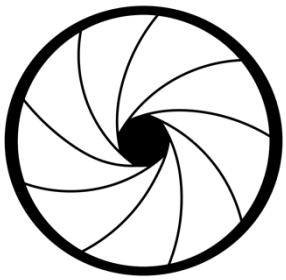
Reading the Bible as History:
Two Essays on Philosophy, Biases, and Challenges



by

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WHAT IS HISTORY AND HOW DO WE SEE IT?

Usually when we write biblical history, we do so by examining specific events and their influence upon the narrative. For example, we discuss how the Exodus impacted the revelation of the Torah or how the reign of David set Judah on a particular trajectory. The French economist François Simiand called this "the history of events."[1] This approach to history does not consider the larger scale of human development, but focuses instead on tangible, specific events which can be seen to represent historical forces. Thus, you might discuss the Protestant Reformation by summarizing the work of Martin Luther and John Calvin. They represent the Reformation, at least in northern Europe, and studying them is sufficient to offer a glimpse into the period.

The issue with presenting history only as a series of events is that we start thinking of it as major events with nothing of importance occurring in-between them. Looking at the Reformation, historians are aware that Luther's influence during the Protestant Reformation was not due solely to his charismatic character or writings. There were much greater long-term forces at work which shaped the events of his life and, in addition, allowed for his influence. Luther was not the first churchman to call for the reformation of the ailing and corrupt European Church. In fact, it was "in the air" of his day. There were few people unaware of the corruption of the Church. The factors that contributed to Luther's success and the rise of Protestantism were complex and spanned centuries.

Simiand pointed out that historians tend to ignore these long-term factors, which leads to a sort of historical idolatry. In his thinking, the event historian's obsession with great events and historical "heroes" fails to explain the events of the past. It also contributed to a sort of isolation of these individuals and events from their worlds. To continue with the example of Martin Luther, he tends to be lifted out of his context and made a sort of man out of time. Luther is often depicted as waging a solo campaign against the tyrannical church. Other significant people, some of whom contributed substantially to mythologizing Luther even in his own time and therefore feature in the events, are reduced to shallow, unidimensional characters in the story of the great man. Historical forces which had been at work, from the failures of medieval Europe to the collapse of the Byzantine empire to the introduction of technologies (other than the printing press) are simply tools in the hands of the hero.

Annalistes and Longue Durée

Contra this type of history of events, early twentieth-century historians, particularly those of the French *Annales* movement, have attempted to describe history in terms of large forces, to see history as a continuum of slow progression. This type of thinking has similarities to Marxist history, which likewise sees history in terms of large-scale forces over long periods of time, but Marxist history is teleological, meaning that it has a specific ideological endpoint. Marxists believe history is driving *toward* the Marxist utopia, which colors their thinking about the historical forces and creates biases that the *Annaliste* historians would argue are too subjective to be accurate. The intention of *Annaliste* history is to observe history with as little subjectivity about intent as possible. Some of the influence of this type of historical method may be due to the time when the *Annales* movement gained popularity, the era immediately following the destruction of the two World Wars. The rejection of

[1] *Historie événementielle*. For discussion and a summary of Simiand's view of history, see Philip Whalen, "François Simiand," in *New Historical Writing in Twentieth-Century France: French Historians, 1900–2000*, ed. Philip Daileader and Philip Whalen (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 573–88.

the single influential figure resonated with Europeans after Hitler, arguably the most influential human of the century, had turned hero worship into unparalleled horror.

The discussion of *Annaliste* method is too extensive to get much deeper here, but one particularly element is extremely important. This is their view of the *longue durée*, which literally means "long duration" but perhaps should be better rendered as "long term" or more idiomatically, "largest possible scale." The idea is to see historical change as stretching out over a large expanse of time. Rather than observing a single event and saying, "this is when things changed," taking the *longue durée* view is to argue "this event was part of this process of change."

Since we have been discussing the Protestant Reformation, let's take a moment to return to it and take the *longue durée* view. In her essay "Continuity or Radical Change?" Jeannine Olson mentions a significant component of the Reformation which almost never gets highlighted in history books.[2] Luther's popularity is undeniable, and the appeal of his preaching to the common people is readily observed, but the medieval period was full of preachers who countermanded the Church and were popular with the common people. Their work rarely survived a generation. Luther's teaching, on the other hand, led to a series of incredibly bloody and destructive religious wars. The reality is that these wars were less about the Protestant rejection of Rome than they were about forces already at work which came to the surface of history due to the Reformation. The German princes had a long history of chafing under the rule of Rome and the political influence of the supposed Catholic monarchs in France and Spain. Likewise, the English had perhaps and even longer history of operating independent of continental Christianity. The German aristocracy splintered into Lutheran and Catholic factions less because Luther had convinced some of their superior religious views and more because adopting those religious views allowed them to operate independent of the medieval "Christendom" model. While Luther's work brought these issues forward, it was a catalyst, and not the cause, of Europe splintering.

There is no Complete Map

There is a temptation, however, to treat the *longue durée* as some kind of total history. It is not. All history is reductionist by definition, and we should always be aware of this. One of the best illustrations of is found in Lewis Carroll's lampooning of a German mentality that was prevalent in the academic of his time. This concept was called *Wissenschaft* or "total science." In essence, the German academics believed that *all knowledge* could be reduced to science and therefore could be fully quantified, analyzed and codified into laws. Carroll, who is best known for his work *Alice in Wonderland,* presents an old professor from a distant country that sounds a lot like a German university. The professor is called 'Mein Herr' and he explains to two street children that only way to build a true map is to have it at a scale of one mile to one mile. The German academic remarks that his people made such a map, but it has never been unfolded because the farmers in his country

[2] Jeannine Olson, "Continuity or Radical Change? Care of the Poor, Medieval and Early Modern." in *Bridging the Medieval-Modern Divide: Medieval Themes in the World of the Reformation*, ed. James Muldoon (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 157.

objected that it would block the sun. "So, we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."[3]

Carroll's *reductio ad absurdum* is meant to illustrate the flaw in the belief in absolute objectivity as well as "total history." Although the Germans may not have intended *Wissenschaft* to be taken to the extremes that it was taken, but nonetheless the reality is that there are many who treat history as if it must be bound to the "laws" of objective science. This has never been the nature of history. "Mein Herr" and his countrymen accomplished nothing in producing a map that was a perfect representation of their country because it failed to reduce the "all" to the "necessary for scale." Every historical effort from every age must balance comprehensiveness with usefulness as a story. History is, after all, the story of the past. It is not, however, an exhaustive list of past events. Historical events are those which exert influence upon the present, or rather the present as perceived by the author.[4] David Lowenthal offers us three maxims that summarize this reality:[5]

1. No historical inquiry can retrieve the virtually infinite sum total of past events.
2. No account can recover any actual past, for no past was a mere account. The past is a complex set of situations and events, and since we cannot retrieve everything, any history is a reconstruction.
3. Historical knowledge, no matter how consensually verified, is necessarily shaped by both narrator and audience. Neither party can escape their own frame of reference. We tell the story of the past *in the present.*

All of this means that no matter what approach you take to history, you are *always* dealing with only part of the past. The history of events is punctiliar, choosing specific points of time to represent larger forces. The *longue durée* approach attempts to show continuity and a broad perspective, some of which becomes so broad as to no longer be history.[6] What individuals (including scholars) view as history is inherently limited, by both internal and external parameters.

