

RATIONALISM IN THE HISTORICAL-CRITICISM OF HERMANN GUNKEL

by John F. McCarthy

1. Hermann Gunkel was born in Springe, Germany, in 1862. His life of study and teaching was spent in Germany, and he died there in 1932. He is known as the founder of the form-critical approach to the interpretation of Sacred Scripture. His work and writings were mainly concerned with the Old Testament, and he was without doubt one of the most influential Scripture scholars of the twentieth century. In his famous commentary on the Book of Genesis, published in German in 1901, he took all of the results of the historical-critical scholarship of his day and forged them into a method of research that went beyond the literary analysis of the text itself to the creative work of the authors of the individual units which were supposed to have anteceded the work of the editors of the final product. Gunkel's Genesis had a profound effect upon twentieth-century historical-critical scholars, directly upon those who could read German and indirectly upon those who could not. Moreover, the publication in 1997 of the first English translation of Gunkel's commentary has aroused renewed interest among English-speaking scholars and thus gives us a timely occasion for a critical review of his famous work.

2. The Rationalism in the historical-critical method of Hermann Gunkel stems from a tradition of rationalistic thinkers who had built up and diversified their "critical" approach to the interpretation of Sacred Scripture over a period of more than two hundred years. The so-called "critical" approach to the interpretation of Sacred Scripture, now known as "historical-criticism," was brought into focus in 1678, when Richard Simon, a converted Catholic priest, published what he called a "critical history" of the Old Testament. His book was rejected by the Holy See and placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1682. Simon called his work a "critical history," for the reason that he subjected the text of the Old Testament to what he considered to be the "critical judgment" of his human reason, and he thus placed himself within the category of writers who are characterized as Rationalists. Like all of the historical-critical thinkers that succeeded him, he believed that he was using sound historical method to produce the results of his reasoning. Simon's work was not accepted into Catholic exegesis, but it was quickly taken up by liberal Protestant scholars, and it has grown now over a span of more than three centuries into the vast biblical movement that today calls itself "modern biblical scholarship." In the course of this article I shall contend that the historical-criticism of Hermann Gunkel and other historical-critics, while it is immensely critical of the text of Sacred Scripture, is extremely uncritical of its own method, and that it does not characteristically use sound methods of historical research. For this reason, I place a hyphen in the expression historical-criticism, thus indicating that the name applies to a specific school of biblical research and not to the general field of historical research into the background of the Bible.

3. The critical element in Simon's "critical history" and in the long series of historical-critical works that have succeeded it consists in the exclusion of biblical faith, and especially of Christian faith, from its set of presuppositions and from its technical frame of reference. In doing this it

places human reason above Christian faith, and it subjects the objects of Christian faith, as they appear in the Bible, to a reasoning process that depends upon this set of false assumptions. Traditional Catholic exegesis, on the contrary, while it makes an exquisite use of human reason in its thinking about the text of Sacred Scripture, does not subject the text of Sacred Scripture to the judgment of a reasoning process depending upon a set of false presuppositions. From a viewpoint of faith and reason, traditional Catholic interpretation regards the Bible as a unified whole, written ultimately by God as its principal Author, and it, therefore, gives the benefit of the doubt to the text of Scripture, whereas historical-criticism tends of its very nature to arrive at a position in which it places the burden of proof on the Scriptures and gives the benefit of the doubt to the "critical" reasoning of the critics.

4. Traditional Catholic interpretation of the Scriptures begins from an attitude of faith in the truth of the sacred text and uses human reason to analyze that text. This approach means that what the sacred text narrates is presumed to be true, and that this presumption of truth will be defended, unless there is proof (not mere plausibility) that there is some falsehood or contradiction in the narration. Rationalist interpretation, on the contrary, does not presume the truth of what is narrated in the sacred text, but rather presumes that any accounts of supernatural events are historically false, and so it searches for natural reasons underlying these alleged supernatural happenings. If Rationalist exegesis could prove that the supernatural events recorded in Sacred Scripture did not really happen, its point would be made, but the Rationalist reasoning process is not made up of proofs; it rather consists of strings of plausibility that tantalize the mind but do not have a solid basis in reality.

