Benjamin Jowett would certainly count in most people's judgement, as a 'biblical critic'; but was he an historical critic? And what did he mean when he wrote that the Bible should be interpreted 'like any other book'?¹

In a striking essay in the Zimmerli Festschrift² Professor Brevard Childs traces a development by which, he thinks, the idea of the 'literal sense' of scripture came to be dominated by that of the 'historical sense' and this latter in turn dominated by the concept of the 'original sense'. As he puts it (p. 89 of his article), in this new approach, which was basic to modern biblical criticism:

"The historical sense of the text was construed as being the original meaning of the text as it emerged in its pristine situation. Therefore, the aim of the interpreter was to reconstruct the original occasion of the historical reference on the basis of which the truth of the biblical text could be determined. In sum, the sensus literalis had become sensus originalis."

According to Childs (ibid., p. 88), 'a fundamental characteristic of the critical movement was its total commitment to the literal sense of the text'. But, since the literal sense now came to be controlled by the idea of the historical sense, and since this latter was understood as the original sense, it no longer meant the same thing as 'literal sense' had meant earlier (see the interesting survey by Childs
on his pp. 80-87). Historical criticism, instead of explaining
the text in itself, works by research intended to discover
something behind the text, either the circumstances of its
origin or the extratextual facts to which it refers:

"The explanation of the biblical text is now
governed by historical research. The role of
the literal sense of the text functions to pro-
vide a way behind the text to some historical
reality" (ibid., p. 90).

Thus, Childs goes on, 'the literal sense of the text itself
has lost all significance' (!). Exegesis guided by historical
criticism is preoccupied with origins and 'the literal sense
dissolves before the hypothetical reconstructions of the
original situations on whose recovery correct interpretation
allegedly depends' (ibid.). Attacks on these tendencies are
frequently repeated in Childs's Introduction to the Old
Testament as Scripture and other works, and need not be
further documented here.

Childs maintains that this change of meaning, by which
the literal sense came to be understood as the original sense,
had become commonplace by the nineteenth century. The
example he offers is that of Jowett, of whom he says that,
though he 'shook the orthodox Anglican establishment to
its roots' by his essay 'On the Interpretation of Scripture'
in Essays and Reviews (1860), he was 'simply drawing some
of the rather obvious implications from an understanding of
scripture which had been increasingly assumed by European
scholars since Ernesti' (ibid., p. 89). Childs goes on:

"He argued that the Bible was now encum-
bered with layers of secondary, often pious,
interpretation which needed to be removed.
Just as one critically sifted the writings of the
Greek historians to recover the historical
truth, so the Bible was to be read 'like any
other book'. Jowett wrote: 'The office of
the interpreter is not to add another [inter-
pretation], but to recover the original one:
the meaning, that is, of the words as they