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[3] The journey of discovering this somewhat obscure nugget is curious one. It started with listening to lectures from Michael D.C. Drout on the topic of fantasy literature. He mentioned the short story "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1," by Umberto Eco. (See Umberto Eco, *How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays*, trans. William Weaver (Boston: Mariner Books, 1982), 95–106.) Eco's essay is an extrapolation of Jorge Luis Borges' "Del rigor en la ciencia," which is in turn based on Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Included* (London: MacMillian, 1893), 169. In Carroll's book, the character who relates the story of the map is an old man called "Mein Herr." The map story is one of many absurdities meant as clear criticisms of German academia.

[4] This is a complex epistemological discussion. For a philosophical consideration of the topic, see Adam Schaff, *History and Truth* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1976), 167–196.

[5] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country - Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 336–40.

[6] The largest possible scale of this approach is called "Big History," a term coined by David Christian, a professor of Russian history at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. See David Christian and William H. McNeill, *Map of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, California World History Library 2 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004). Big History attempts to tell the *entirety* of history, from the origin of the universe until the present, in a comprehensive, uniform way.

Black Swans and Historical Anomalies

There is also a temptation to believe that the *longue durée* approach will yield a "truer" history than a history of events. In the whole, this could be said to be true, but history is not as smooth and seamless as the *Annalistes* sometimes thought it should be. This is because as regular and predictable as human events can sometimes be, there are always unexpected aberrations. In the writing of history, such an event is referred to as a "black swan." The term was borrowed from the Roman writer Juvenal by Elizabethan writers in England in the late 16th century to describe something that is impossible.[7] Then, in 1697, the Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh discovered *actual* black swans in swimming in a river in Western Australia. Since then, the term has morphed to indicate something that is *highly improbable* rather than impossible.

In history, a black swan event is defined as an event which is (1) highly improbable, (2) cannot be predicted by any current models, and (3) of a significant magnitude or scale that it alters the course of history. Events which meet these three criteria are exceedingly rare. By definition, they the general direction and force of history. Taking an example from recent history, it would be easy to classify the terrorist attack on New York City on September 11, 2001, as a black swan event because of the impact it had on the course of history. In reality, however, al-Qaedi was a *known quantity* in the world. They had attempted several other high-level terrorist attacks, and the intelligence community was aware of the potential for a high-level attack like what occurred. Although the attacks met the third criteria, the attacks were considered almost inevitable, and they were not only predicted but predicted repeatedly.

On the other hand, a subterranean earthquake centered on the sea floor 45 miles off the coast of Japan in 2011, caused a tsunami that produced one of the greatest natural disasters in modern history. The disaster struck during the winter, accompanied by snow and freezing temperatures. The Fukushima nuclear power plant was hit, and due to a series of failures of human and mechanical controls, three of the reactors melted down, dumping radioactive water everywhere. In the end, nearly 20,000 people were killed, and there was somewhere around $235 billion in property damage. Over 300,000 people were completely displaced from their homes. To date, it is estimated that there are still a million tons of debris from the tsunami somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

The disaster meets all three criteria of the black swan event. While earthquakes are relatively common in the Pacific Rim, this one measured 9.1 on the Richter scale which makes it the fourth most powerful earthquake on record.[8] This, combined with the event occurring near a nuclear reactor in winter, meant it was highly improbable and unpredictable. There can be no doubt that it altered life in Japan in a radical way.

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[7] The term is taken from Juvenal, *Satire VI:160–66.* Juvenal uses the idea of a black swan to indicate something impossible. *"'Nullane de tantis gregibus tibi digna videtur?' sit formonsa, decens, dives, fecunda, vetustos porticibus disponat avos, intactior omnicrinibus effusis bellum dirimente Sabina, rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cycno, quis feret uxorem cui constant omnia?*" (So, is there a woman among these great herds/flocks who lives up to your standards? She can be beautiful, graceful, wealthy, fertile, displaying her ancestors in the colonnades, untouched [by man] as the wild-haired Sabine women who stopped the war. She would be the rarest bird on earth, a black bird like a swan! But who could stand a woman who was perfection itself?) The term has since become popularized by Wall Street analyst Nassim Nicholas Taub in *Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and the Markets* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[8] The most powerful was the 1960 Chile earthquake, at 9.5, which shook the entire Pacific rim. The most deadly, however, was the 2004 quake in Indonesia, which killed over 200,000 people.

It is far more likely for a black swan to be a natural event because of the unpredictable nature of such events. Famine is a common theme throughout the biblical texts and most ancient records.[9] This was a common problem in the Levant, because agriculture was both essential and highly unpredictable. Before the development of modern farming technologies, climatological extremes could radically change crop yields and result in almost immediate population crises. This was especially true in areas such as the Levant (modern day Israel, Lebanon, and Syria) where agriculture was dependent upon annual rainfall. Too little rain, and the crops would dry up. Too much rain and mildew and mold could damage the crops.

Egypt was able to sustain a relatively stable society in the Nile River valley because the flooding was predictable. So predictable were the floods that the Egyptian year was divided into three seasons: *Akhet* (flooding), *Peretor* (growing), *Shemu* (harvesting). Still, black swan events could occur. The reign of Ptolemy III went from success to success, waging war against his rivals the Seleucid. By 246 BC, his armies were at the gates of the Seleucid capital, but then he had to turn around abruptly and return home to quell an uprising. The cause? The Nile had failed to flood for a second year. Farmers rose up to demand that Ptolemy provide grain, which he did at a substantial expense. The reason for the flood failure was a mystery until 2017, when a correlation between volcanic activity and the floods was noted.[10] Using ice core data and comparing the timeframes to the records of the floods, it became clear that somehow volcanic activity had affected rainfall in the mountains which feed the Nile, resulting in drought.

Another, more recent black swan was the Black Death, which decimated the population of Europe in the late 14th century is a good example.[11] Wiping out as much as *half* of the population of Europe in just five years, the Black Death essentially marks the end of the medieval period. What historians call the Late Middle Ages (1300–1500) were really a low point for European history, a period of disease, economic collapse, and petty warfare. Populations were only just recovering from the Great Famine of 1315–1317, but the Black Death tore out the heart of the continent and laid the groundwork for the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Consider another type of event which might be considered a black swan: *divine intervention.* In modern historical method, the supernatural is relegated to myth. This is not because historians necessarily discount the reality of the event (although many do). It is because there is no historical method by which one can account for a divine intervention. The parting of the Red Sea (Exod 14:1-13) or the destruction of the Assyrian armies outside of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 19:32–37) are recorded *as* history by the biblical authors. Indeed, the song of Moses (Exod 15:1–21) is generally considered to be one of the oldest texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, marking the parting of the Red Sea as a very, very old part of the story of Israel, and yet there is no way to account for it by human means.

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[9] The Hebrew word is *rāʿāb*, which can mean anything bad or evil.

[10] Joseph G. Manning, et al., "Volcanic suppression of Nile summer flooding triggers revolt and constrains interstate conflict in ancient Egypt," *Nature Communications* 8 (2017): DOI: 10.1038/s41467-017-00957-y

[11] For a sense of scale, the Black Death came in three forms. The most survivable was bubonic plague, which had a survival rate of around 20%. One in five people would survive and have some immunity to the plague. The other two forms, pneumatic and septicemic, had survival rates of under 1%. Most scholars estimate that in the five years of the plague's greatest virulence, more than 25 million Europeans died, out of a population somewhere around 75 million. Globally, the death toll could have been as high as 100 million, fully a quarter of the world population.

