

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AND TRUTH IN THE BIBLE

GRANT R. OSBORNE*

Webster's defines truth as "the property (as of a statement) of being in accord with fact or reality." With historical studies truth is not easily ascertained, for "reality" is the product of historical research into a past that is no longer available. Thus it is a reconstructed reality and always heuristic in its conclusions. Moreover, since all history-writing is interpretive at heart, true objectivity is impossible. The Bible is not just history but theology as well, and there has been a long-standing debate as to whether history and theology can cohere. Moreover, as Kevin Vanhoozer has shown, truth is derived differently depending on the genre employed in Scripture. Yet "the diversity of literary forms does not imply that Scripture contains competing kinds of truth: it shows rather that Scripture is about various kinds of *fact* (i.e. historical, metaphysical, moral, etc.). A sentence or text is true if things are as it says they are, but as Aristotle said, 'Being may be said in many ways.'¹ In fact, we can assert with Douglas Groothuis that "truth matters most. . . . Despite the truth-allergic pathologies of our postmodern culture, truth remains to be considered, known, and embraced."²

Using speech-act theory, Vanhoozer says that infallible truth in Scripture "means that Scripture's diverse illocutionary forces will invariably achieve their respective purposes."³ This is achieved when (1) the formal condition of a successful speech-act is satisfied (i.e. the speaker believes he is justified in what is said); and (2) the speech acts correspond to reality "in a manner appropriate for their particular illocutionary mode."⁴ For historical narrative, this means that there are two levels of truth to consider: the correspondence of the event or speech to what happened and the correspondence of the theological message to the rest of Scripture.

* Grant R. Osborne is professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2065 Half Day Road, Deerfield, IL 60015.

¹ K. J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 85, citing Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.2.

² D. Groothuis, "Why Truth Matters Most: An Apologetic for Truth-Seeking in Postmodern Times," *JETS* 47 (2004) 441, 453. He speaks of philosophical truth, but the point also applies to truth in historical narrative.

³ Vanhoozer, "Semantics of Biblical Literature" 94.

⁴ *Ibid.* 101.

I. HISTORY AND THEOLOGY IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

It is interesting to compare OT and NT scholarly attitudes on this question. Both seem to be moving in a more positive direction than at any time in the past 200 years, but NT study seems to be more optimistic at this point. The reason is obvious: in NT research we deal with a period of 100 years (from Jesus' birth in 5/6 BC to the writing of the book of Revelation in AD 95), a period well known and documented in historical research. The OT, however, covers two millennia with a relative paucity of historical information behind much of its details. Therefore, while virtually no one doubts the existence of Jesus or Paul, many doubt the existence of Abraham or David. Still, the growth of knowledge in both fields has led to a corresponding growth of more positive attitudes to the possibility of reliable history in the Bible.

1. *Old Testament research.* Phil Long provides an excellent survey of OT research in his "The Near Death and Revival of Narrative History."⁵ In the nineteenth century, historians abandoned the traditional narrative style of historiography which centered on individuals and events and turned to an environmental and social mode of study that they believed could better answer *why* history unfolded as it did. Thus social science methodology triumphed, and societal forces and material conditions were the focus of research. A determinist model took over, and a hierarchy of interests developed, with the first tier being economic and demographic evidence, the second tier being social structure, and the third (almost forgotten) tier being the intellectual, religious, and cultural element.⁶ The result was revisionist history with a vengeance. A new skepticism toward the biblical narrative resulted, and radical scholars such as P. R. Davies and N. P. Lemche could say confidently that biblical Israel is only a literary creation and has almost no resemblance to Iron Age Israel.⁷ However, this bias is beginning to dissipate, and a recent interest (from the 1970s) in narrative approaches has re-emerged, partly due to weaknesses in the deterministic model and partly due to the realization that ideas and customs provide an important supplement to material evidence.

Walter Kaiser looks at the major schools of the last century:⁸ First, the Albright/Wright/Bright Baltimore school accepted the general viability of

⁵ In I. Provan, V. P. Long, and T. Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 77–79. On pp. 18–24, they trace the movement from the suspicion of history by Descartes and Bacon because it centered on observation and interpretation rather than the scientific method. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, therefore, historians switched to such a method by adopting a cause-effect nexus and searching for the brute "facts" of history and a concomitant skepticism toward all previous histories, including that of the Bible. Traditional claims were suspect, and revisionist theory became the name of the game.

⁶ See L. Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85 (1979) 7.

⁷ P. R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (JSOTS 148; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992); N. P. Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

⁸ W. C. Kaiser Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998) 9–13.

the biblical account but supplemented it with archeological evidence and often reconstructed the biblical story accordingly (we might call it "moderate revisionism"). Second, the Alt/Noth school took a historical-critical approach and favored the sociological theories of Max Weber and ancient historical parallels such as the amphictyony leagues of Italy and Greece over the literary and archeological data. Third, the Norman Gottwald school took an ethnographic approach based on social theory and turned the conquest of Canaan into an internal peasant revolt of disenfranchised Canaanite tribes. Fourth, the non-Pan Israelite tribal confederation schools (e.g. Soggin, Miller, Hayes, Van Seters, Thompson) believe that all other approaches are wrong-headed and that no confederacy at all existed until very late, made up in the exilic period to idealize Israel's past. Thompson, for example, questions the historicity of David and Solomon as well as of Jerusalem and the temple.

