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NINETY-SECOND YEAR

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BIBLIOTHECA SACRA COMPANY

6834 Washington Ave.,

St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

EUROPEAN AGENTS, CHARLES HIGHAM & SON,

13 Charterhouse Street, London, E. C.

Single Number, 75 Cents

main

Yearly Subscription, \$3.00

Entered at the Post Office in St. Louis, Mo., as Second Class Matter

CRITICAL NOTES

BIBLICAL CRITICISM PROPER.

CRITICISM: THE CRITICAL PROCESS

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Each term in the phrase Biblical Criticism contributes its quota of information touching the discipline so designated. The term "Criticism" indicates the larger, and the term "biblical" the more limited, group of disciplines to which it belongs. The student of Biblical Criticism cannot do better than to begin by carefully clarifying his conceptions in regard to the connotation of both terms. In this paper it is proposed to limit attention to the latter,¹ and to offer some observations on its meaning, and more particularly upon the critical process.

First of all, then, it is important to note that the word "criticism" is legitimately employed in not less than four, perhaps I should say five, perfectly distinct senses. Thus the mind goes through an inspecting and comparing process, or a sifting, weighing, testing process which issues in a judgment, and to this *process* or these *processes* we give the name of "criticism;" and to the *act of judgment* in which the process issues we likewise give the name of "criticism." Here it will be observed that both the process and the judgment in which its outcome is registered are purely subjective, being confined within the mind itself. Should this judgment subsequently be formulated and expressed in words, this objective formulation of the spoken, or written, judgment we speak of as "a criticism," or if there be a series of such judgments relating to a

¹The former term, "biblical," I have commented upon in "Some Strictures on Current Conceptions of Biblical Criticism," BIBLIOTHECA SACRA, April, 1920. To the same paper the reader must be referred for the meaning of the phrase "Biblical Criticism Proper."

common subject, to this series viewed as an organized whole we apply the name "criticism." Long experience, however, has taught men that if the critical process is to issue in judgments that are valid, and so of real value, that process must itself be controlled and guided by well considered and sound principles, and a sound method. To the *science* that results when these principles and this method have been reduced to an orderly organized whole we continue to apply the name "Criticism," frequently signalizing this special application of the term by beginning the word with a capital. Finally, to the *art*² that emerges when these principles and this method are skillfully applied to a given subject we still give the name of "criticism."

Hence it comes to pass that by Biblical Criticism may be meant (1) a mental process of a specific kind employed upon Biblical problems; or (2) a more or less well-defined body of conclusions or judgments reached by this or that school of scholars in their application of this process to these problems; or (3) the principles and method which of right ought to regulate this process when applied to these problems; or (4) the art of skillfully and effectively applying these principles and this method to these problems. Obviously these are four very different things.³

²By "art" here is meant a body of rules to guide in the application of the principles and method to a concrete case.

³Dr. Driver (*The Higher Criticism*, p. vi) employing italics, says: "The word 'critic' means *able to distinguish*, & 'criticism' the *power or art of distinguishing*"; & D. C. Simpson (*Pentateuchal Criticism*, p. 1), "True criticism, then, is discrimination, the passing of judgment upon the qualities of anything." It is hard to see what useful purpose is served by such definitions. Designed to disarm popular prejudice, they are themselves lacking in definiteness and discrimination. They only serve to mislead the unsuspecting by investing a really delicate and difficult process with a false appearance of simplicity.

If mere brevity were the chief desideratum, Heinrich's definition is more scientific both in spirit and wording: "Criticism," he tells us, "is the art of rightly estimating what has been actually apprehended according to its real value" (*New-Schaff-Herzog*, ii, p. 170, 1). But even here would it not be nearer the truth to say that criticism is the method by which we seek to arrive at a rational certitude as to whether what has been apprehended has been rightly apprehended, or as to whether the value of what has been rightly apprehended has also been rightly appraised. These are two very distinct issues both of which come within the purview of criticism.

The importance of carefully noting these several senses that the word "criticism" may bear lies in the fact that it is altogether easy and not uncommon for a writer to pass unconsciously from one to another of them. Where this occurs the result is occasionally amusing. Usually, however, it is mischievous. When, for example, we find a distinguished American scholar, in seeking to discredit a certain position, first asking in all gravity, "But what does Criticism say?" and then, for answer, citing from a previous volume from his own pen his own personal conclusion touching the matter, we merely smile. But it is different, when we turn to *Webster's New International Dictionary*, and under the word "Criticism" run upon the following: "Biblical Criticism, designating or pertaining to that school of Bible students who treat the received text with greater freedom than the Traditionalists do, discussing its sources and history, and departing in many places from the Traditional conclusion!" One is entitled to protest against so flagrant a disregard for all the proprieties of definition in an international dictionary.