Balanced Historical Appreciation

There is therefore a certain irony that *most* of history can be defined by the *longue durée*, and yet the black swan events are far and away the most influential, as presented in the biblical record at least. We cannot interpret history as only defined by the peculiar and unusual; but we also should not be so inflexible as not to allow for events and people who violate expectations.

In order to best understand history as presented in the Bible, it is necessary to find a balance. The *longue durée* provides us with a baseline for the flow of history while being willing to embrace that at times, highly improbable things happen. Is God speaking to someone from a burning bush a *normal* historical event? No. It is an extraordinary event, one which cannot be shown to be normative for history overall. This does not, however, mean that it is not historical, nor does it preclude us from accepting it as factual.

Tremper Longman, III has referred to the Hebrew presentation of their history, as it comes to us in the Hebrew Scriptures as "theological history."[12] What Longman means by this is not that the history is conformed to a theology, but rather history is how we represent the past. The biblical authors *chose* to represent the past with a clear theological understanding at both the explicit and implicit level. To them, God is as real and as active as any human agent or natural force. As an active agent in their long history, God is given his place in the history; and that place is at the pinnacle of all history, for the Israelites specifically but for the world in general. Critics will argue that if the biblical history is ideologically motivated, it cannot be true history. Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman respond with common sense. "There is no account of the past anywhere that is not ideological in nature, and therefore in principle to be trusted more than other accounts."[13] If they are correct, then we have to taken it as given that no matter how aberrant events in the biblical record may be, there is no reason *not* to accept them as historical unless they can be definitively proven to be false.

This does not mean, however, that we blindly accept our own theological reading of the text. If there is a theological matrix that aids in interpreting the Scriptures, it is the theological matrix of the authors and original audiences. A sound theological reading is not a reading from a preexisting theological dogma.[14] To interpret the Scriptures without earnestly attempting to do so from within the theological matrix of the original author and audience inevitably leads to what theologian Robert Carroll's warning that there can be "an ecclesiastical captivity of the Bible."[15] This is not an academic problem or a liberal problem. It is a universal tendency that when information is received in a vacuum, we interpret it in alignment with our own context and beliefs. It is assumed that the

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[12] Tremper Longman, III, *Introducing the Old Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 82–83.

[13] Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 68.

[14] This will be discussed in depth below.

[15] Robert Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christians* (London: SPCK, 1991), xi. To this might be added, with some qualifications, the tendency to project Christian theology back into the Hebrew Scriptures. This was Gerhard von Rad's concern as he approached the Hebrew Scriptures, and he attempted to envision an Old Testament theology in which any Christological anticipations in the Hebrew Scriptures. See Gerhard von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. John Bright (Atlanta: John Knox, 1963), 36.

authors express enough of this shared theology to inform the modern reader of their beliefs, explicitly or implicitly.

One important step in preventing the imposition of an external theological system is to embrace and acknowledge the presuppositions we bring to the text. As the New Testament scholar Ben Meyer puts it, "the way to objectivity is through authentic subjectivity."[16] This involves not only the admission of one's own presuppositions as well as acknowledgement of the presuppositions of secondary sources, but also the assumption that the biblical text itself already has meaning encoded in it, giving the reader access to a real past. Put in the context of Old Testament studies, one might consider why there is a bias against anything in Scripture which lacks "non-biblical control evidence," as Miller and Hayes put it.[17] These two writers proceed to reject the historicity of much of the early history of Israel based upon their criteria for control evidence, but as Provan, Long, and Longman point out, once one goes down that road uncritically, it results in a "principled suspicion of the whole Old Testament in respect of historical work."[18]

History and Historiography

A note on terminology is appropriate here. To those outside of academia, the distinction between "history" and "historiography" may seem to be unimportant, but they represent two quite different disciplines. **History is the reporting of the past, based on facts as known by the reporter.** The telling of history is fundamental human behavior. As the 19th century historian Thomas Carlyle once wrote, "Some nations have prophecy, some have not: but of all mankind, there is no tribe so rude that it has not attempted history."[19]

One of the more confusing aspects of ancient histories, especially those from Mesopotamia, is the mixture of what we would separate out as history and myth. There was no clear division between the "real" world that we can perceive and quantify and the supernatural world, the realm of deities and spiritual beings. The borders were blurry. This does not, however, mean that the ancient histories are *not history* just because they do not meet our modern definition of history. It does mean, however, that we must exercise discretion in our reading of history, especially ancient history. We cannot read ancient history as if it was written by a modern author, to our modern standards.

Historiography, on the other hand, is essentially the study of history writing. It is the examination of the influences upon the historian and the way that the historian presents his history. History is more or less the record of what happened, but historiography answers the question *why* was what happened recorded the way it was. Take for example, the differences between the books of Samuel-Kings and the Chronicles. In large part, these two sets of books report the same information and tell more or less the same story of Israel's history as an Iron Age secondary state. When one

[16] Ben F. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 4. CR is mostly a New Testament discipline. To the author's knowledge, it has not been employed on a large scale in Old Testament studies.

[17] J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 74.

[18] Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 55.

[19] Thomas Carlyle, "On History," in *Works of Thomas Carlyle*, vol. 2 (New York: AMS Press, 1969, reprint), 83.

looks at the two in parallel, it becomes clear that the chroniclers have a very different approach to the record. The chroniclers omit any hint of David's failings as a king, and they omit his predecessor Saul entirely. The historiographer attempts to determine the reason that these omissions occur while also asking why Chronicles includes extensive genealogies and draws theological conclusions about the events of Israel's history.

Allow me another biblical example. During the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, an Assyrian emissary known as "the Rabshakeh" presents an argument for the besieged people to surrender (2 Kgs 18:19–25). Writing of this event, historian Richard Briggs asks whether this passage preserves an exact transcription of the Rabshakeh's words. "It is one thing to suppose that this speech had some historical backing, and another to suppose that its delivery in the midst of fraught negotiations … would have enabled some form of memorization of transcription of the actual words."[20] What Briggs proposes is that imposing a modern historical view, which has been conditioned by the ability to make exact audio recordings or at least transcribe text using assorted disciplines such as shorthand or technology like the typewriter or computer, would not reflect the worldview or theological purposes of the original author. Even if the text is "historically constrained," it nonetheless preserves a vital moment which can be trusted to articulate the intent of the author to present the situation.[21]

We must not fall into the common misconception that since the biblical record is not modern history, it is not history at all. There are many scholars who view the Hebrew Scriptures through the lens of what Provan, Long, and Longman call the "verification principle." This is the view that the biblical text should not be treated as historical unless it can be corroborated by extrabiblical evidence. Thinking beyond the Scriptures, they ask, "how much history, ancient or otherwise, would we 'know' about if the verification principle were consistently applied to all testimony about it?"[22] We might also ask how much verification is required before a text is accepted as historical. Inevitably, the quest for verification is a quest for falsification. It is a subjective standard by which one can simply protest, "There's not *enough* evidence to satisfy my expectation of historicity." Historicity becomes a moving target, guided by the historian's bias for or against the text.

