing similarities and differences. Third, the redaction critic isolates and lists material unique to a particular gospel. Finally the redaction critic, drawing on background resource materials, accounts for the similarities and
differences between the parallel gospel texts in terms of the literary relationship between the Synoptic Gospels, the communities for whom each gospel was originally composed and the theological focus and themes of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

**Socio-Historical Criticism**

Socio-historical criticism focuses on the social context of the world behind the text, whether this is the world referred to in the text or the world in which the text was actually written. Socio-historical criticism is an extension of a focus on the “situation in life” that form critics have traditionally spoken about. The aim of socio-historical criticism is to provide information about the context of a scriptural text, thus providing data and parameters for determining the probable original meaning of the text and a guide to the intention/s of the author of the text. Socio-historical criticism views religion as a social entity. This critical method assumes a reciprocal interaction between the religious dimension of society and economic, ecological, political, historical and cultural social factors.

Socio-historical criticism as a method focuses on social, economic, legal, cultural and religious factors impacting on a text. There are a number of lines of study within this approach:

- Studying the social environment – occupations, houses, roads, means of travel, money economic realities, political realities, architecture, villages and cities, laws, social classes, markets, cloths, foodstuffs, cooking practices and so on.
- Focusing on social history, attempting to trace the social changes that took place over time, class conflicts in community, marginalised groups and so on.
- Using anthropological theory to reflect on patterns of thought and behaviour in a culture, its symbols, its artefacts and institutions and the basic ideas that hold a society together and give meaning to its members.

Socio-historical criticism relies heavily on archaeological and historical scholarship to clarify the historical likelihood of events described in texts, the possible ways the texts were understood by original audiences and the influence/s of the text at the time of writing.

**Narrative Criticism**

Narrative criticism is one of the critical methods associated with a literary-critical approach to the interpretation of scriptural texts. The literary critical approach and its associated critical methods study the final text of a given biblical book or extended text and differ from historical-critical approaches that focus on the historical origins and development of parts of a text that together form a final extended biblical text or book.

Narrative Criticism focuses primarily on the exploration of the world within the text being studied. The method of narrative criticism explores the story world created within narrative texts in the Bible. Narrative critics employ a range of questions such as the following in interpreting the story world within the narrative text being studied. What is the author’s purpose in this narrative? What are the characteristics of the people depicted in this narrative? What are the relationships among the people in this narrative? How does the author of this text make use of language and to what purpose? What are the possible meanings of this narrative? In longer narratives such as a Gospel, book of the Bible or extended text, the narrative critic also considers elements such as plot development, conflict, foreshadowing of future developments, themes, character development and so on.
Narrative texts in the Bible exhibit text types such as biography, epic, argumentative dialogues, folklore, history, legend, myth and saga that influence the way a narrative is understood and interpreted. Structural features in a narrative text such as flashback, foreshadowing, plot, setting and theme also need to be taken into account in the interpretive process. In relation to characterisation in narrative texts, identification of the protagonist/s or leading figure/s and the antagonist/s who oppose the leading figure are important for interpretation, as is an analysis of the motivation of the various characters. Narrative perspective in a text may be explored through consideration of the perspective/s established by the author who may relate the story in the first person, or through assuming the posture of an omniscient narrator-knowing everything that is in the minds of the characters and revealing such knowledge selectively as the text progresses.

**Rhetorical Criticism**

Rhetoric is the ancient art of persuasive discourse. Most discourse, whether it is written or spoken, aims to persuade or at least to affect those who read or listen to it. The underlying assumption of rhetorical criticism is that texts are structured according to patterns of what one might call “persuasive speech”. The rhetorical critic seeks to uncover the patterns and strategies of “persuasive speech” to interpret the text and uncover its intended meaning and likely impact. Rhetorical criticism assumes that the final composer of a particular scriptural text has a perspective informed by the culture of the time and seeks to persuade his/her contemporaries of that perspective. Rhetorical criticism identifies the rhetorical devices used in the construction of a text and analyses the likely impact of the text on readers and hearers.

Rhetorical critics use procedures such as the following in analysing and interpreting texts. Identify the problem/s to which the text is responding. Find major theme/s and supporting arguments. Isolate supporting arguments and the language, images, similes and metaphors used to enhance the theme/s and make the arguments persuasive. Analyse the argument/s in terms of authorities invoked, the progression of the argument and the use of rhetorical techniques.

Common rhetorical techniques include the following: repetition of the same word or phrase; stating ideas both negatively and positively; pretending doubt; statement or assertion followed by a supporting reason; use of rhetorical questions; hyperbole or exaggeration; metaphors and similes drawn from a variety of familiar contexts; combining two or more terms that are normally contradictory; use of examples from myth, nature and life; strings of parallel phrases; pretense of passing over a point in silence, while in fact emphasising that very point; accumulation of connectives.