So the academy is divided, with a resurgent interest in the literary as well as material evidence, and utilizing narrative as well as social factors in reconstructing the history of ancient Israel. Merrill provides eight characteristics of OT history:⁹ (1) it is narrative, centering on people and events; (2) it is biographical, telling the story about God's work in this world through people; (3) it is tendentious, seen through the perspective and interpretation of the authors; (4) it is theocentric, presenting itself as the Word of God and not just a human record; (5) it is selective, as all details that do not relate to the central message are ignored; (6) it is historiographic, presenting itself as the writing of history; (7) it is consistently contextual, not just telling the past but relating it to the needs of the present; and (8) it is interpretive, yielding the author's assessment of the events, often by way of editorial asides.¹⁰

2. *New Testament research.* The NT academy has followed a similar direction, although there is a generally more positive state of the issue today. In my recent "History and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels,"¹¹ I delineate three stages in the debate:

a. *History or theology (1900–1970).* Following Martin Kahler's 1896 distinction between the historical Jesus and the historic biblical Christ,¹² Bultmann and his followers (both form and redaction criticism) assumed a complete break between the history behind the Gospels and the theological portrait within them. For Bultmann, the historic Christ was a product of

⁹ E H Merrill, "Old Testament History A Theological Perspective," in *NIDOTTE* 1 71–75

¹⁰ For a reassessment of the place of archeology in historical research, see J K Hoffmeier and A Millard, eds., *The Future of Biblical Archeology Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 2004)

¹¹ G R Osborne, "History and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels," *TrinJ* 24 n s (2003) 5–22

¹² M Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (trans C E Braaten, Philadelphia Fortress, 1964 [1896]) He was trying to protect Church dogma from the skeptics, but his assumption of a radical dichotomy between history and theology had disastrous consequences

the early Church and the Jesus of history a mere presupposition of NT theology.¹³ R. H. Lightfoot said the Gospels "yield little more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways."¹⁴ To this we must add the recent Jesus Seminar, whose "quest" of the last twenty years is a throwback to the radical skepticism of the Bultmannian period. Their negative portrayal has not met with widespread favor in the academy.

b. *History and theology (1970–85)*. Two major sets of publications paved the way for a reappraisal: first a set of works on each Gospel arguing for the interdependence of history and theology. As I. H. Marshall contended, Luke followed historical sources and combined history and theology in a faithful portrait of the historical Jesus.¹⁵ He was followed by Ralph Martin on Mark, Stephen Smalley on John, and R. T. France on Matthew.¹⁶ They argued that the evangelists were theologians who wrote history but were faithful to the original events. The second set was the six-volume Gospel Perspective series published from 1980–1986 and summed up in Craig Blomberg's *Historical Reliability of the Gospels* in 1987. In that series, Richard Bauckham says that the "[e]vangelist's traditions, however 'midrashic' his procedure may be, could be historical in origin."¹⁷ Two others are major figures: Ben Meyer, whose *Aims of Jesus* argued that both the events and their significance or theological relevance were necessary parts of the historian's task in Jesus study; and A. E. Harvey, whose *Jesus and the Constraints of History* said that the historical Jesus could be viably identified by seeing how he interacted with the historical figures and forces of his day.¹⁸

c. *History through theology (1985 to the present)*. It is now widely recognized that theology is a partner and a path to history, an essential aspect of all historical enquiry into the life of Jesus. This is seen in the "third quest" for the historical Jesus (the first was Albert Schweitzer, the second Ernst Käsemann and the existential quest), building on the Jewish lives of Jesus by Sandmel, Flusser, and Vermes and centering on the Jewishness of Jesus. E. P. Sanders departed from radical skepticism and argued that the historical Jesus can be found by situating Jesus within the Judaism of his day and by explaining how his movement eventually broke with Judaism.¹⁹ He

¹³ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. K. Grobel; New York: Scribner's, 1951) 1.3.

¹⁴ R. H. Lightfoot, *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934) 225.

¹⁵ I. H. Marshall, *Luke, Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

¹⁶ R. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972); S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (London: Paternoster, 1978); R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (London: Paternoster, 1989).

¹⁷ R. Bauckham, "The Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum of Pseudo-Philo and the Gospels as 'Midrash,'" *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1983) 3.67.

¹⁸ B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979); A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures 1980* (London: Duckworth, 1982).