To combat this bias against the historicity of the text, Provan, Long, and Longman propose that commentators first accept that "there is no account of the past anywhere that is not ideological in nature, and therefore in principle to be trusted more than other accounts."[23] In their view, truly critical thinking embraces the realities of the biblical record. One certainly must engage with data beyond the Scriptures, but when the image being reconstructed from this data is considered "more historical" than what is provided in Scripture, it is easy to see the danger of creating our own version of events.[24]

> "There is no good reason to believe that just because a testimony fails to violate our sense of what is normal and possible, it is on this account more likely to be more than

[20] Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 76.

[21] Ibid., 78.

[22] Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 55.

[23] Ibid., 68.

[24] Provan, *1 & 2 Kings*, 19–21.

> another; and there is no good reason to believe, either, that an account which describes the unique or unusual is for that reason to be suspected of unreliability."[25]

Put another way, our own perspective is not the measure of what is/was historical to the authors and audience. As Richard Nelson puts it, "the major interpretive problem with this narrative is that most of its modern readers will simply be unable to believe that it actually happened."[26] On the other hand, there may be those who say it not only happened, but happened *exactly* as described, including a verbatim reproduction of the actual dialogue in its entirety. This is the concern about things like the Rabshakeh incident already discussed. We must accept that the theological history of the biblical text *does* present the facts of the past, but that does not make it *synonymous with* the past. What we have is a historical record, presented in its own historical context and constrained by its own historical boundaries.

It follows then that in order to properly study the biblical text, we must understand not only what is being reported but the way in which it is being reported. Finally, we need to be highly critical of our own position. We need to appreciate that biblical interpretation requires a little bit of self-historiography. We cannot read history without *also* being aware of the distinctions between the world into which that history was written and our own. The hard part of that awareness is learning to prefer the original context over our own for interpretation.

[25] Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 70. This approach is completely contrary to those like Dever, who argues that "appeals to miracles or divine intervention as explanations of events must be dismissed by the modern historian as unsatisfactory." Dever, *Beyond the Texts*, 31.

[26] Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 242.

DEVELOPING A THEOLOGICALLY ROBUST APPROACH

> *"To assume that it makes no difference whether [the biblical events] are facts or not is simply to destroy the whole basis of the faith. Or even to infer that these facts, if they are such, are irrelevant, would to the Biblical mind be a form of faithlessness or harlotry."*[1]

In their relatively recent volume, Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III argued for a profound reexamination of our thinking in terms of biblical history. These authors asked, "what sense does it make in our pursuit of knowledge of Israel's past, therefore, to adopt the kind of principled distrust of major sections of, or even the totality of, the Old Testament that is often evidence in the histories of Israel of the past two hundred years?"[2] This is a valid question. What value does the biblical record have if it is not historical? And yet, we have to admit that the biblical record is dependent upon the supernatural in relating events. As we have seen, this *should* shift the biblical record into the realm of myth. Can we find a path to affirm both the supernatural and the historical? In this chapter, we will explore the mindset of the biblical authors in regard to the supernatural and consider (to the best of our ability) how they would read the text themselves.

The Supernatural as Realistic History

Mark Gignilliat has argued that text can be read faithfully only when it is read within its own theological framework.[3] The distance of time and culture makes it difficult to fully recreate the theological stream of the ancient Hebrews, but to read the biblical texts and exclude the supernatural and miraculous is to read them in such a way that would have been alien to the original historical context. Within the theology of the authors, supernatural events and miracles were not literary devices. Their worldview was fundamentally supernatural in its character, deriving all identity from the intervention of their God, and their recording of their past is, as Longman refers to it, "theological history."[4] At the risk of being a bit too reductionist, the worldview of the authors of the Hebrew Scriptures can be reduced to three core tenets.

Tenet 1: God is a Necessary Being in the Biblical Worldview. The Bible is meaningless if there does not exist a necessary being who is God. In his consideration of the *shema* (Deut 6:4–5), theologian R. W. L. Moberly notes that the appearance of such a clear declaration of dependence upon YHWH in Deuteronomy, which he calls "the Old Testament's most systematic account of the relationship between YHWH and Israel, whose perspectives inform substantial parts of the histories and the prophetic literature,"[5] indicates that the Hebrew worldview was one which embraced the

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[1] G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, Studies in Biblical Theology 8 (London: SCM Press, 1952), 126–27.

[2] Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 54.

[3] Mark Gignilliat, "Theological Exegesis as 'Exegetical Showing': A Case of Isaiah's Figural Potentiality," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010): 217–32.

[4] Longman, *Introducing the Old Testament*, 82–83.

[5] R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 8.

necessity of God's existence.[6] One might summarize it this way: *God is real and active.* The authors of the Hebrew Scriptures believed this, and any attempt to separate this necessary being from history to determine the "true" version of the narrative, creates what Gerhard Maier called "the diastasis between truth and reality."[7] It is dismissive of the biblical authors' faith and truthfulness to do so.

As previously mentioned, the *shema* articulates this theological realism: "YHWH your God is one" (Deut 6:4). This statement presupposes the absolute existence of the Israelite God. The necessity of God as creator is present in the creation epics (Gen 1–2). At times, this necessity is implicit in the narrative, as in the case of the encounter with Naaman the Aramaean (2 Kgs 5).[8] In the narrative, the kings of both Israel and Aram are relegated to minor roles. Even the prophet Elisha is somewhat veiled in the narrative, never directly addressing Naaman. According to Moberly, "it is this combination of the universal with the particular, of God and a privileged human context for knowledge of God, that is so distinctive of the Bible. It is foundationally present in the Old Testament."[9] The presence and power of YHWH is manifest in the miraculous healing through the almost absurd order Elisha gives to Naaman, but without YHWH's reality, the healing would not have occurred in any fashion. Again, Moberly emphasizes that for the ancient Israelites, it was not a matter of choosing what form of belief they might embrace—polytheism, monotheism, atheism, or some other arrangement. God's existence is the definitive mystery at the core of the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures.[10]

In his essay, Maier emphasizes two peculiarities of Israel's attitude toward history which lend to seeing their works are "true history." First is Israel's emphasis on history as the work of one God, not the acts of great men or multiple gods. This kind of unifying divine attribution *could* be the result of editing, but the diversity of texts in Israel's historical record is vast. Second, he remarks that "the Hebrew root word *zākar* [[remember]] expresses a spiritual-personal bond that includes an active component—for example, the obedience of a thinking man. This bond arises from the historically

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[6] Today, this is referred to as *theological realism* (TR). Realism is the belief that objects exist independently of observation. Theological realism therefore is the belief in the independent or necessary existence of God, despite the empirical observability of his existence. As a corollary of this, it also holds that God is knowable in creation. The specifics of the argument are nuanced. For a more complete discussion of the definition, see Thomas F. Torrance, "Theological Realism," in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 169–96; Janet Martin Soskice, "Theological Realism," in *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell*, ed. William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 105–19; Sue Patterson, *Realistic Christianity in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12–32. Theological realism is not without its critics. Andrew Moore, for example, argues it is too imprecise for the Christian believer because it is grounded in the philosophy of science rather than God's self-revelation in Christ. This is a valid critique, but it is a Christian one, which does not directly speak to the realism of the Hebrew Scriptures. See Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21–40.

[7] Gerhard Maier, "Truth and Reality in the Historical Understanding of the Old Testament," in *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. V. Phillips Long, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 196.

[8] This fascinating exploration of YHWH's necessity not just to Israel but to all nations is the subject of a chapter in R. W. L. Moberly, *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the Divine in Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 165–202.