It is perfectly manifest that the critical process itself is the very heart of Criticism. It is to secure the purity of this process that Criticism as a science exists. It is to facilitate this process that Criticism as an art has come into being. Upon the purity of this process depends the value of whatever body of conclusions or judgments is put forth in the name of Criticism. The critical process itself, therefore, may properly engage our attention briefly.

The critical process derives its name from the judgment in which it issues—the preliminary inspecting and comparing activities being merely a preparation for this final step. It is obviously not only a normal but a necessary, not only a spontaneous and constant, but a constitutive activity of the rational mind. It is an essential condition of rationality. And the care and thoroughness with which it is performed is the measure of rationality. It is as essential a factor in our mental economy, as respiration is in our physical. The cessation of the lat-

ter would not more certainly mark the end of our physical life, than the cessation of the critical process the end of our mental life. Further, like respiration, the critical process, in its primary and most common form, is for the most part not only an involuntary, but an unconscious activity. The process itself is usually pushed through with such incredible rapidity that we are wholly unaware of the fact that it is being carried on, being distinctly conscious only of the resulting judgment. And yet in every case—from that of the infant in its cradle to that of the revered sage—the acts of inspection and comparison always precede the act of judgment. The only possible difference between any two cases will be found to consist in the degree of conscious care and exactness with which the inspecting and comparing is done, and the conscientious fidelity with which the resulting judgment is made to conform to the facts disclosed by inspection and comparison. Further still, it should be observed that the critical process is concurrent with, ancillary to, and broadly speaking, conditions the value of all of our other mental activities. Dr. Briggs rightly says that "Criticism is a method of knowledge." He might have said *the* method. For ultimately it is upon this process that we are dependent for all that is even named knowledge. It not only, as Dr. Briggs says, "refines the crude oil of knowledge," but itself provides this "crude oil" that it subsequently "refines." It not only "cleanses and polishes the rough diamond of thought," but itself furnishes us with "the rough diamond." It initiates, and it completes every intellectual achievement—or rather it is the *sine qua non* to the completion of all such achievements. If, then, this inspecting, comparing, judging activity of the mind, even in its primary, unconscious and involuntary form, is the badge of the mind's rationality; if in its final and perfected form, it is the measure of that rationality, how gross, and how greatly to be regretted, is the misuse of the adjective "critical" when it is employed in a deprecatory, disparaging sense.

Next we may note the scope of the critical process. Here it will be enough to say that the whole field of

human thought and activity comes within its purview. Every inquiry, whether it be concerned with the useful, the beautiful, the true, or the good, involves the employment of the critical process. For as H. S. Krans truly says: "Criticism . . . is applicable in all fields of human accomplishment, and all inventions, all institutions, all life, are, broadly speaking, within its scope."⁴

In its essential nature the critical process, as its very name indicates, is a judicial process. This fact determines among other things, the spirit in which it should be conducted; the nature of its subject-matter; and its aim.

As to the first of these matters—namely, the spirit in which the critical process, if its purity is to be maintained, should always be conducted—the term judicial itself reminds us that its characteristics are seriousness, calmness, open-mindedness, poise, and the like. The suspicion with which criticism is so generally regarded, the disrepute attaching to "a critical spirit" are sad proofs of how difficult it is for men to maintain a truly judicial temper.

It is worth noting with care that, limitless as is its scope, and regardless of the particular field in which it may be engaged, the specific subject-matter of the critical process is always and only an issue or claim of some sort. The first step in every judicial process is the "making up of the issue." And this issue constitutes the subject-matter under consideration from the beginning to the end of the process. The issue may be raised by the mind *sua sponte*, or it may be thrust upon it from without. The claim may be expressed, or merely implied. The issue or claim may be as to a matter of fact, or as to a matter of value. But that upon which the critical process is always engaged is simply the determination of an issue of some sort or other. If this obvious truth were well borne in mind it would dissipate at once a world of confusion that has been permitted to gather around the matter. Further, the purity of the critical process demands that the issue upon which it is engaged be a single, and sharply defined issue. It frequently happens that the determination of a

⁴*New International Encyclopedia*, sub criticism.

major issue turns upon the determination of a number of subordinate issues. In such cases the purity of the critical process demands that, before dealing with the major issue, each subordinate issue be dealt with separately and in its proper order.