¹⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 18.

began with certain "facts" (Jesus' baptism, Galilean preaching, call of twelve disciples, ministry only to Israel, controversy over the temple, crucifixion, and the fact of the movement and opposition from Judaism), and then examined the rest of the Jesus story to see how it fits in explaining the Jesus movement.²⁰ J. P. Meier is even more open and seeks objectivity with the evidence, impossible in a final sense but somewhat possible by bracketing one's world view and presuppositions.²¹ He is generally even more positive about the possibility of discovering the kernel of history in the Gospels. Finally, N. T. Wright believes the Gospels were indeed ancient biographies and for the most part were reliable documents. Utilizing the methods of critical realism and far more positive criteria for deciding historical material (see further below), he has more than anyone brought theology fully back into the discussion of the historical Jesus. His method is to look for what is "real" in the narrative and to subject it to "critical examination" so as to ascertain what is a valid reflection of the historical record, both factual event and theological reflection.²² Aspects like his universal lordship, deity, and "death" for us are accordingly valid subjects for historical explanation, studied by taking seriously the "world view" of first-century Judaism as a clue to Jesus' own mindset.²³ This is a huge step forward in historical Jesus studies.

II. A METHODOLOGY FOR ASCERTAINING TRUTH IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

1. *The method.* The best method by far for developing a biblical historiography is that of "critical realism," namely the belief that there is something "real" in the text to be discovered and that it must be ascertained by way of "critical" research. Wright separates this from positivism or "naïve realism" (the belief that we have definite or objective knowledge of a thing) and phenomenalism with its pessimistic view (stressing the inaccessibility of final knowledge), saying that critical realism occurs when "initial observation is challenged by critical reflection but can survive the challenge and speak truly of reality."²⁴ It proceeds by observation leading to hypotheses that are refined by critical reflection and then conclude with verification/falsification. Yet the challenge to utilizing this for historical research into the Bible is the assumption by many literary critics that the biblical narratives are ahistorical/fictive. John J. Collins says this forcefully:

The rediscovery of biblical narrative has been largely a consequence of the negative results of historical research. This point has theological importance. Many conservative Biblicists have invoked literary criticism as a way of avoiding unwelcome historical conclusions. . . . It should be clear that such will not work. . . .

²⁰ Ibid. 11.

²¹ J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 4–6.

²² N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 32–37.

²³ Ibid. 38–44.

²⁴ Ibid. 36 (cf. 32–37).

"Story" is not "history." It is essentially fiction, material which in some measure has been invented.²⁵

This ahistorical stance has dominated the assumptions of the new literary criticism since the early 1980s. But how valid is such an assumption? Meir Sternberg addresses those who think biblical research cannot recover the past: "From the premise that we cannot become people of the past, it does not follow that we cannot approximate to this state by imagination and training—just as we learn the rules of any other cultural game—still less that we must not or do not make the effort."²⁶ There is nothing intrinsically ahistorical in the historical narratives of Scripture. Long attributes the bias to a modern concatenation of two forces, a view of literature as increasingly linked with poetry and fiction, and a view of history in positivistic terms as linked to the natural sciences. Thus the gap between narrative and history is an unnecessary one.²⁷ In fact, Wright goes so far as to claim that first-century Jews and Christians "understood more about the real nature of history, that is, about the complex interaction of 'event' and 'meaning,' than has been grasped by the ardent proponents of 'scientific history' in comparatively recent times."²⁸

The question is not whether or not there is an historical element, but how to discover that element and ascertain its accuracy. This is the task of critical research. Thorsten Moritz argues that Wright's critical realism does not so much distance itself from positivism and phenomenism as it harmonizes the strengths of both positions. It recognizes that there is a definite meaning to be discovered but that it comes only after serious critical reflection and debate on the alternative hypotheses. The key is the "fit" between the critical reconstruction of the scholar and the controlling story that is already in place, with a high premium on the historical accuracy of that fit when subject to the traditional verification process.²⁹

Within this the author's intentions play a critical role, along with a theory of reading, for putting together the story in the text, the historical situation behind the text, and the world view that flows out of the story.³⁰ The process of critical realism can be seen as a series of criteria:³¹ the criterion of coherence (provides a better "fit" than other hypotheses), of comprehensiveness

²⁵ Collins, cited in Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 420n.

²⁶ M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 10. He adds, "Indeed, the antihistorical argument never goes all the way, usually balking as early as the hurdle of language. . . . If the whole network of past conventions is empirically unattainable, then dividing the indivisible is even theoretically untenable."

²⁷ V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 151–52.

²⁸ Wright, *People of God* 122.

²⁹ T. Moritz, "Critical but Real: Reflections on N. T. Wright's *Tools for the Task*," *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (ed. C. Bartholomew, C. Greene, and K. Möller; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 180–83.

³⁰ Ibid. 189–92; Wright, *People of God* 61–64.

³¹ Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 311. See also P. Hiebert, "Epistemological Foundations for Science and Theology," *TSF Bulletin* 8/4 (1985) 5–10.

(puts together all the data, not just parts of it), of adequacy (provides a better harmony of both the outside data and the inside text), of consistency (forms a viable pattern in putting together the data), of durability (has staying power and is recognized by others), and of cross-fertilization (accepted by more than one school of thought). Through critical reflection such as this, the bridge between narrative and history and between story and theology can be erected.