[9] Ibid., 197.

[10] Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 40.

experienced care of God."[11] At various point, the invocation to "remember" that YHWH is present is a call to awareness of his necessity, of his reality in the events of life (Exo 3:15; Isa 26:8; Hosea 12:6), or in one case, the end of remembrance in death (Ps 6:6).

God is therefore necessary in the biblical worldview. Since biblical history records the remembrance of a *long* history of a single God's participation in the lives of a covenant people, one must at least allow for the possibility that the memories would not have been subject to "normal" conditions. In other words, Maier takes the position that Israel's history is unique. It was more carefully guarded and required exactitude, not just verisimilitude, because of their adherence to theological realism.[12]

Tenet 2: God Should Be Seen as Active in Israel's History. "To treat the Bible as a source—as evidence for some natural phenomenon "behind" it—is to deflect attention away from the texts are saying (as testimony) in favor of a hypothetical reconstruction of 'what actually happened'."[13] Modern readers tend to believe that since God is not perceived as active in the world today (relative to the Hebrew Scriptures), there is no reason to argue that he was so engaged in Israel's history. This is erroneous in two distinct ways. First, we tend to forget that God's actions in Israel's history were *exceedingly rare* and concentrated in *very specific occasions*. Israel's history has only one Moses, only Elijah. The supernatural was not an everyday occurrence, and the biblical record treats it as such. *When God intervenes it is just as extraordinary as it would be today.* Second, the argument that the portrayal of God as active is a fiction demeans the original audience of the text and treats them like gullible dupes willing to accept fiction as the basis for their cultural understanding. Indeed, the fundamental notion that must be accepted in such a view is that some sort of powerful class, whether priests or literati or some other group, presented a history which included supernatural elements to support their own ideology.[14]

Accepting that the authors of the Hebrews Scriptures adhered to a theological realism then logically leads to the assertion that there will be a present involvement of God in the history of the Israelite people. As Longman recently put it, "to take the biblical accounts seriously, accounts that describe God's intervention in history, one needs to think there is a God who can so intervene."[15] In harmony with Longman, Paul R. House presented four reasons one must read the supernatural in the Book of Kings as historical:

(1) If God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, then he controls and safeguards the natural order.
(2) As creator and sustainer of nature, God is able to control any changes in nature caused by a miracle.
(3) Supernatural events which advance the well-being of God's chosen people would be in keeping with his nature.

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[11] Maier, "Truth and Reality," 202.

[12] Ibid., 204.

[13] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 17.

[14] Tremper Longman, III, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies: Pressing Questions about Evolution, Sexuality, History, and Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 61.

[15] Ibid., 60.

(4) Scripture indicates that miracles occur in the lives and history of people who are presented in realistic terms. He concludes, "one might not accept that they actually happened but must do so for reasons based on something other than historical, literary, or theological data."[16]

Again, the testimony of the biblical authors bears this out. There is an expectation in the biblical worldview of God's active involvement. The psalmist anticipates God's involvement in his crisis (Ps 13:1–2, 35:17, 90:13). The prophets anticipate the judgment of God upon the peoples of the earth (Isa 19:2; Habb 1:2). Despite the apparent silence of God at times, there was a belief that he would indeed act. God's hearing of the Israelite's pleas and his response are fundamental aspects of the Exodus narrative (Exod 3:7–10). God's activity is seen as both sustaining the natural order and violating it in supernatural acts and miracles. Such violations are exceedingly rare, and yet God is fully capable of them.

Tenet 3: Biblical Literature as Fiction Does not Reflect This View of God. Those who reject the historicity of Scripture will often resort to describing the text as "realistic narrative" while resisting the idea that the world of the narrative has anything but a tangential relationship to the real history.[17] They say that the stories exist because they teach us something abstract about God, not because they teach historical events. Longman argues that if the biblical "stories" did not happen, then the message is meaningless. If, for example, the Exodus did not occur, how can it teach a lesson about God saving his people? The very idea of God saving his people who are living in and making history must be grounded in history in order to be valid.[18] A fictional story which illustrates a moral point, such as a parable, need not be historical; but a narrative upon which a people are expected to build their entire worldview and indeed *have* built their worldview in the case of the ancient Israelites, needs to be true.

Ancient people were capable of discerning whether stories were factual or not. They were also capable of discerning the difference between a literary structure and a historical fact. While there might not be many examples of this preserved in the biblical text, it is still observable in the ancient world. As Michael Graves demonstrates, ancient thinkers in both Judaism and Christianity were not afraid to raise critical questions about the biblical text.[19] Whether their protests were well-founded or not, the capacity of people in every age to discern fact from fiction should be accepted *a priori*. Assuming that the ancient readers of the biblical texts were incapable of this discernment or disinterested in whether their narratives concerning their God were factual is, to put it bluntly, condescending toward them.

Every genre of biblical text emphasizes truth over falsehood. At the foundation of this principle is the command against bearing false witness (Exod 20:16) The narrative of Balaam ends with Balaam blessing the people of Israel and when challenged he replies, "Must I not take care to speak

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[16] Paul R. House*, 1, 2 Kings: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC 8 (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 53–54.

[17] Iain W. Provan, *1 & 2 Kings*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 19.

[18] Tremper Longman, III, "History and Old Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address,* ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 98.

[19] Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 75–79.

what the LORD puts in my mouth?" (Num 23:12). Truth is lifted up as a virtue (Ps 15:2; Prov 12:7). In the Torah, there are specific commands against false prophets (Deut 13:1–5). The Deuteronomy prophetic text assumes that false prophets are capable of signs and wonders, a theme picked up from the Exodus narrative (Exod 7:8–13). In fact, the text even places Moses's words in the mouths of the false prophets (see Exod 8:1, 10:7). Discerning between false and true prophets is an exercise of belief (Deut 6:4–5), but it is necessary for faithfulness to YHWH. The rebellion (*sereh*) of following false gods must be met with repentance (*šôb*), a theme present throughout the Book of Kings (1 Kgs 8:47–48, 13:33).[20]

Section Summary. If the mindset of the biblical author and audience included the supernatural, active work of God in history, then excluding the supernatural when interpreting the text would be a violation of the author's intent and the original perception. While advances in science and technology have certainly improved many aspects of society, there is a tendency to believe that since our society is so advanced, others must necessarily have been primitive or inferior. This is especially true in interpretation of the supernatural or "irrational" in the biblical text. Rather than discarding these biblical materials, the reader should engage them with the intent to understand and value the thinking of those who composed them. Thus, Longman's perspective must be taken seriously. This does not, however, mean that we disengage the critical aspects of perception. Abandoning the critical engagement of the text is no more profitable than elevating it above the text in the first place.

The Need for Critical Engagement in the Historical Realities of Scripture

Provan warns that we cannot "insulate both text and reader against the chilly winds of historical inquiry" by separating text from history. Christians who surrender the historicity of the biblical text to historians who deny the existence of the supernatural are abandoning a core aspect of the very texts they are relying upon for their faith.[21] We cannot, however, simply abandon historical realities and assume that the Scriptures are isolated and self-contained. That will yield an equally unbalanced approach to the texts. If the reader is to incorporate historical evidence with the biblical record, it is necessary to do so critically. To that end Kevin Vanhoozer has articulated three warnings about the use of the term "theological" when describing the process of reading the biblical texts. These warnings pertain to RM approaches, with their inherently low theological views, as well as those pursuing a more theologically robust approach.[22]

Danger 1: Imposition of an External Theological System onto the Biblical Text. This has been touched upon already (pages 6–7) but the danger of this is so important it should be discussed more thoroughly. With 3,000 years of Jewish tradition and 2,000 years of Christian interpretation, the biblical text is often weighed down with theological systems. Our readings *will be* informed by these systems, even if we are not trained in them.