5. The Rationalism in the historical-critical approach of Hermann Gunkel derives ultimately from the absolute separation of faith and reason that sprang from the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. This unreasonable separation of the objects of Christian faith from the objects of human reason tended to place the objects of faith in an "alternate world" from the world of reality that presents itself to sense perception and natural reason. On the basis of this false principle of separation, liberal Protestant thinkers felt invited to reduce the world of Sacred Scripture with all of its details to a fictitious world whose historicity was just waiting to be debunked. Richard Simon, the Catholic convert, was not a self-styled Rationalist, but he exaggerated the role of unaided human reason in his study of the Old Testament. He just thought his unaided reasoning was more solid than it was. The German Illuminist H.S. Reimarus (died 1768), was the founder of Rationalism as an explicit and self-styled approach to the systematic interpretation of Sacred Scripture with his *Apologia for the Rational Worshipers of God*.¹ In his work Reimarus launched a total attack against belief in the existence of any supernatural happenings, such as in divine Revelation and in the divinity of Jesus.

6. This general attack, on an even more thoroughgoing level, had already been made more than a century earlier by the Englishman Thomas Hobbes in his notorious work *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes was a complete materialist who denied the possibility of anything supernatural and even the existence of the human soul. It was his teaching that miracles do not take place, and so he reduced the reports of miracles recounted in Sacred Scripture to mere misinterpretations of natural events traceable to the gullibility of the onlookers. In fine, Hobbes characterized the New Testament teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven to be simply a misunderstanding of

the Kingdom of God on earth portrayed in the Old Testament. But Hobbes did not have any sound historical evidence for his theory.

7. By the mid-eighteenth century biblical scholarship had begun more sharply to distinguish itself into the fields of Old Testament and New Testament interpretation, but with the findings of each field having a strong influence upon those of the other.² The attack of Reimarus provoked a strong reaction from other Protestant writers, among whom was the philologist J.S. Semler (1779), who, however, sought to "save" the Gospels by giving natural explanations for the miracles recounted therein. He organized his approach under the name of "historical criticism." In his work he was inspired by the philosophy of Deism, according to which God is said to have created the universe in the first instant of time and then left it to run by itself. This theory enabled the Christian interpreter to avoid denying the existence of God while excluding any intervention of God into time-related events. It was used to justify the denial of the Providence of God, the existence of the supernatural, the possibility of miracles, and the divine inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures. H.E.G. Paulus between 1800 and 1830 followed the lead of Semler by accepting the fact that the "miraculous" events recounted in the Gospels as events really took place, while seeking to give a non-miraculous and merely natural explanation for each one of them. He claimed that it was the false opinion of the Evangelists that these events had happened miraculously. Paulus felt that he was thus giving a "rational explanation" of what the Evangelists present as miracles. D.G. Strauss felt that the Rationalist explanations presented by Semler and Paulus were inept, and so, in his *Life of Christ* (1835-1836), he had recourse rather to the Rationalist theory of "myth," inspired ultimately by the philosophy of G.W. Hegel. According to Strauss, myth is presented in the Gospels in the form of symbolic stories representing timeless ideas that constitute their true message, and it was to be the task of the critical Scripture scholar to identify these stories as myths and then interpret their message. Of course, Strauss took for granted in his reasoning that anything smacking of the miraculous never really could have happened, because miracles are ruled out by what he believed to be the "laws of historical development." Strauss' theory had a lasting impact upon historical-criticism, especially for his false distinction between the "Jesus of history" and the "myth of Christ." Soon after this came the widespread acceptance of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which attributed all things to random occurrences and put man at the top of a self-made biological transformation of species. Evolution was seen to be both the evidence that modern man and modern technology were at the summit of all being and the confirmation of the idea that Modernism is the way of the present and of the future.

8. From about 1885 onward, the cutting edge of historical-critical scholarship in Germany was merging into what soon became known as the History of Religions School, led by Albert Eichhorn, professor of church history at Halle. Adding something new to the already existing historical-critical method of isolating and analyzing the "myths" and "legends" in the Bible, Eichhorn maintained that any valid interpretation of a biblical "myth" or "legend" must take into consideration the origin and development of that myth or legend. Thus was born the "tradition-historical method of biblical research." Hermann Gunkel became the leading pioneer of this new method, which he embodied in his first major work, *Creation and Chaos in the Beginning and at the End of Time. A Religio-historical Investigation of Genesis I and Revelation 12* (in German, 1895). In this work Gunkel's attention was focused upon what he considered to be the history of the tradition behind the text of these two chapters of the sacred text. When he later came

out with his famous work, *Genesis* (first German edition, 1901),³ his attention was now concentrated on the history of what he saw to be the fictional "forms," or "literary genres" (*Gattungen*), that constituted the text. Thus was born the method of *Formgeschichte* (literally, "form-history," but which has always been called "form-criticism" in English). Take, for instance, the story of the creation of the world in *Genesis* 1. Historical-critics were already convinced that they knew that this story is a myth, for the reason that any depiction of the intervention of a god in this world is assumed by Rationalism to be mythological. But this myth is expressed in a literary form, and it was Gunkel's point that the myth could only be understood by tracing the development of the biblical literary form back to the pagan mythologies from which it was derived.