2. *Genre*. It has long been recognized that genre plays an important role in interpretation. We will utilize the classic definition of Wellek and Warren:³² "Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific meter or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience)." As such it is a classification device (though they do change with periods of literary interest, they can be studied within their own period)³³ and has an epistemological function (it provides the framework for understanding the intended meaning of a text). Leland Ryken, quoting Jonathan Culler, calls it a "norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text."³⁴ E. D. Hirsch speaks of "intrinsic genre," which is similar to Wittgenstein's "family utterances" and defines genre as a "type of utterance" that narrows down the "rules" of a language game and allows the interpreter to isolate the possibilities of meaning. Readers sift through the "implications" of the possible meanings, and the intrinsic genre guides them in determining which have greater "validity" as the likely meaning.³⁵

Vanhoozer, building on John Searle, calls genre a "rule-governed form of social behavior" that therefore has "communicative competence." As in speech, where speakers in dialogue follow certain conventions and cooperate in order to communicate, so in written texts literary genres are complex communicative devices that follow certain conventions in order to communicate their intentions. The rules that govern each type exhibit a kind of "generic rationality" that tells a reader how to understand and interpret the literary work. The communicative competence is learned like any other language game, namely through practice, as the reader understands and then rightly interprets the generic intentions of the text.³⁶ In response to Derrida's attack on determinate meanings and a stable context, Vanhoozer responds, "I hope to show that what writing pulls asunder—author, context, text, reader—genre

³² R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956) 221.

³³ For a defense of the validity of genre as classification in light of attacks from poststructuralism and others, see G. R. Osborne, "Genre Criticism—Sensus Literalis," *TrinJ* 4 n.s. (1983) 5–9. On the fluidity of genre, see T. Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 78–80. Classification, then, is done by comparing a literary work with other similar texts.

³⁴ L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 25, from J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975) 136.

³⁵ E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) 89–126.

³⁶ K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 337–38.

joins together."³⁷ Since genres have a social and historic location (that is, they can be identified historically as to period), they can communicate at a distance to someone in another place or at another time. Through genre the reader can reconstruct the thought and life situation of the literary work. This is done through "generic illocutions," as the work yields what the author is doing in the communicative act. In narrative, for instance, an author both tells a story and displays a world as well as giving a world view by taking a stance toward the world that is displayed (the "point of view"). In this sense genre coordinates "the enactment of the author's intent, the engagement with the world, and the encounter with the addressee." Thus genre communicates to the reader a set of conventions that controls the understanding of the whole intention. In this sense biblical wisdom "commends a way," apocalyptic "displays the end of the world," the psalms "celebrate a created world."³⁸

For biblical literature and other ancient texts, it is critical to isolate the characteristics of the ancient genre. Longman says, "That there are similarities between texts which can serve as a rationale for studying them as a group is especially true for ancient literature where literary innovations were not valued as highly as they are today."³⁹ There are external and internal considerations in doing so: externally, one considers the overall structural pattern, form (meter, rhythm, narration), style, interrelationships, and content; internally, one considers the cohesive plot, action, narrative voice, setting, and language.⁴⁰ Long gives five caveats in the use of genre:⁴¹ (1) it is descriptive, not prescriptive, since authors are free to press the limits or depart from the rules when they wish; (2) it is no longer viable to press any given trait, such as shorter = early material, longer/more complex = later material, or developed content = late tradition; (3) unique texts that do not fit traditional categories do exist, e.g. the Gospels as *sui generis*, combining earlier forms; (4) we must be careful not to depend entirely on the comparative method, that is, assuming that outside parallels are the key to biblical literature; (5) we must not center only on small units and ignore the larger discourse in which they are embedded (a mistake at the heart of form criticism).

3. *History and fiction.* How do we apply this to the issue of whether historical narratives in the Bible are history or fiction/saga/legend? Alter speaks for many when he says, "prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative."⁴² We might separate three sub-genres here—historical narrative, historical fiction, and pure fiction. Although many say there are no generic indicators to separate history from fiction, Walhout says that

³⁷ Ibid. 339.

³⁸ Ibid. 339–42.

³⁹ T. Longman III, "Fictional Akkadian Royal Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Approach" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University) 3–4.

⁴⁰ Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 150.

⁴¹ Long, *Art of Biblical History* 43–49.

⁴² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 23–24.