[20] See Paul E. Dion, "Deuteronomy 13: The Suppression of Alien Religious Propaganda in Israel during the Late Monarchical Era," in *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel,* ed. Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson, JSOTSup 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 147–216. Dion outlines quite a bit of now-neglected scholarship on the preexilic, prophetic nature of Deuteronomy. He also notes the relationship of chapter 13 with chapter 17, which some scribes placed together (as in the Temple Scroll).

[21] Provan, *1 & 2 Kings*, 20.

[22] Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament,*16.

Consider, for example, the sweeping theological generalizations made about the appearance and behavior of the being known to us as "the Devil" or "Satan." The popular image of a horned, cloven-hoofed, being with arched eyebrows and a forked tail is so familiar in western society that it can be evoked subliminally and unconsciously. This is exactly what happened with the depiction of "Mr. Spock" in the original *Star Trek* television show. When Leonard Nimoy, who played the character, was sent the first promotional images, the studio artists had removed his arched eyebrows and pointed ears. The show's creator, Gene Rodenberry, told Nimoy, "They think the Bible Belt viewers are going to find the character too 'satanic.' Don't worry. We're keeping him just the way he is."[23] Why was Mr. Spock's appearance going to be perceived as satanic? Because people had unwittingly been influenced by the medieval depictions of demons in sculpture and illuminations.

Even those who are aware that this idea of a satanic look is unbiblical will tend to unconsciously project this medieval idea upon their reading of Scripture. So, for example, people will tend to believe Satan tortures people in hell. This idea comes not from the Scriptures but from medieval art. If we read what happens in the gospels, it seems that Satan and the evil spirits are tied to our world, rather than having dominion over hell or any other existence. Jesus repeatedly refers to the devil as having dominion over aspects of *this world*, not of the world to come (Matt 4:8–9; John 8:44, 12:31, 14:30). The devil is headed toward the final, eternal fire rather than ruling it (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:1).

The popular impressions we have of Satan and the satanic *are* theological, even though they may not be described in any systematic theology.[24] That said, the root of the misunderstanding is historical, not theological. The fall of the Western Roman empire resulted in a failure of literacy. Even church clerics were largely illiterate. This meant people drew their beliefs from visual representations—icons, passion plays, altar decorations, and later stained-glass windows. To clearly differentiate between good and evil, these depictions employed dramatic elements. Thus, in Eastern Orthodox depictions, Satan is a black, winged being, sometimes with horns while angels and saints are brightly colored and visible. The contrast made it plain that the light would conquer the dark. Folk religion, which was rarely informed by the biblical text as much as cultural norms, influenced our thinking further. The idea of the afterlife being filled with demonic tormentors probably had its roots in the conflict of European Christendom with the Muslim *Dar al-Islam* ("house of submission") which spanned from the sixth century CE through the Crusades and into the modern world. During the Crusades, prisoners on both sides were subjected to horrible cruelty and undoubtedly some observers drew parallels to the Muslim view of torture in Jahannam, their afterlife for the unrighteous (Q. 66.6). Prisoners in Jahannam were tortured by the Zabaniyah or "merciless angels" (Q. 96.18).[25] In an illiterate society, soldiers arrayed against a threat to Christendom would

[23] This story is related in Leonard Nimoy, *I Am Spock* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 26.

[24] Systematic theology is the most common type of theology. It consists of theological assertions and biblical proofs, following a template of logical argument that dates back to the Greco-Roman world. Many of the theological labels often employed in discourse such as "Calvinist" or "dispensationalist" come from systematic arguments.

[25] These ideas likely come from a mixture of pre-Islamic folklore, Jewish traditions, and non-biblical Christian literature like the 4th century CE "Apocalypse of Paul." Islam *was* informed by both Christian and Jewish sects. Both religious groups were present in Mecca when Muhammed supposedly began receiving revelation from Allah.

inevitably see Islam as aligned with the Devil and if Islam tortured prisoners, it only made sense that the Devil did.[26]

This brief discursus shows how biases can be deeply engrained in our thinking, but the issue goes beyond such sweeping discussions of popular perception. One's own theological bias can be brought to the text. Consider as another example the obsession with identifying the Antichrist in some circles of evangelicalism. The idea is nothing new, with early Christians identifying various Roman emperors as the Antichrist, and Martin Luther pointing to Pope Leo X. Through the centuries, various Antichrists have been identified. Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, Henry Kissinger, and even Donald Trump have been identified by various commentators. And yet, nowhere in Scripture is the term "antichrist" used to refer to a world leader in this way. The only place the term appears is in the letters of John (1 John 2:18, 22, 4:3; 2 John 7). There, it is clear that John has in mind the spirit of *opposition* to Christ, not a global leader. All the same, Christian literature is filled with ideas of the Antichrist. Perhaps the best-known today is the character Nicolae Carpathia in the best-selling *Left Behind* apocalyptic fiction series. Theologies which focus on a powerful individual as the Antichrist will project this idea on the biblical text.

Hopefully, these two examples show how dangerous it can be to bring presuppositional theological systems to the biblical text. For this reason, deductive systematic theology is best subordinated to inductive *biblical theology*. Biblical theology attempts to ask what the biblical authors believed, rather than seeking out confirmation of what we believe. It is highly critical of our own biases and subjectivity. That said, we must also admit that *all* theology has some bias in it. As Ben Meyer asserts, "the way to objectivity is through authentic subjectivity."[27]

Not only are we biased, but so were the biblical authors. They presuppose certain elements of their theology, which we might find in conflict with our own. We are called to identify these biases and cultural affinities. Thus, it should not surprise us if a biblical psalm has marked similarities to a hymn to Ba'al found in the ancient library of Ugarit. The biblical authors would not have been overly concerned about adapting something already in the culture for their own purposes, turning it on its polemical head to bring glory to the true God rather than a false god. We should likewise not be surprised that YHWH is sometimes presented as "chief among the gods" (Ps 93:5, 135:5) and these other gods *appear* to be treated as real. We assume that the Israelites were fully monotheistic, but this is clearly not so. To some extent, the ancient Israelites *accepted* the existence of other powers that could be considered divine, even as they viewed YHWH as the one true God. This is a paradox to us, but our perception is based on millennia of monotheism in our Western views. The Israelites lived in a different world where such a thing was not presupposed. Our theological bias must be set aside, to the extent we are capable of doing so.

Danger 2: Application of a General Hermeneutic to the Biblical Text. The Hebrew Scriptures are written works. This means they must be read. While the previous sentence may seem self-evident to many, it is an important point. The act of reading involves interpretation, and our method of interpretation is called our *hermeneutic*.

[26] Much is made about the western world being called "The Great Satan" by Muslim religious leaders in Iran, but Christian rhetoric generally viewed the Muslim world as "The Great Satan" for centuries. Identifying both Islam and Judaism, as well as every non-monotheistic religion, as being part of Satan's plan is nothing new.