9. The literary forms identified in the sacred text by the form-criticism of Hermann Gunkel are not the literary forms which Catholic Scripture scholars have distinguished over the ages, such as the historical, the poetic, the prophetic, and the judicial. They are all assumed to be poetic in the sense of fictitious. For Gunkel "*Genesis* is a collection of legends," and a legend is "a popular, long-transmitted, poetic account dealing with past persons or events." Regarding the shock to believers in hearing that *Genesis* presents fiction and not historical reality, Gunkel explains that this revelation "does not involve belief or unbelief, but simply better understanding."⁴ This judgment depends upon the acceptance of Rationalism and Modernism. Yes, once one has accepted the total separation between the "alternate world" of faith and the real world of reason, one only needs to "understand" that the legends of *Genesis* belong to that alternate world. Gunkel avers that Jesus and his Apostles thought that the accounts of *Genesis* were historical events of the real world, but "they shared the opinions of their time," and so "we may not, therefore, seek information in the New Testament concerning questions of the history of the Old Testament literature."⁵ Gunkel assures us that he, as a "modern man," has of necessity a viewpoint that is superior to the primitive viewpoint of Jesus and his contemporaries. Of course, many highly educated contemporaries of Gunkel and of his successors did not and do not agree that the accounts of *Genesis* are fictitious, but from the viewpoint of Hermann Gunkel and, in general, of all Rationalist historical-critics, these modern men are not modern men.

10. Gunkel seems to be speaking for modern man where he says: "Following our modern historical world-view, truly not an imaginative construct but based on the observation of facts, we consider the other view entirely impossible." The legends of *Genesis*, he says, frequently relate extraordinary events "that contradict our advanced knowledge," and the tellers of these stories are not even aware of the great unlikeliness of what they recount. And so we would actually be doing "injustice to this naiveté," if we were to "incorporate it into sober reality."⁶ As a modern man he sees the outlandishness of such *Genesis* accounts as the Serpent speaking to Eve, Noah bringing every species of animal into the ark, and God walking in the Garden of Paradise, and he feels that the representatives in his time of the Evangelical Church in Germany would, therefore, do well to give up their refusal to see the first book of the Bible as a collection of fictitious legends in order to make possible for them "a historical understanding of *Genesis*."⁷ What Gunkel does not suspect is that his "modern viewpoint" is probably a mere construction of his own subjectivity that does not correspond to objective reality. Many great thinkers of his time and of ours, be they natural scientists, historians, philosophers, technicians, teachers, statesmen, or whatever, have a modern viewpoint that accepts the fact of miracles in the Bible. These thinkers are not wedded to Deism, to Rationalism, or to Modernism as a philosophy, nor

does reason require them to be so wedded, for Modernism is not based upon chronological fact; it's just an unsubstantiated belief of its own. Modern, non-Modernist, men of Gunkel's time and of our time have reason to accept that the fallen angel Satan could speak to a woman from the form of a serpent, that Genesis is not saying that Noah took two of every species of animals on earth into the ark, and that, when Genesis says that God "walked" in the Garden of Paradise, it is using an obvious anthropomorphism.

11. Gunkel shows that he is a Deist where he says: "We believe God works in the world as the quiet, hidden basis of all things. [. . .] But he never appears to us as an active agent alongside others, but always as the ultimate cause of all."⁸ On what does he base this belief apart from his prior belief in himself as a "modern man." Where there is no belief in the role of divine Providence, in divine interventions, in divine revelation, in divine inspiration, there is from our viewpoint no Christian faith. And there is always the great temptation to reject Christian faith, wholly or in part, in favor of the self-satisfaction to be had from thinking of oneself as a "modern man" whose own superiority of view overrides any and every suggestion of the supernatural, notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary.