"authorial stance" makes the difference, namely the fictive stance of the fiction writer and the assertive stance of the historian, that is, "the historian claims—asserts—that the projected world (the story) of the text together with the authorial point of view counts as a story and an interpretation of events as they actually occurred."⁴³ John Searle concurs, saying, "roughly speaking, whether or not a work is literature is for the readers to decide, whether or not it is fiction is for the author to decide."⁴⁴ Sometimes this is clearly stated, such as the historical accuracy for the Gospels claimed in Luke 1:1–4 (Luke "carefully investigated everything" on the basis of eyewitness testimony and writes an "orderly account" of it); John 19:35; 21:24 (the "true witness" behind the narration); or 2 Pet 1:16 ("We did not follow cleverly invented stories"). As Sternberg points out, Ezra and Nehemiah also "assume the form of eyewitness narrative."⁴⁵ In such cases we are ethically bound to consider the text's claims. Vanhoozer speaks of an "ethics of reading" in which the reader is responsible "to determine to what kind of communicative act a text belongs, and to respond to this communicative act in an appropriate manner."⁴⁶

Much of the time the generic type must be derived from a careful analysis of the material itself. One must utilize the extrinsic and intrinsic factors mentioned above and decide carefully whether the text considers itself history or fiction. Thiselton, building on Searle and Wolterstorff, notes the "extra-textual factors" that provide "different bases upon which" fiction and non-fiction works depend. The key is the illocutionary stance of the author, as non-fiction works make certain commitments with the reader that are not relevant to the speech acts of fiction, such as tying the reader to the real world implied in the text, while fiction breaks this connection.⁴⁷ Wolterstorff builds on this and speaks of the world projected in the text as a "mood-action" established by the author as the agent producing the text. In fiction, the author presents certain states of affairs for reflection, but the historian takes an assertive stance, making truth claims about the world in the text.⁴⁸

Walhout provides three further criteria: (1) the world represented in the text is factually accurate, that is, whether the events truly occurred; (2) the author's "techniques of presentation" (e.g. traditional phrasing, genealogical catalogues, etc.) fit the state of affairs at that time; (3) the authors and readers connected to the story provide an atmosphere of history (that is, it is used for factual history).⁴⁹ For instance, pure fiction will have few recognizable

⁴³ C. Walhout, "Texts and Actions," in *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, by R. Lundin, A. C. Thiselton, C. Walhout (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 69. Sternberg, *Poetics* 24, says history is "re-creative" and fiction "creative discourse," existing in the "sphere of the imagined or invented."

⁴⁴ J. R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *Expression and Meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 59, cited in A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 26.

⁴⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* 12–13.

⁴⁶ Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning* 395.

⁴⁷ Thiselton, *New Horizons* 362–63, using Searle, "Fictional Discourse" 58–75.

⁴⁸ N. Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 222–31, in Thiselton, *New Horizons* 570.

⁴⁹ Walhout, "Texts and Actions" 72–73. See also Long, *Art of Biblical History* 58–63.

historical figures and events; historical fiction will have many but will contain dialogue and events that go beyond the historical; and historical narrative will seek to "tell it like it was." Of course, it is not an easy task to determine how accurate the events described in an ancient historical work really were, since we have limited access to the actual data today. In point of fact, it is not even demanded that the author be correct, only that he *thought* he was. Nearly every historical work today can be found to contain factual errors, as the author did not have all the data, but that does not mean they are not historical.⁵⁰ Moreover, no one would say fiction (or for the Bible, parables or fables) do not contain truth, for the message of each is certainly true. For instance, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–31 probably does not mean to say that the two compartments of Hades is factual truth (that provides "local color" for the story) but rather that God will judge the person who lives only for this world's riches.⁵¹ For a parable, the truth lies not in the event described but in the message taught.

In historical narrative, of course, one also has two aspects of truth, the truth of the event as narrated and the truth of the interpretation as provided. One can agree that the events of a biography of Churchill or Eisenhower are correct and yet disagree with the historian's assessment of each man. In biblical narrative, there is both history and theology, but the presence of the latter no more negates the former than the explanations present in Gibbon's *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* negate its claim to be a book of history. One can simply not write history without interpretation. Moreover, we must add a third dimension, the literary creativity of the author. No historical work can be exhaustive, and ancient historians did not even try to be.

There was not the demand in the ancient world (unlike today) to be chronologically exact or to show all the interrelationships between the events. Rather, biblical authors were highly selective in their depictions, like the cyclical depiction in Judges or the narrow trajectories regarding only Peter and Paul in the Book of Acts. When one compares the order of events in the Synoptic Gospels, one realizes that chronological exactness was not a part of their purpose (indeed, in ancient history-writing as a whole). This is where the sacred imagination plays a part. For instance, John places the anointing of Jesus before the triumphal entry (probably the historical order), while the Synoptics place it later, in contrast to Judas' betrayal (for theological reasons).⁵² An OT example will help as well. The life of Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, is told quite differently in 2 Kgs 21:1–18 and 2 Chr 33:1–20. In Kings his evil is spelled out—rebuilding pagan shrines, leading the nation

⁵⁰ In my study of the Gospels, however, I have not found what I would label "factual" errors

⁵¹ See C. L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987) 22–23. In his "New Testament Genre Criticism for the 1990s," *Them* 15/2 (1990) 40–42, he examines the debates on the genre and historical worth of the Gospels and Acts and calls them "theological histories" that can be trusted, built on Hellenistic biography but also with Jewish parallels that allow them to remain faithful to the original events.

