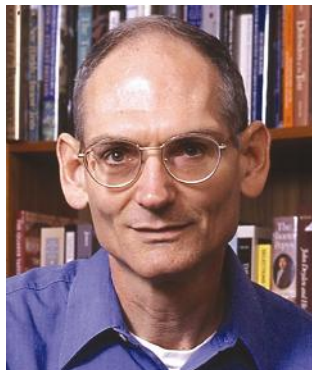


## Robert Coote, San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union



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In nearly forty years of teaching, I have gone through many ways of regarding criticism. Lately I have used communication theorist David Zarefsky's account of argumentation to define it. For Zarefsky, to be critical is to make provisional judgments before an audience about matters that are significant but uncertain, by use of evidence and reasoning, in the common pursuit of truth or good decision, with a willingness to run the risk of being wrong.

Criticism is not all-sufficient, it is not autonomous, and it is not absolute. With reason on the defensive in theological education, these obvious qualifications must be clearly stated at the outset. I have posted the following quote on the corkboard next to my office door for several years: *Qui rationem in omnibus quaerunt rationem subvertunt*, "to seek reason in all things is to subvert reason." The object of reason is limited. The reasoning subject — you and I — is no less limited, by enculturation, experience, and feeling. However criticism is not solipsistic, unlike many of today's "Bible studies." The public and cooperative aspects of argumentation put the limitations of our individual views in perspective. With respect to method, criticism is inherently rhetorical, serving to persuade rather than to prove. And to understand the Bible critically we have to look at not only the Bible's past but also our own present. In order to take the Bible

seriously on its own terms, critical reason is essential because of the nature of the Bible as a vast and composite ancient text. Reading it involves many complexities and ambiguities. Three years ago, when her book, *The Trouble with Islam*, came out in the United States, Muslim author Irshad Manji was asked by detractors how she could understand the Koran since she was expelled from the madrasa at age fourteen. “I got kicked out for asking questions,” she replied, “which is a very scholarly thing to do. And I spent the next twenty years studying Islam on my own. I acknowledge that the Koran is difficult and complicated. I celebrate that.”

The same is true of any body of scripture, including the Bible. Because most areas of theological inquiry involve complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty, they must be approached critically. For no theological subject is this truer than for the Bible. Noticing contradictions, for example, is a long-established and effective way to introduce complexity and ambiguity in the Bible. Contradictions are fairly inescapable in the textual evidence, so it is easy to understand that deciding upon the text of a passage or a book — or the biblical canon, for that matter — is a basic critical (and confusing) task. Once presented with what is usually new information, most students begin to grasp the ambiguities entailed by questions like “What exactly is the text of this passage or book?” or “Which books make up the Bible?” Beyond textual and canonical questions, the historical contingencies that produced the Bible may be conceptually more challenging, and certainly less tangible, but again students usually appreciate, more or less, the implications of a question like the perennial and momentous “Who wrote the Bible?”

Such entrees into biblical criticism make educational sense because of the nature of the Bible, with its complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties. Eventually students come to realize that the Bible itself presents views and positions that appear to — and often do — contradict each other. The Bible is long, not because it is a shaggy-dog story leading up to a simple clear point, but because it is the product of more than a thousand years of polemical faith in the context of ever-changing circumstances.

Because the Bible was written through a process unlike our own and which we do not well understand, and in different times, places, and languages, interpreting the Bible always involves significant uncertainty. Increasingly in my teaching, I have stressed cultural differences between the biblical world and ours, and consequently the sheer uncertainty of understanding the Bible. As the truism has it, the more we know the less we know. The interpreter who gradually understands why this is true of the Bible, and who nevertheless wants to take into account what can be known about the Bible, not only welcomes a critical perspective but insists on it.

During my most recent sabbatical I devoted months to rereading Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56–66). I hoped to reach uncharted waters sooner rather than later, and in this I was not disappointed. I expected to notice things about the text I had not noticed before, but not in such quantity. The journal of observations and insights I kept expanded quickly. My eyes were opened anew to the opulence of verbal and thematic connections within Third Isaiah and between it and the larger book of Isaiah. Commentators frequently mention and make lists of such connections, but these are no substitute for seeing for oneself where they lie and what weight they bear. The richness and complexity of Isaiah were reconfirmed, and the coherence of Third Isaiah again impressed me, and I was exhilarated.

At the same time I was exasperated. The Hebrew text of Third Isaiah is often impossible to understand. I had been reading the Bible for thirty-six years in Hebrew, including all of Isaiah several times. I was nevertheless reminded how vexingly uncertain our understanding of the Bible is in so many of its parts. Time and again I was faced with uncertainties of text, vocabulary, idiom, poetic form, pronominal references, and more. Much is known, and perhaps our understanding grows by increments, but much is still inconclusive, uncertain, or obscure. Intense study of the biblical text leaves one frustrated by its indeterminacy and, at the same time, by the glibness of the church's everyday use of the Bible, where there is not too much critical thought but too little.

For years, I regarded the purpose of my teaching as that of modeling critical reasoning as a way to add to our understanding of the Bible in the face of our inevitable ignorance. I still try to do that. But I have backed up a step. My syllabus now states that the main purpose of an introduction to the Old Testament is to foster inquisitiveness. To study the Bible critically does require knowing things as much as acknowledging there is always something more to know, and our further answers are never any better than our further questions. What students take away from my course is not so much the content, or even particular methods, but a style or manner of exploration that can assess the critical value of innumerable questions that arise when reading the Bible.

Criticism involves not just the intellect, but also character. I begin my introductory class with a prayer for virtues, or qualities of character, that contribute to critical learning. These include openness, honesty, courage, patience, humility, and sense of humor. I endeavor both to model these qualities and to encourage them in students.

The clearest demand of biblical study upon character comes from its uncertainty. Unless students encounter uncertainty, they have no reason to reason. So I start by encouraging students to ask questions. "While reading the Bible in translation, make a continuous but brief

written log of the following: items that seem to be particularly important for the larger story; items that are particularly interesting or intriguing; items that are extraordinarily odd, strange, or surprising; items that I find weird, outrageous, or offensive; and items that I simply don't understand." For the first several weeks of the course, students share their findings with one another. I treat this exercise as a paradigm of discovery and detection not to be left behind with increasing knowledge of the Bible, but to be embraced as a lifelong practice.

In a course on preaching from the Bible that I have taught for many years, together with a church pastor and a homiletics professor, the first exercise requires students to choose a brief passage from a gospel and, after studying it for a few minutes, to stand before the class, read it out loud, and complete the sentence "What this passage makes me wonder is...." That is all. Students are not expected to provide an answer or solution or resolution for their query, but to value the discovery of what is not known. When preaching from the Bible, there is no reason to pretend to greater certainty than when studying the Bible. Critical study can produce answers to questions; but certainty is not what criticism is about.

Critical study assumes the ability to reason, which cannot be taken for granted in theological education today. It is not a skill that is different for biblical studies than for other theological disciplines. Criticism starts by doubting that I understand. Students may find such doubt regarding the Bible uncomfortable for their faith, or even immoral. I don't deny the perceived dilemma. To suggest otherwise, though, I quote Annie Lamott: "The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is certainty, and madness."