12. Gunkel sees in the "primal legends" of Genesis both the presence of "weakened myths" and "a quiet aversion to mythology." By a "myth" he means "a story of the gods." Israel's strong emphasis upon monotheism would tolerate only "myths in which God acts alone, as in the creation narrative," or myths "in which the story takes place between God and people."⁹ But these "myths," as so identified by Gunkel, are obviously seen to be merely fictitious stories, since (the one true) God is for Gunkel always and only "the ultimate cause of all" and never plays any role in human history or the history of the world. In this description Gunkel may be retaining a residual belief in the existence of the one true God, but as far as his interpretation of Genesis is concerned, what comes out in the "primal myths" is the fictitious god of Israel, who is depicted as acting either alone or with people. In this interpretation there is no real connection between the god of Israel and the one true God of Christian belief. Gunkel finds that Israel's notion of its one god was derived from various pagan sources. He assumes a Babylonian influence for the primal legends (which he also calls "primal myths"), since, for early Genesis, Babel was the oldest city in the world, and he surmises that these legends came first into Canaan and were from there passed to Israel at the time "when it [Israel] was grafted into the Canaanite culture."¹⁰

13. Viewed in the objectivity of an adequate mental framework, the writings of Hermann Gunkel and other historical-critics provide a fertile source of material for the understanding of many texts of Sacred Scripture, not because their historical-critical conclusions are correct, but because they challenge the traditional thinker to find correct solutions to the problems that they raise. The works of Hermann Gunkel and other notable historical-critics deserve to be studied carefully and methodically, not according to their own method, but in such a way as to formulate correctly the principles of historical method and to separate the facts from a mere fascination for false ideas. It is important to have general observations about the reasoning and conclusions of historical-criticism, but it is necessary also to delve into the concrete expressions of its reasoning, after first having identified its governing principles.

14. We might begin in a general way by asking again whether Gunkel's "modern historical world-view" is really modern or is only Modernist. We might ask whether Gunkel's "modern historical world-view" is really historical or is only pseudo-historical. In the third place, we might ask whether Gunkel's "modern historical world-view" is truly "based on the observation of facts," or is only a biased view based on Rationalist presuppositions that do not coincide with the historical facts. These questions should always be in the mind of the critical reader. Do what Gunkel calls the "legends of Genesis" really "contradict our advanced knowledge"? To answer this question one needs to look carefully at what these "legends" are saying to us in a context of understanding that is in keeping with historical science, properly defined, and is, therefore, free of unproven presuppositions..

15. According to Hermann Gunkel, the patriarchal accounts of Genesis are legends, that is, they are poetic recastings of vague historical memories, into which later popular elements and even whole other figures have been interwoven (p. xvi). He sees these accounts as constructs fashioned from imaginary thinking, such as, from the idea that every different nation was descended exclusively from a different remote ancestor, in such wise that two closely related nations would be imagined to have descended exclusively from brothers or from the same mother. Thus, the close relationship of the Israelites, the Moabites, and the Ammonites would be explained in the popular imagination by their having descended from the imaginary brothers Abraham and Lot. How can Gunkel say that Abraham and Lot are mere figments of the imagination? He contrasts two ways of thinking. He says that mythical thinking sees all tribes and nations, "as having resulted through reproduction," whereas "we know" (in our modern historical thinking) that peoples form in quite different ways, "perhaps through the incorporation of foreign clans" or "perhaps through fusion of immigrants and natives" (p. xv). He believes that the writers of Genesis couldn't have known anything about what Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were like, even if they had really existed, because "everyone who knows the history of legends" is aware that, at a distance of so many centuries, the personal characters of these persons could not have been preserved (p. lxviii). So, in any case, they remain mere "literary figures" (p. lxix).

16. Gunkel's kind of modern historical thinking does not appear to be scientific thinking, since scientific thinking depends upon facts and makes clear distinctions as it proceeds. Perhaps the incorporation or perhaps the fusion of extraneous persons does not constitute a clear exclusion of blood descent, and, in fact, the Genesis account makes explicit provision for and gives many examples of the incorporation of extraneous persons into the nation of Israel. And it is clear from the entire Pentateuch that the Israelites lived under a severe prohibition of intermarriage with other peoples. Gunkel undertakes to erase the patriarchs from historical reality, not by means of historical evidence, but by deduction from such unproved general principles as that accounts like those of Genesis are necessarily a product of mythical thinking. Actually his conclusion is a product of unscientific thinking, for he here simply assumes without any historical evidence that the accounts of Genesis could not have proceeded from actual historical observation and experience, that orally narrated but real historical happenings could not have been preserved intact over centuries by human endeavor and by the help of divine Providence, that the writers could not have been guided by divine inspiration. These assumptions are unscientific in that historical science has as its object whatever happened and does not decide in advance what could or could not have happened.