From all that has been said it is clear that the goal or aim of the critical process is a judgment either as to a matter of fact, or of value: always and only a judgment, and nothing more. Accordingly the famous dictum of Matthew Arnold that "Criticism is a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world" is characterized by sweetness rather than by light. In no case does Criticism hold a brief for the best any more than for the worst. Its position is that of judge, and not that of advocate. The mere suspicion of a propagandist spirit or aim is sufficient to vitiate its findings, Mr. James Strachan states the case at once briefly and with admirable insight and discrimination, when he defines Criticism as "The effort of the mind to see things as they are." And Walter Pater's statement of the aim of the critical process is even better: "To see an object as in itself it really is has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism." The goal of the critical process is rational certitude as to the correspondence between its judgment as to a matter of fact, or a matter of value, and the just-as-it-is-ness of the matter of fact, or the matter of value. Whatever diverts the attention of the critic from this goal vitiates the purity of the critical process. Obviously the just-as-it-is-ness of things remains just what it is regardless of the effects, good or bad, that may follow from its discovery and recognition. And Criticism can take no account of what may be, or of what will be, the consequences of the discovery and recognition of the just-as-it-is-ness of the matter of fact or of value that is in issue. If when recognized the just-as-it-is-ness of the matter proves to be incompatible with, or destructive of, long cherished opinions and important interests, obviously criticism should not be held responsible. Nor, on the other hand, when the discovery and recognition of the just-as-it-is-ness of a matter opens up new vistas of

fruitful activity is criticism to be acclaimed. As well denounce or laud a crucible, retort, or pair of scales for what they disclose. They destroy no values; they create no values. They simply disclose the value that was there—the value the presence of which had been denied, it may be; or alleged, it may be, or merely suspected and hoped for, it may be, but which up to the conclusion of the testing process had been in issue and uncertain or not yet fully manifested; or they disclose the absence of some value that was supposed to be there, but which as a matter of fact never was there. The crucible, the retort, and the scales exist for but one purpose. The real and only measure of their worth is found in the efficiency, the certainty, the accuracy with which they effect that purpose. For the consequences that may ensue from the effecting of the purpose for which they exist neither responsibility, nor credit attaches to them. Precisely the same is true in regard to the critical process. It does not and cannot look beyond ascertaining and declaring the just-as-it-is-ness of the matter in issue.

It follows, of course, that such phrases as “destructive criticism,” “constructive criticism,” “evangelical criticism,” and “rationalistic criticism,” common as they are, are solecisms, and as such should be tabooed. All of these phrases—one as much as another—so far as they have any intelligible meaning, imply that the critical process has been or may properly be carried on with some end in view other than and ulterior to the ascertaining and declaring of the just-as-it-is-ness of the matter in issue. Such a procedure, however, is not criticism, but the negation of criticism. Equally to be reprobated are the terms “critical freedom” and “critical boldness” as commonly used. It is impossible to associate the terms “freedom,” and “boldness,” as thus used, with a genuinely judicial process. To be lauded for such “freedom” and “boldness” would fill a righteous, self-respecting judge with indignation. Nor would it ever occur to any rational man to see in such “freedom” and “boldness” ground for laudation. It is an essential characteristic of a truly judicial finding, that in nothing does it go a step beyond the law

and the evidence. Unquestionably there is a legitimate place for conjectures, even for bold conjectures: but conjectures, whatever their worth, cannot be too rigidly distinguished from criticism.

As already stated the critical process even in its primary, unperfected, and undisciplined form is the mind's normal method of acquiring knowledge. While this is true, we do not dignify the process in this immature and imperfect form with the name of Criticism. Further, at a comparatively early age we are made aware of the fact—usually reluctantly and resentfully enough—that the judgments in which our inspecting and comparing processes have issued prove to be incorrect. An infant, for instance, automatically and with lightning like rapidity goes through such a process, and on the basis of the judgment reached makes a certain muscular adjustment and exerts a certain amount of muscular energy in its effort to reach a ball, and to its surprise and disappointment fails to do so. It repeats the experiment a time or two with the same result, and likely enough throws up the attempt in a rage. Unfortunately many minds get but relatively little beyond this stage. Their indolence overmasters their appetite for knowledge. Their thinking processes continue to the end to be performed in a slovenly, haphazard manner. And the result is that their mental development is slow, limited, and very imperfect; and their interests needlessly jeopardized by their ignorance, prejudices and misconceptions. Others, awakening to the fact that too often what they have apprehended has not been rightly apprehended, or that its value has not been rightly appraised, spurred by a keen appetite for real knowledge, a compelling craving for certitude, or more frequently still by the stern tutelage of experience, bring every step of the inspecting, comparing, judging process under the concentrated light of clear consciousness, take careful account of the nature of the subject-matter, acquaint themselves with the methods, principles and results of others, until finally, by dint of much patient toil, and despite many temporary failures and discouragements, methods and principles are wrought out that insure a high degree of

control and verification of results. Thus it is that the various branches of criticism have been slowly and tediously brought to whatever of perfection they have at present attained. And it is the critical process as guided by such a method, and controlled and checked by such principles that is dignified with the name of Criticism.