⁵² See C. L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) 175–76.

into idolatry, causing Israel to commit "more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites" (v. 9)—and the judgment the Lord would enact on the nation concludes the narration. In Chronicles, however, his repentance and later good deeds are added. The evil he did earlier is still present, but his later covenant faithfulness is added, probably in order to emphasize this aspect for the post-exilic community. There were two different agendas operating, and that led the authors to omit certain parts and add others from their sources (pointing to the historical worth of both accounts).⁵³

Yet biblical critics continuously judge the historical narrative on the Bible harshly and utilize all kinds of so-called "scientific tools" to determine its sources and imaginatively reconstruct its prehistory. Sternberg speaks of

the incredible abuse of this resource for over two hundred years of frenzied digging into the Bible's genesis, so senseless as to elicit either laughter or tears. Rarely has there ever been such a futile expense of spirit in a noble cause; rarely have such grandiose theories of origination been built and revised and pitted against one another on the evidential equivalent of a head of a pin; rarely have so many worked so long and so hard with so little to show for their trouble.⁵⁴

While biblical history is presented in narrative form, this by no means obviates its status as history. There is no theoretical reason why literary and historical interests cannot coincide, and why the stories cannot be trustworthy representations of what really happened.

4. *Historical narrative as narrative and as history.* Most ancient history comes down to us in narrative form, and so the reader must be aware of both the literary and the historical elements. As narrative, the stories contain real/implied author, point of view, ideology, story time, plot, characterization, setting, implicit commentary, and real/implied reader⁵⁵—all the ingredients of a literary work. As history, the author seeks a depiction of what really happened. A definition will help.⁵⁶

"Narrative history" involves an attempt to express through language . . . the meaning . . .—that is, a particular understanding/explanation . . .—of the relationship of a selected sequence of actual events from the past . . . and to convince others through various means, including the theological force and aesthetic appeal of the rendering . . . , that the sequence under review has meaning and that this meaning has been rightly perceived.

⁵³ See "Manasseh," *ISBE* 3.234; and A. E. Hill, *1 & 2 Chronicles* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 615–17. The source of the Kings material was The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah (v. 25); and the sources of the Chronicles material were The Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and The Chronicles of the Seers (vv. 18, 19).

⁵⁴ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* 13. A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 119–21, performs a detailed literary analysis of Gen 37:18–30 (the selling of Joseph to the Midianites) and interacts with the traditional JEDP breakdown, concluding, "on the basis of plot and discourse, the present text is a unified product. . . . Whatever the sources of the final product may have been, they lie far below the surface of the text and can probably not be found by the criteria used in source criticism" (p. 121).

⁵⁵ See Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 155–62; Longman, *Literary Approaches* 83–100.

⁵⁶ Provan, Long, Longman, *Biblical History* 84.

The question is always whether the contours and sequence of the narration fit the reality of the ancient events or have been imaginatively created by the author. There is not necessarily an absolute disjunction between the two. For instance, Matthew's genealogy skips generations and artificially is organized into three groups of fourteen ancestors to highlight Jesus as the Davidic Messiah (the gematria of the Hebrew *david* is fourteen); but the list is still accurate in the sense that all were ancestors of Jesus. Long states that the OT interpreter needs three things:⁵⁷ (1) literary competence, with the ability to utilize the ancient conventions and workings of the narratives to assess their truth claims, because the stories are literary art first, with the history flowing out of the stories; (2) theological comprehension, since more than anything the narratives show how God was behind the historical events guiding and controlling the action, not only "transcendent" over his creation but also "immanent in human (historical) affairs"; (3) historical criticism, as the narratives purport themselves as true historical events and must be assessed in that way. Yet the historical-critical method, the product of the Enlightenment, is ill suited to do so because it centers on the principles of analogy (the criterion is normal, everyday experiences, usually ruling out divine intervention) and correlation (all events arise from secular causes rather than being unique or supernatural in origin). Such a skeptical approach is no longer mandated in modern historiography. So the biblical historian must be open to the possibility of divine action.

5. *How narrative communicates meaning.* Narrative does not merely inform; it acts. The illocutionary force takes place via plot, characterization, and a point of view that invites readers to share its world. As such there are at least two aspects that are communicated, the historical event told in the story and its theological interpretation accomplished by the imaginative reconstruction of the author. The two aspects are interdependent and not meant to be separated, yet still both can be identified and studied by the reader. By comparing the historical story to external data on the event in history, one can evaluate the event itself as a contribution to historical knowledge. And by ascertaining the implicit commentary and point of view, one can see how the author is developing the significance and moral content of the story. It is clear that in the historical narratives of the Scriptures the authors believed they were retelling the historical past of Israel and the early Church so as to solidify the self-conscious identity of the people in their present time. In other words, there was a historical purpose throughout. At the same time, they were evaluating those events to provide both negative and positive models for the nation.