17. Gunkel observes in broad perspective that the "primal legend" (the story of creation) is essentially of Babylonian origin, while the "patriarchal legends" are "essentially of ancient Hebrew origin" (p. liii). Yet, he also holds that these patriarchal accounts are not of Hebrew origin but pre-existed elsewhere as stories that "wander from people to people, from land to land, and from religion to religion" (p. xlvii). They are stories, he says, that originated somewhere as "pure products of the imagination," and were much later "given new meaning on Israel's lips" (p. xxiii). What historical evidence is there that the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were earlier floating around on the lips of other tribes and peoples? None. Gunkel is merely deducing from his idea of certain "epic laws" (p. xlii) that he feels are common to all folk literature. There are no such laws that would determine fictitious responses from individuals who we know were endowed with intelligence and free will nor laws that would exclude any divine inspiration and guidance. Gunkel assumes a virtual absence of free will where he says: "In addition the imagination powerfully excited by these accounts continued to work almost involuntarily." He readily admits that the narrators and hearers of these biblical stories believed that they were true, but, he maintains, they didn't have the intellectual capacity to distinguish fact from fiction (p. xxvi). And this is a gratuitous assertion. The Israelites were practical people; they were shrewd traders and realists. They called a spade a spade, a lie a lie, and a miracle a miracle. It is Hermann Gunkel who here seems to be laboring under a studied inability to distinguish the truth of Genesis from the fiction of the surrounding pagan literature.

18. Gunkel acknowledges that the text of Genesis speaks always of one god (the god of Israel), but he also sees here and there an "earlier polytheism" echoing through, such as in the "Let us" of Gen 1:26, in the "Come, let us go down" of Gen 11:7, in the appearance of the Lord to Abraham as three men in Gen 18, and in other places. He concludes that "all this cannot be based on one and the same God figure" (read "god-figure") (p. xlix). He maintains that a whole variety of god-concepts was transmitted in the legend material, and that Israel's Yahweh-figure was subsequently imprinted upon them all, thus elevating them to a monotheistic level (p. lviii). According to an ancient viewpoint that Gunkel thinks he sees in the text, Yahweh himself moves around during the time of the plagues in Egypt (Exod 11-12), while in a later view his messenger does this (2 Kgs 19:35). In an earlier view Yahweh inspired the prophets, while in a later view an angel did this. In an earlier view Yahweh conducted the Israelites through the desert (Exod 34:11), while in a later view an angel did this (Exod 20:16). In an earlier version Yahweh appeared to Hagar at the well (Gen 16:13), while in the later text it was the angel of the Lord (Gen 16:7). But in an even earlier version it was the pagan god of the place that appeared to her, and his name was "el roi" (p. 186). Thus, by using his method of form-criticism, Gunkel thinks that he sees behind the text of Genesis a primitive mythology moving through many intermediate stages to a final belief in divine providence and in the one god of Israel (p. lix).

19. It is interesting to note that all of the things that Gunkel thinks he sees behind the text of Genesis are only questionable detractions from what is already plainly written in the text of Genesis itself. There is no independent documentation of earlier stages to back up his theory. We know from the plain text of Sacred Scripture that Abraham's belief in the one true God replaced the belief of his ancestors in many false gods, but Gunkel's conclusion that the interventions of the one true God described in the text of Genesis are fictional renditions of

older stories about local pagan gods is not evident at all; it seems to depend mainly upon his own Rationalist presupposition that there could have been no real interventions of the real God. The stories of the patriarchs in the text of Genesis look very real to those who examine them without recourse to the Rationalist presuppositions of Gunkel's method. There are those Catholic scholars who say that these Rationalist presuppositions do not necessarily govern the method and that Gunkel's form-critical conclusions have merit in themselves. They quote and recommend Rationalist books with a certain abandon. I purchased a copy of the English edition of his Genesis as it was prominently displayed together with various Catholic commentaries in a large Catholic bookstore in Rome. Is this book as innocuous as some Catholic scholars seem to think?

20. The dangers of Rationalism have often been remarked in the teachings of the Popes. Back in 1832, Pope Gregory XVI pointed out the harmful element of pride in the "critical approach" to Catholic faith where he said: "It is the proud, or rather foolish, men who examine the mysteries of faith which surpass all understanding with the faculties of the human mind, and rely on human reason, which by the condition of man's nature is weak and infirm." ¹¹In this statement, Pope Gregory XVI is not speaking against the use of human reason in studying the mysteries of faith, and even more so in examining Sacred Scripture, but he is rather warning against relying on human reason motivated by an attitude of pride which actually obscures the mind and closes it to the light of objective truth. And this is the thinking of the Modernist who places himself and his mind over all that comes from the distant past on the ground that his modern mind is superior just because it is modern.