**Advocacy Criticism**

The term “advocacy criticism” (advocacy hermeneutics) refers to various ways of reading Biblical texts that draw on and advocate for particular ideologies or sets of values and ideas to which someone is committed. Advocacy criticism openly asserts and espouses a particular worldview/ideology which in turn informs the orientation which the advocacy critic takes to a given Biblical text. Feminist hermeneutics or interpretation and political hermeneutics or interpretations are two common examples of advocacy criticism. Advocacy criticism whether exemplified through feminist or political hermeneutics utilise other critical methods such as source criticism or narrative criticism using and refining critical methods such as these in the light of their particular ideological orientation to a biblical text.
Feminist hermeneutics analyses Biblical texts seeking to recover the experience of women in antiquity and to critique norms and interpretations whereby that experience was and is marginalised. The feminist critic begins with the observation that ancient Biblical texts were mostly written by men and thus communicate a male view of reality. Women’s perspectives, insofar as these differ[ed] from men’s perspectives, are rarely visible in biblical texts. Thus women often appear in the Biblical texts as the objects rather than the subjects of religious experience and debate. To remedy this imbalance, the feminist critic reconstructs and emphasises women’s experience as it is indirectly revealed in the text.

Feminist criticism as a method does not stand alone. Feminist critics approach various text types differently, depending on the most appropriate method for the text type. They then add a layer of feminist questions to their analysis of the text. For example, if a feminist critic is analysing a narrative text, they might use narrative criticism and/or socio-historical criticism to explore the background and structural elements of the narrative and then add questions such as the following relating to their feminist orientation and advocacy. Is there a women’s point of view in this text? How are women portrayed in this text? Do they speak? Are we given access to their point of view? Who has the power in this text? How is power distributed? How do women get what they want (if they do)? What do women want in this text? How does the text represent uniquely female experiences such as childbearing, menstruation or traditional female experiences such as child rearing, homemaking? How have women’s lives and voices been suppressed by this text? Are women made to speak and act against their own interests? What hidden gender assumptions lie behind this text? Is the passage reinforcing or altering gender roles? Does the text betray anxiety about changing gender roles? Whose interests are being served in this text?

The feminist mode of advocacy criticism is called a “hermeneutics (or interpretive strategy) of suspicion”. First, it seeks by definition, something the texts unconsciously disregarded or actively repressed and so it approaches scriptural texts suspicious of ancient motives. Second, it is self-critical, aware of its own role in the activity of interpreting texts. The feminist critic is conscious that every reading of texts is an interpretation and every interpretation has contemporary political implications.

Feminist hermeneutics can be placed along a spectrum from feminist scholars who see the Bible as a tool of patriarchal oppression to be rejected outright, to other feminist scholars, whose position is more ambiguous, recognising as they do, the oppressive nature of Biblical texts but wanting to expose such oppression and subvert patriarchal interpretations. Others wish to recover the perspective and voice of women in the scriptural text by focusing on the powerful and important women in the Bible or on the importance given in some texts to poor women, widows, foreigners, prostitutes and so on. A further complexity is added by the realisation that “rich women’s feminism” differs from “poor women’s feminism” and that “black and coloured women’s feminism” can enrich and challenge the feminism of white women and so on.

Political hermeneutics, as with feminist hermeneutics, has as a major component of its ideology/worldview the idea of liberation from oppression. In the case of political hermeneutics, the oppression could be related to repressive political systems, unjust and exploitative economic arrangements, discrimination on racial or ethnic grounds, or some combination of these factors. Liberation theology, for example, critiques prevailing socio-political situations in Latin America. Liberation theologians applying a political hermeneutic to the interpretation of Biblical texts in order to illuminate contemporary situations of oppression and inspire solidarity and action to bring about change. Black Theology, as another example, approaches Biblical texts from the perspective of an often-oppressed African-American people seeking similar illumination, solidarity and action.
A further example of Advocacy Criticism is the canonical-critical approach to interpreting biblical texts. This approach explicitly advocates a religious and theological approach to the biblical text, as part of the Christian Canon of the Bible— that is, those writings from the Jewish tradition and from the Christian tradition that the Church has judged should be included in the Bible. A canonical critical approach advocates a Christian reading of the Biblical text. Each Biblical text is interpreted within the context of the Bible as a whole and from an explicitly Christian perspective. Texts from the prophet Isaiah, for example, are read in the context not only of the other prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible, but in the context of the entire Old Testament and New Testament as well. An explicitly Christian perspective is brought to bear when, for example, texts from Isaiah referring to “a suffering servant” are interpreted as referring to the passion and death of Jesus. A canonical-critical interpretation of the Bible extends beyond the Biblical text itself into the creeds, dogmas and traditions of the Church and even further into literature and art.