There is a dialogue between the author who imaginatively reconstructs the story and evaluates its significance, the text that embeds that story in its reconstructed form, and the reader who studies the text and attempts to reconstruct the intended meaning of the text. The reader does not study the

⁵⁷ V. P. Long, "An Old Testament History: A Hermeneutical Perspective," *NIDOTTE* 1.89–96.

author but the text the author has written.⁵⁸ Still, the reader identifies with the intrinsic genre embedded in the text by the author and thereby unlocks the intended message of the narrative. The story has a performative function in guiding the reader into its narrative world⁵⁹ as well as a referential dimension as the illocutionary act enables the readers to identify the rules of the language game utilized in the communication.⁶⁰ Wright speaks of the triangle of knowledge, story, and world view through which narrative communicates.⁶¹ As Moritz says, "The location of stories on the map(s) of world-views—or better: the way stories mediate, challenge, confront, reshape etc. those worldviews—is what determines meaning."⁶²

The perfect example for this is the exodus narrative. It communicates meaning on two levels, the historical events it purports to transmit, and the theological perspective it provides for those events. This provides a good illustration because the archeological evidence for a migration of Hebrew tribes that wandered in the wilderness and then conquered the Canaanite tribes is quite slim. However, there is a fair amount of secondary evidence for such a migration and sufficient data to accept the historicity of the events.⁶³ There are also several generally accepted theological motifs that emerge from Exod 12:37–40:38:⁶⁴ (1) the deliverance of the people of God—this becomes the seminal event behind the theme of salvation in Scripture; (2) a theology of creation—this is seen in the plagues where God turns the gods of nature worshipped by the Egyptians against them, and is demonstrated in the crossing of the Red Sea as well as God's control of his creation throughout the wilderness wanderings; (3) the unfolding knowledge of God—this is the heart of God's self-revelation at the burning bush (Exod 3:16) and at the exodus: it is "the LORD your God who has freed you from the burdens

⁵⁸ See P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 16–44. He says that while one studies a text rather than an author, without the author the text flows in a sea of relativity, unnecessarily open to multiple meanings. Authorial intention anchors a text in history, but the reader centers on the text and its communication, not the implied author.

⁵⁹ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) 10–11.

⁶⁰ J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 44–56.

⁶¹ Wright, *People of God* 62.

⁶² Moritz, "Critical but Real" 186.

⁶³ See J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). He argues that (1) the account of Gen 39–Exod 15 is compatible with Egyptian history; (2) there were people from western Asia in Egypt during this period; (3) the type of bondage Israel experienced is compatible with what Egypt did with conquered people groups; (4) Semitic people like Joseph did serve as high officials from time to time; (5) foreign princes were schooled in the Egyptian court; (6) the first six plagues fit the setting of Egypt's inundation setting, and the others are compatible with this; (7) a route for Israel from Egypt to Sinai can be plotted that is in keeping with geographical factors of that period. From this it is viable to affirm the basic historical worth of these narratives.

⁶⁴ Here I am amalgamating E. E. Carpenter, "Exodus, Theology of," *NIDOTTE* 4.605–14; R. E. Watts, "Exodus," *NBDT* 478–87; and T. E. Fretheim, "Exodus, Book of," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003) 252–55.

of the Egyptians" (Exod 6:7, 37; 16:6, 12); this revelation continues at Sinai and throughout the book; (4) the land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exod 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3)—this hints that God has restored his people to a new garden, a land of promise; (5) forming the character of his people—they are to be "a kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:5–6) that take the knowledge of God to the nations and reflect him; he gives them the Torah to guide them in this endeavor, they were to be the restored remnant of humanity that would begin a renaissance of God-centeredness; (6) Numbers adds the theme of the covenant responsibilities, including the covenant blessings and curses—God is still the covenant God and Israel the covenant people, but they must fulfill their covenant responsibilities; they are tested in the wilderness but fail to remain faithful and so experience the covenant curses and fall in the wilderness.

6. *Validation techniques: criteria for authenticity.* Vanhoozer speaks of "universal validity conditions" behind appropriate speech acts and literary works, including grammatical competence, situating the communication properly vis-à-vis the external world, and communicating properly to the reader, in other words, that it "*truthfully* expresses its author's intention (subjective condition), that it *truly* represents something in reality (objective condition), and that it establishes *right* interpersonal relations (inter-subjective condition)."⁶⁵ Vanhoozer calls this a "communicative covenant" first between author and reader (whereby the reader can identify the genre, reconstruct the life world communicated in the text, and understand its message); between words and the world (as each genre engages with reality in its own way and therefore informs readers of the world they share with the text, via both its literary form and its subject matter), and between words and the Word (the genres of Scripture become one genre, the canonical witness to Christ).⁶⁶

To this might be added the critical method of harmonization. Blomberg shows the value for this method in historical Jesus research as well as in Kings-Chronicles, Josephus, and the lives of Alexander, concluding, "The more one studies extrabiblical historiography, the more inescapable the legitimacy of harmonization becomes, even in its narrow additive sense," justifying "a thoroughgoing application of redaction criticism and, although less significant, of all the other branches of literary and historical criticism as well."⁶⁷ Such tools will validate what has often been considered conflicting testimony.