21. In his encyclical letter *Providentissimus Deus* of November 18, 1893, published at the very time that Hermann Gunkel and other members of the School of the History of Religions were refining the methods of historical-criticism, Pope Leo XIII called upon Catholic scholars to rise to the defense of the truth of the Sacred Scriptures and to oppose the Rationalist exegetes, "who, trusting in their turn in their own way of thinking, have rejected even the scraps and remnants of Christian belief which had been handed down to them" ¹². Pope Leo proceeded to summarize their Rationalist approach by pointing out that they "deny that there is any such thing as revelation, or inspiration, or Holy Scripture at all; they see instead only the forgeries and the falsehoods of men; they set down the Scripture narratives as stupid fables and lying stories; the prophecies and the oracles of God are to them either predictions made up after the event or forecasts formed by the light of nature; the miracles and the wonders of God's power are not what they are said to be, but the startling effects of natural law, or else mere tricks and myths; and the Apostolic Gospels and writings are not the work of the Apostles at all." Then the Pope calls upon scholars and all true shepherds of souls to let their hearts be stirred up so that this Rationalist "pseudo-knowledge" (1 Tim 6:20) may be opposed with "the ancient and true knowledge which the Church, through the Apostles, has received from Christ, and that Holy Scripture may find the champions that are needed in so momentous a battle." ¹³

22. Leo XIII went on to characterize the method of historical-criticism, then known especially under the name of "higher criticism," as it was being proclaimed by Hermann Gunkel and his colleagues, in the following words: "There has arisen, to the great detriment of religion, an inept method, dignified by the name of 'higher criticism,' which pretends to judge of the origin,

integrity, and authority of each Book from internal indications alone. It is clear, on the other hand, that in historical questions, such as the origin and handing down of writings, the witness of history is of primary importance, and that historical investigation should be made with the utmost care; and that in this matter internal evidence is seldom of great value, except in confirmation." [Otherwise], "this vaunted 'higher criticism' will resolve itself into the reflection of the bias and the prejudice of the critics, [. . .] and seeing that most of them are tainted with false philosophy and Rationalism, it must lead to the elimination from the sacred writings of all prophecy and miracle, and of everything else that is outside the natural order."¹⁴

23. Well over a century has passed since Pope Leo XIII published his condemnation of the method of historical-criticism, and during the intervening time there have occurred, among other things, various documents and decisions of the original Pontifical Biblical Commission, the condemnation of Modernism by Pope Pius X, an encyclical on Sacred Scripture by Pope Benedict XV, another encyclical on Sacred Scripture by Pope Pius XII, a document of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council treating of divine revelation, and the reconstitution by Pope Paul VI of the PBC in favor of Catholic historical-critics in such wise as to effect a somewhat ambiguous acceptance by the hierarchy of the Church of the method of historical-criticism. In 1993 the reconstituted PBC published a document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. In this document the PBC fully endorsed the historical-critical method as "the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts."¹⁵ Nevertheless, as the Commission pointed out in the Introduction to this document, "at the very time when the most prevalent scientific method - the 'historical-critical method' - is freely practiced in exegesis, it is itself brought into question, to some extent through the rise of "alternative approaches and methods," but also "through the criticisms of many members of the faithful, who judge the method deficient from the point of view of faith," some of whom maintain that "nothing is gained by submitting biblical texts to the demands of scientific method," and who insist that "the result of scientific exegesis is only to provoke perplexity and doubt upon numerous points which hitherto had been accepted without difficulty." The purpose of the present study is to propose the neo-Patristic method of biblical interpretation in place of what the PBC document of 1993 calls the "scientific method" of historical-criticism, and, by the way, to raise the question of whether the "scientific method" of historical-criticism is really scientific at all.

24. As noted above, the founder of the dominant approach of historical-criticism known as form-criticism is Hermann Gunkel with his celebrated commentary on the Book of Genesis. In this commentary he notes that through form-criticism one can discern the whole literary development of this book, precisely because its passages were never fused into a smooth literary whole, but rather that the cracks are visible to skilled "legend scholars," and, therefore, that "theologians should learn that without legend research, and especially without legend analysis, Genesis cannot be understood."¹⁶ In question here is what it means to "understand" the Book of Genesis. Does it mean to realize that the spiritual message of Genesis, such as it may be, is presented in fictitious stories resembling fairy-tales? Gunkel observes that "scholars have begun to see the basic form of account in the fairy-tale that focuses on people."¹⁷ Or does it rather mean to comprehend that deep and imposing realities are expressed in these biblical narratives, in historically true episodes that carry a supernatural dimension unrecognized by historical-critics? Historically and theologically valid analysis may reveal the answer.