[27] Meyer, *Reality and Illusion*, 4.

- All written works are considered *texts*. What is a text? At its most basic level, a text is "a series of signs that fixates the unified sense of something spoken."[28]
- A text only be *read* if the person examining the text (the reader) can understand the form of language which the text has been produced in.
- For a text to be *understood* by the reader, the reader must have some knowledge of the intent of the text.

Anyone who has seen most high school students reciting Shakespeare or Chaucer can have an appreciation for the difference between *reading* a text and *understanding* of the significance of the text. Take, for example, the line from the hymn "There is a Fountain":

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

Within the context of Christian theology, these words are understood to speak about the atonement for sins through Christ's death, which is drawn from Hebrew 9–10 This concept is married with the images of baptism—a fountain, being plunged and cleansed of sin. Without that context, however, how would these lines be read? Why would Christians celebrate a *fountain* of blood? What gory rituals involve filling such a fountain. Who is Immanuel? Again, without the biblical narrative and knowledge of the way in which Christ fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah, there would be no correlation between Immanuel and Christ. Why does guilt *stain* the sinner? Do all sinners feel guilt? Or is this judicial guilt?

On top of this, we must ask whether the expressions of language that make up this text are meant to simply represent a concrete meaning or if they are *figurative* and *literary*. These latter categories describe a text which "ceases to be merely a tool for the expression of thoughts and becomes instead an object of interest in its own right."[29] Think of the finest piece of poetry you have ever read. How is that poetry to be understood? Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts? True literature transcends simple textuality. Simple textuality is sufficient for receipts or elementary school book reports. Literature expresses great truths in creative and thought-provoking ways.[30]

It is easy to see why the reader must have *some* insight into the intent of the text in order to read it properly. How do we read it effectively. Hermeneutics are the means by which we develop an *understanding* of the biblical text, since we are so far removed from the original cultural context.

A *general hermeneutic* assumes that a work conforms to a single interpretational schema. In other words, *all* of the book is uniform in its literary form. A science book is a non-fiction science book. The entire book can be read flatly as a presentation of scientific facts for the reader to accept.

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[28] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Eminent Text and Its Truth," *The Bulletin of Midwest Modern Language Association* 13 (1980): 4. 3–10.

[29] John Barton, "Reading the Bible as Literature: Two Questions for Biblical Critics," *Literature & Theology* 1 (1987): 148.

[30] Here, I have to break with the ideas of most critics who agree with John Barton that the Bible is literature, since Barton et al. believe that literature is fictional and non-affirmative. Hence, I do not treat the Bible as *literature* but rather as *literary*. The distinction Barton makes is an artificial, modern one.

The Bible is *not* a single book, nor does it simply present facts. It is a varied anthology of works, from many different genres, written with a multitude of styles and literary nuances. Various authors express themselves within their own theological matrices while often interacting with the wider matrices of preceding and contemporary authors.

As a result of this phenomenon, the reader of the Hebrew Scriptures must adopt *special hermeneutics.* The Book of Esther cannot be read in the same way the Book of Job should be read, nor should Deuteronomy be received in the same way that the Book of Proverbs is. There are significant distinctions to keep in mind.

- **Genre and Style:** Is the particular work poetry? Prose? Discourse? Recorded speech? Song? Wisdom? Is it elevated? Technical? Revelatory?
- **Diachronic Language Location:** What markers exist in the language to place it on a spectrum of language development? Is it early? Late? Does it show signs of borrowing from other sources?[31]
- **Historical Context:** What events led to the writing? How far removed is it from the events it records? Were there intermediary sources?
- **Audience:** Who was the text written for? How did that intention affect choices, style, inclusions, omissions?
- **Personality:** What was the author like? How does he or she report the events, and what does that tell us about the author themselves?

A general hermeneutic cannot take all of these matters into consideration. It can only deal with the broad categories, and it will inevitably fall short when discussing a complex collection such as the biblical texts.

Additionally, the biblical texts, even taken together, are not accommodating of a general hermeneutic that might be applied to other works. The biblical texts should not be read as if they can be interpreted "like any other book."[32] This is not to say that the biblical texts do not utilize idioms, conventions, and concepts from their contemporary world. It is to say, however, that when approaching the Scriptures, we must do so with a theological hermeneutic.[33] First, one should not read the biblical texts as if they are not unique in their character and language from human literature. The biblical texts speak to the character of the living God, as described earlier in this text. Second, however, one cannot read the Hebrew Scriptures in the same way that the New Testament is read. Indeed, the genres and types within the Hebrew Scriptures are varied. The canon of Scripture has a

[31] A language can be studied either *diachronically* or *synchronically.* A diachronic analysis attempts to understand development over time. Synchronic analysis examines language at a point in time. In the case of the biblical text, a synchronic analysis examines the text in its received form. The dichotomy between the two methodology comes from the teachings of French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who warned against an overemphasis on "laws" of development in language, going so far as to argue, "diachronic facts are forced upon the language, but there is nothing general about them." Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1986); trans. of *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1916), 79–98.

[32] Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament*, 16.

[33] For full length treatments of a theological hermeneutic, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Landmark in Christian Scholarship (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, repr. 2009); Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Christopher R. Seitz, *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004).

number of voices. Speaking of a number of crises in the contemporary church, Seitz has written, "our crisis has to do with the failure to know how to use the OT theologically and doctrinally. Our crisis has to do with not knowing how to deal in a balanced and appropriate way with the dual voice of Christian Scripture."[34] Our approach to Scripture is inevitably informed by our theology, but we must be cautious and read the texts as they are, in their own unique setting and style. Our theological hermeneutic must incorporate the best of all disciplines, theological and secular, but we must think critically enough to understand their role as tools rather than as boundaries.[35]

Danger 3: Treating the Biblical Text as a Natural Work. The supernatural being treated as normal necessarily precludes the biblical text as being "just another book." It was written to be read with a bias toward the supernatural and divine. Therefore, it cannot be received as a natural work. It is not just the same type of book writ large. It is a different order of book.

If these last couple of sentences sounds dismissive, that is not the intent. The intent is to convey the conviction that the Bible *is not* like other books and so should not be evaluated as a natural work. Post-Enlightenment Christianity seems obsessed with "proving" the veracity of the biblical text through natural means. This kind of thinking was quite prevalent during the late 19th century, after the publication of *Origin of the Species*. In this time, *all* phenomena were considered natural and within the reach of scientific explanation.[36] Christians attempted to meet the standards of scientific naturalism, but these standards intentionally "separates Nature from God, subordinates Spirit to Matter, and sets up unchangeable laws as supreme."[37] The Bible does not conform to natural law, and as a result, any attempt to read it according to natural laws will strip it of its essential elements. There is simply no room in a theologically robust approach to the texts for the rejection of the supernatural aspects, and those who approach the Scriptures with an intent to read them as they were intended must set aside such interpretational approaches which "bracket out a consideration of divine action," as Vanhoozer puts it.[38]

On the other hand, we are not free to totally dispense with reason and logic in our study of Scripture. Proper biblical interpretation means balancing critical thinking and theological

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[34] Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 181.

[35] Craig G. Bartholomew, "Uncharted Waters: Philosophy, Theology, and the Crisis in Biblical Interpretation," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller, The Scripture and Hermeneutic Series 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 26–28. Technically, TR does not allow for the existence of truly "secular" knowledge and reprioritizes all knowledge as theological interpretation. Such a distinction is vital in the broader discussion of TR, but not fully relevant here, and so these disciplines are here still referred to as "secular."