Tradition criticism, the step-child of form and redaction criticism, was developed at a time of radical skepticism and sought the irreducible minimum,

⁶⁵ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning* 344, building on Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993).

⁶⁶ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning* 346–50.

⁶⁷ C. L. Blomberg, "The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 173 (cf. 135–74).

centered on such negative tools as the "dissimilarity principle," arguing that authenticity must be restricted only to those elements in the life of Jesus that had no connection with either Judaism or the early Church, since then they could be copied from one or the other. As J. P. Meier has said, "instead of giving us an assured minimum about Jesus, [it] winds up giving us a caricature by divorcing Jesus from the Judaism that influenced him and from the church that he influenced."⁶⁸ We have already shown that the historical narratives of the Bible demand to be read as accurate history as well as theology. Hence it must be recognized that the burden of proof is not only upon the one affirming its accuracy but even more upon those doubting the texts. All, whether our tendency is to accept or reject, must allow the data to carry us to our conclusions.⁶⁹ Three other criteria form the classical set—multiple attestation (found in more than one source, like Mark, Q, M, L, John), Palestinian environment (a close fit to the language and customs of the Palestinian period), and coherence (that which is similar to other material is deemed authentic).⁷⁰

But recently a more positive set of criteria has begun to develop. Meier speaks of the "criterion of embarrassment," that encompasses passages that would not fit the exalted claims of the early Church (like Jesus' baptism by John [rather than the other way around] or his claim not to know the time of the eschaton).⁷¹ Wright has developed the criterion of "double similarity and dissimilarity," meaning that on the one hand Jesus certainly built on his Jewish roots and at the same time differed from them in developing his distinctive method. So Wright advocates a method that takes these into account in a study of authenticity in stories.⁷² Gerd Theissen has developed an even more positive principle, the criterion of plausibility, that is, one that makes sense in its historical context as well as in its impact on early Christian thinking.⁷³ Finally, J. D. G. Dunn has recently added the criterion of oral transmission of tradition, namely a stable core of traditions transmitted by faithful participants in the Jesus story. These multiple witnesses further enhance the viability of the Synoptic portrayal.⁷⁴ With these criteria,

⁶⁸ Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 172.

⁶⁹ See S. C. Goetz and C. L. Blomberg, "The Burden of Proof," *JSNT* 11 (1980) 39–63; and Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels* 240–42.

⁷⁰ On this see G. R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and *Traditionsgeschichte*," *JETS* 21 (1978) 117–30; R. H. Stein, "The 'Criteria' for Authenticity," in *Gospel Perspectives I* 225–63; and Meier, *Marginal Jew* 168–84.

⁷¹ Meier, *Marginal Jew* 168–71.

⁷² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 131–33.

⁷³ G. Theissen, "Historical Skepticism and the Criteria of Jesus Research, or My Attempt to Leap across Lessing's Yawning Gulf," *SJT* 49 (1996) 147–76. See also G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 115–18; and G. Theissen and D. Winter, *The Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

⁷⁴ J. D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, Volume 1: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 640–42. Unfortunately, he considers John a secondary source at best (p. 167), following the last hundred years of Gospel research, and seems unaware of the recent reappraisal of the historical worth of John (see Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John* 56–57, 63–68).

a new era has opened in which historical Jesus research has entered a new positive phase, and these principles can be adapted to the book of Acts and to OT historical research as well.

III. CONCLUSION

We must work with the literary as well as the historical dimensions of biblical narrative, and we must seek both historical and theological truth. They are intertwined in historical narrative and cannot be separated into isolated compartments. Both the raw facts and the assessment of those facts are essential in interpreting the stories in Scripture. For instance, the cycle of history in Judges does not just relate the facts of the apostasy—oppression—repentance—deliverance cycle but also assesses the spiral downward as seen in the decline of the judges both religiously and morally.⁷⁵ Both aspects—the brute facts and the interpretation of them—must be studied for truth content, and both can be verified.

Provan, Long, and Longman conclude their study of historical narrative by saying,

Testimony—"storytelling"—is central to our quest to know the past. In fact, all historiography is story, whether ancient, medieval, or modern. Historiography is ideological narrative about the past that involves, among other things, the selection of material and its interpretation by authors who are intent on persuading themselves or their readership of certain truths about the past.⁷⁶

The attempt to bifurcate history and theology and to see a dichotomy between the facts and the story line is unfortunate and wrong. Modern historiography differs little from ancient procedures. "Modern historians, like their precursors, in fact depend on testimony, interpret the past, and possess just as much faith as their precursors, whether religious or not," and ancient historians "were no less concerned than their modern counterparts with differentiating historical truth from falsehood."⁷⁷ In short, we can trust the historical instincts of the biblical writers and must assess their works positively and constructively.

⁷⁵ See J. R. Vannoy, "Judges, Theology of," in *NIDOTTE* 4.828–29.

⁷⁶ Provan, Long, Longman, *History of Israel* 49.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 50.