25. First some general definitions. It is necessary to begin from an adequate concept of historical science. In its most general denotation, science is "the knowledge of the real as such." This means that science is the knowledge of what is real under the aspect of its reality. The notion of reality is the defining characteristic of all science. There are two basic levels of science: common science, also called common sense, and technical science. The difference is that technical science uses precisely defined terms and reasons with rigorous logic, while common science uses loosely defined terms and sometimes less rigorous logic. In ordinary parlance, when people use the word "science," they are referring to technical science, but technical science itself can be one of two kinds: genuine science, which presents reality as it is; and pseudo-science, which may have precisely defined terms and may use rigorous logic, but which reasons from one or more false governing principles with the result that it does not present reality as it is.

26. We take history to be "the knowledge of the past as such." The defining characteristic of all history is the past seen under the aspect of its being past. Within this category, historical science is "the knowledge of the real past as such," while fiction is the knowledge of the unreal past as such." Included within the category of fiction is historical pseudo-science, which pretends to be technically scientific, but which may use terms that are not precisely defined and always reasons from one or more false principles.

27. In the present discussion, it would seem at first that Hermann Gunkel's historical-criticism is an historically scientific way of analyzing the text of the Book of Genesis. He distinguishes the legendary accounts of Genesis from modern scientific historical accounts and divides them into fictional literary genres. Hence, he is working under the concept of reality and analyzing the Genesis accounts, not in terms of their fictional elements, not by taking the stories as narratives of historical reality, but by uncovering the real historical processes according to which the original stories developed into the stories of the final text. But did such an historical development really take place? Does Gunkel's analysis of the separate accounts in Genesis really stand up under scientific historical criticism? It is amazing to learn that over more than a century of use of his book there has been practically no searching criticism of his method, even on the part of Catholic exegetes who have followed this method. Gunkel's method presumes that everything miraculous narrated in the Genesis accounts and every intervention on the part of the one true God are historically unfactual and need to be given a natural explanation. Is this presumption in keeping with historical science? I would say that it is not. Natural science is limited to the observation of natural facts and occurrences, but historical science is not. A natural scientist as such cannot record the occurrence of a miracle or of any divine intervention in the world of physical reality, but he is obliged to accept the results of those higher sciences that can observe supernatural occurrences, and historical science is one of these, because historical science observes whatever has taken place in the past and must accept these occurrences without excluding in advance what exceeds the workings of physical nature. Therefore, the evidence for a happening is what concerns the historian and not whether or not the happening is within the bounds of a natural occurrence. But Gunkel's method, because it is governed by the false principle of Rationalism, excludes in advance even without any evidence the recorded reality of every happening that exceeded the workings of physical nature, and, therefore, Gunkel's method is not historically scientific.

28. The plain text of Genesis shows a studied intent to record real history as it really took place. Gunkel assumes without good evidence that the writer of Genesis was not able to distinguish fact from fiction and so wrote falsehoods without clearly realizing that he was doing so. Gunkel's method places the burden of proof for historical truth on the text of Genesis, not on the critic of Genesis. This means that everything recounted in Genesis is assumed to be unfactual or to be on the verge of being assumed unfactual according to the latest accepted opinion of historical-critics. Any other plausible explanation is deemed better than acceptance of the supernatural, and the only criterion of judgment is whose explanation is the most plausible. But plausibility is not proof, and its strength lies largely in the bias of the critic as he reviews the strings of plausibility that he and other historical-critics have provided. Thus, the entire system stands on weak and shifting grounds (cf. no.4 above) .

29. The traditional Catholic approach assumes the historical truth of the accounts in Genesis unless there is solid evidence to the contrary. While Hermann Gunkel and other historical-critics would have us believe that the text of Genesis presents historical contradictions from beginning to end, these so-called contradictions tend to dissolve one by one as the reasonings of the historical-critics are carefully examined. What needs to be done in the case of Hermann Gunkel and of the many historical-critics of Genesis who have succeeded him is to systematically examine and refute their analyses of Genesis on a line-by-line basis and thus restore the historical integrity of the sacred text. It is unfortunate that this work has not been done up to now. Historical-critical commentaries on the text of Genesis present a great challenge to traditional exegesis, which, if effectively taken up, will enable impressive advances in the understanding of the text, since the critics are raising new questions that need to be addressed.