[36] Michael W. Taylor, "Herbert Spencer and the Metaphysical Roots of Evolutionary Naturalism," in *The Age of Scientific Naturalism: Tyndall and His Contemporaries*, ed. Bernard Lightman and Michael S. Reidy, Science and Culture in the Nineteenth Century 24 (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 71–88.

[37] James Ward, *Naturalism and Agnosticism* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906), 185–86. Although virtually unknown today, Ward was a prominent voice of realism and naturalism in the late 19th century. He was raised in a strict Calvinist home, but after a brief stint as a minister, he abandoned the faith and became an academic. The eminent atheist philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell was one of his students.

[38] Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 16. Elsewhere Provan describes the obsession with stripping away everything except what can be verified with "control evidence" as convincing yourself that history is supposed to be dispassionate and "presuppositionless." See Iain Provan, "Hearing the Historical Books," in Bartholomew and Beldman, *Hearing the Old Testament*, 255.

understanding when one approaches the socio-historical and the textual. In a theological robust approach, this means that, as Mark Gignilliat has presented it, "our confession regarding the nature and role of Scripture within the divine economy as the living voice of God surely influences if not determines, the way one engages the materials."[39] We must turn our attention to what such an approach would look like in practical terms.

What is a Theologically Robust but Reasonably Critical Approach Look Like?

A theological reading of the biblical text employs the tools of the various forms of biblical criticism but does not grant them autonomy or magisterial function.[40] We cannot ignore the realities and complexities that criticism has brought to light in biblical interpretation. To the contrary, we should embrace the reality of our own presuppositions and the presuppositions of the scholars with whom we engage as we seek to understand the Scriptures. In a theologically robust context, the art and science of interpretation must partner with the theological rather than supersede it. Not only must we, as Dale Martin put it, "dethrone it [the historical-critical method] as the only or foundational method taught,"[41] but we must also be willing to allow for the supernatural as "normal" in the biblical text and balance that with reason and discipline which provide us with insight that otherwise we would be unaware of.

Baruch Halpern is one of the most prominent biblical historians working today. While he does not embrace the theological robust approach to the Scriptures, he provides us with a template of a reasonable criticism of ourselves and the text. He takes issue with those who follow the verification principle and argues that, "their argument is that there is a possibility that cannot be *utterly excluded* on the basis of evidence that the whole construct is a lie."[42] This is true, Halpern says, but it is true of all history. There is no way to *ever* exclude the possibility that historical reporting is a fabrication. Conspiracy theorists thrive in the space of this proposal. Halpern argues that we must be reasonable and employ common sense. For example, when discussing the historicity of the Book of Kings, he finds the reporting to be too accurate in its depiction of things to be a fabrication or a distant reconstruction. "The fact that Kings is so accurate about the history of the eighth-seventh centuries, *when the Temple still stood*, suggests that our authors had both continuity and records on their side."[43] He ultimately concludes that the reason people reject the historicity of the biblical text is not an intellectual one but emotional.[44] Here, we might also add it is philosophical or theological. Like it or not, most critics approach the text with the conviction that it is not historical, and although

[39] Gignilliat, "Theological Exegesis," 220.

[40] Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 20–21.

[41] Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 27.

[42] Baruch Halpern, "Erasing History: The Minimalist Assault on Ancient Israel." *BR* 11.6 (2005): 30. This is not a recent opinion. In 1981, Halpern was already suspicious of RM approaches, calling minimalism "methodological arrogance." See Baruch Halpern, "The Uneasy Compromise: Israel between League and Monarchy," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 60.

[43] Baruch Halpern, "Erasing History," 33.

[44] Ibid., 34.

Halpern would probably agree with many of their reservations concerning the supernatural, he rejects this biased approach.

Pointing out that the extremists on either side are not contributing to the dialogue, Halpern concludes, "cacophony in scholarship is normal, and uncritical allegiance to the biblical text is, sad to say, common among students and a significant slice of scholars."[45] This is an unfortunate situation, which Halpern argues is breaking down one of the most vital roles of socio-historical disciplines, such as archaeology. Without interplay with textual history as historical, archaeology is suffering. "True, taking the archaeological evidence purely on its own, with the input from textual or artistic corpora, has the heuristic value of showing us where a particular body of material would, by itself, lead us. But we are too poor in already fragmentary evidence as it is to think that throwing some of it out of court is the road to clearer understanding."[46] Rather than placing one discipline over the other, both the study of the text and the study of socio-historical evidence should be a free, creative interaction.

To borrow from Halpern, the concept of "fixing the etiquette" is vital. Dismissing portions of the biblical text as unhistorical or out of context simply because they contain elements that might be objectionable to the naturalist or reductionist reader's sensibilities is far too subjective. On the other hand, understanding that the answer to every historical objection is not simply to appeal to theology, *one must approach the biblical texts with a full consideration of the historical and linguistic context while acknowledging the theological content of the texts and the theological worldview of the authors.* Likewise, the assumption that the biblical texts somehow obscure an original context assumes facts not in evidence.

To that end, let us agree together to work from the thesis that the texts we have today are substantially faithful to the purported historical context and directly related to the events rather than distantly reconstructed as the compilers looked back at the text. Unless this is proven not to be the case, the texts should be received as historically reliable. The methodology is well summarized by Provan, Long, and Longman. "We do not require 'positive grounds' for taking the biblical testimony about Israel's past seriously. We require positive grounds, rather, for *not* doing so."[47] Embracing a theologically robust approach to the biblical text gives the benefit of doubt to the testimony of those who recorded the events and believed them to be true. Therefore, for the evangelical and theologically orthodox reader, the question is not whether we accept the biblical record as true but *how* we accept it to be true.

Thus, to approach the biblical texts with a properly critical perspective will require that we be critical of our own skepticism and experience, as well as the biases that result from them. In this pursuit of a theologically robust but critical way of thinking, we do well to heed Walter Brueggemann's advice, "For the *otherness* of reality given us on the lips of Israel makes our deciding always penultimate and provisional, always yet again unsettled by new disclosings."[48] It

[45] Baruch Halpern, "Erasing History," 47.

[46] Baruch Halpern, "Research Design in Archaeology: The Interdisciplinary Perspective," *NEA* 61 (1998): 56.

[47] Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 74.

[48] Walter Brueggemann, *The Role of Old Testament Theology in Old Testament Interpretation and Other Essays*, ed. K. C. Hanson (Cambridge: James Clark and Co, 2015), 11. One must, however, read Brueggemann with a

seems reasonable to conclude that given the widely divergent ideas of biblical history which continue to emerge in the present time, one should be self-evaluative and more open to plausible explanations.[49] This also helps the person who takes a theologically robust approach to the biblical texts to utilize resources produced by those who disagree with us. We can critically identify identify the biases and separate them from the evidence. Then, there is opportunity to examine alternative explanations for the evidence, both biblical and historical.

critical eye, as he was willing to separate the texts from their immediate context, both historical and canonical, for interpretational purposes, as he did in Walter Brueggemann and Hals Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982). For critique, see Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 13–34.

[49] For a discussion of the ever-expanding spectrum of approaches to biblical history, see Mark Zvi Brettler, "The New Biblical Historiography," in Long, *Israel's Past in Present Research,* 43–50.

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