There are those who, misinterpreting the facts that we have just been considering, trace the origin of Criticism proper to an acquired distrust of the testimony of consciousness, of our senses, and of our fellow men. But as already indicated this is a misinterpretation of the facts. Were it possible to inoculate the mind with a genuine distrust of the fundamental dependability of the testimony either of consciousness, or of the senses, or of men, it would put an arrest not only upon all human progress, but upon all human activity. Our incentive to activity is furnished by our unshakable confidence in the dependability of the testimony of consciousness, our senses, and our fellows, when this testimony has been correctly apprehended and appraised. Further, we feel unshakably assured that in the due use of ordinary means, and of ordinary care we can finally determine whether the testimony in any given case has been correctly apprehended, and appraised. This assurance is rationally justified by all the solid gains that have been made in the manifold fields of human enterprise. These gains one and all have been effected through dependence upon the testimony of consciousness, of our senses, or of our fellow men. In fundamental equipment the sage does not differ from the infant, nor the expert from the tyro. Vast as is the actual difference in the results achieved in their respective cases, it is all ultimately traceable simply to the difference in the care and skill with which this fundamental equipment is used. It is, therefore, incorrect to represent Criticism as originating in distrust either of our own faculties, or those of others. It originates rather partly in our experience of our own limitations, and the limitations of others; partly in our need of and desire for certitude; and partly in the discovery that it is only as it is used with discriminating care, and under the control and guid-

ance of a sound method, and sound principles that the critical process yields valid results.

The judgment in which the critical process finds its consummation may take a threefold form. It may be either an affirmative judgment, a negative judgment, or a suspended judgment: the claim set up may be affirmed, that is to say the evidence adduced may be adjudged sufficient to establish the correctness of the claim; the claim set up may be denied, that is to say that the evidence adduced may be adjudged sufficient to establish its incorrectness; or the investigation may issue in a suspended judgment, that is to say the evidence adduced may be adjudged insufficient to establish either its correctness or its incorrectness. There is a strong, and, I am persuaded, a wholly unreasonable prejudice against both negative and suspended judgments. Nor is the explanation of this prejudice far to seek. We are essentially active beings, and frequently our circumstances call, or seem to us to call, urgently for action. Hence we do not rest content with negations, nor when in a state of suspense. But surely it is better to rest temporarily in a negation, than to rest permanently in a lie. Further, a negative judgment compels no one to rest in negations. While negative in form, such judgments are in reality merely writs of ejection, which, in forbidding us to remain where we are, force us to seek safer and better quarters. And while a state of suspended judgment is far from being comfortable, it is obviously the part of wisdom to bear with the discomfort rather than either to reject the truth or accept a falsehood. Not only so, but the critical process must be true to itself. And this it cannot be, except as its judgment is conformed to the just-as-it-is-ness of things. And, after all, despite the outcry only too frequently raised against it, what is called "negative criticism," that is to say the critical processes that issue in negative judgments, renders a large and valuable service. For by displacing error they make way for truth.

If the depreciation and deprecation of Criticism is to be deplored, the making a fetish of Criticism, and invest-

ing its results as such with an absolute authority and finality is absurd. But unfortunately that is very much the tendency at the present time. To hear the way in which "Science" and "Criticism" are appealed to one would naturally suppose them to be entities clothed with infallibility. But, of course, they are not. "Criticism," whether used to designate the critical process, or the results of that process, has no existence apart from some individual mind. So that, no matter how impressively it may be asked, the question, "But what does Criticism say," is always an appeal by the person asking it either to the results of his own critical processes, or to those of others. But who of us seriously regards either himself or others as infallible? Indeed, the very same distinguished scholar who, in an unguarded moment, fell into this rhetorical trap, when writing more reflectively, says: "But criticism itself, as a human method of knowledge, is also defective and needs self-criticism for its own rectification, security, and progress. It must again and again verify its methods and correct its processes." And professor Nash goes even so far as to assert that "In truth, there is no such thing as an absolutely pure critical process. And the idolatrous estimate of the imaginary standard of criticism is just another chapter in the long history of the reign of words, another divorce between words and things."⁵ This, of course, does not mean that the results of the critical process are in no instance susceptible of a high degree of control and verification. But it is a needed protest against the vulgar fetishizing of "Criticism" that alas! is sometimes indulged in even by those of whom one has a right to expect better and saner things.

As a concluding word it is enough to say that Criticism, meaning by that word the critical process, needs no letters of commendation from the present writer, or from anyone else. It is here to stay. It has long since justified its existence by its results. Where the process has been controlled by sound principles and a sound method, skillfully, strictly and thoroughly applied the value of its results has always spoken for itself. And even where its

⁵History of the Higher Criticism of the NT, p. 138.

findings have been faulty, still, with insight, quickened by the soul's inextinguishable love of the truth, and armed with an inexhaustible patience by the soul's undeniable craving for perfection, Criticism has again and again first discovered, and finally eliminated the defects in its principles, their application, and their results, thus freeing men from venerable errors, or leaving them in secure possession of long challenged truths.