30. Gunkel's historical-critical approach to Genesis is not a Christian approach. The first few chapters of Genesis, narrating the creation of the world and the creation and fall of man, provide the world-view of Christianity. To exclude the interventions of the one true God recorded in the Book of Genesis and throughout the Bible on the ground that there could be no divine interventions is to exclude Christian faith. Traditional Catholic Christian faith accepts and affirms these divine interventions as having taken place within the one continuum of reality known to human reason and rejects the idea of an alternate world of Christian belief that would not have place in the same univocal realm of reality. Gunkel's approach fails to recognize that the presence and activity of the one true God as recorded in the Sacred Scriptures is contained within the one continuum of reality known to science and thus misrepresents the sacred text.

31. Hermann Gunkel distinguishes between legend and history in this that legend usually originates as an oral tradition, while history generally appears in written form and presumes the practice of writing. Again, Gunkel finds that history deals with great public events, while legend treats of personal and private matters dear to the people.¹⁸ These distinctions display an imperfect conception of history. What eventually appears as history in written form can have earlier existed in memorized form. And history doesn't just deal with great public events; it deals with any event of the real past. Thus, biography pertains to history. The Gulag Archipelago of Alexander Solzenitzen is a work of history, even though for years before it was finally written

down it was history only in memorized form. And many narrators in ancient times had marvelously accurate memories. Gunkel's method assumes that writing was totally unavailable to the traditions of the Hebrew Patriarchs until rather late in Hebrew history, even though writing existed all around them. What real evidence does he have that these shrewd traders were totally unable to read and write? And his method of biblical interpretation completely denies the possibility that a true account of past historical events could have been preserved intact over a long period of time in an oral tradition even through the aid of divine Providence. It also excludes the possibility that the sacred history of the past could have been revealed wholly or in part to the sacred writers through divine inspiration. Again, his method does not consider or even suspect that the events recorded in the first eleven chapters of Genesis could embody the true historical tradition of early human history as it was handed down from the time of Adam and Eve and their early descendents through the various peoples, an historical tradition which was transformed by pagan poets in the surrounding cultures into the distorted versions so well known to and exploited by historical-critics, but which appears intact in the biblical accounts. In Gunkel's historical-critical analyses the pagan accounts are always considered to be older and more authentic than the biblical accounts, but what real evidence is there that the biblical accounts do not represent the older tradition? Gunkel thinks that his view is based upon "the observation of facts," but what Modernist thinker, what modern astronomer, what natural scientist has observed the forming of the universe, the rise of vegetative and animal life on earth, or the emergence of man on the face of the earth? Only God and the angels observed these things as they took place, and only they could have communicated these facts to the tradition behind the biblical accounts. So the inspired world-view given in the first chapters of Genesis is actually more based upon the observation of facts than is the "modern world-view" proposed by Hermann Gunkel.

Endnotes

1. Reimarus finished this 4,000-page work shortly before his death in 1768 but did not have the courage to publish it. Lessing published seven extensive extracts of it between 1774 and 1778 under the title of Anonymous Fragments.
2. A good introduction to the background and development of the historical-critical school of biblical research (especially with regard to the Gospels) is given by Giuseppe Ricciotti in chapter 13 of the *Critical Introduction to his Life of Christ* (1941; English translation, unabridged edition, Bruce Publishing, 1944), titled "The Rationalist Interpretations of the Life of Jesus." In this Introduction Ricciotti expresses another kind of historical criticism, not so much of the Scriptures as of the history of the method of the historical-critics.
3. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, first edition, 1901). The references in this article are to the English translation from the third German edition, 1910. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997).
4. Gunkel, *Genesis*, pp. vii-viii (both quotations).
5. Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. viii.
6. Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. x.

7. Gunkel, Genesis, p. xi.
8. Gunkel, Genesis, p. x.
9. Gunkel, Genesis, pp. xii-xiii.
10. Gunkel, Genesis, p. I (= p. 50).
11. Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari vos*, no. 22, in Claudia Carlen ed., *The Papal Encyclicals* (McGrath Publishing Co.), vol. 1 p. 240.
12. Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, no. 2, in Claudia Carlen ed., op. cit., vol. 2, p. 326.
13. Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, no. 10, in Claudia Carlen ed., op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 329-330 (*Enchiridion Biblicum* no. 100).
14. Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, no. 17, in Claudia Carlen ed., op. cit., vol. 2, p. 334 (EB no. 119).
15. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), opening words of chapter I.
16. Gunkel, Genesis, p. lxxxvi.
17. Gunkel, Genesis, p. lxvii.
18. Gunkel, Genesis, p. viii.