

“The Art of Biblical History,” I

During this session we want to begin looking at *The Art of Biblical History*. I have oriented you to this book before in terms of the big questions that it asks and how those questions arose. Now we want to go through the book and talk about some major issues. We will start from the preface.

Why do you think the book is entitled *The Art of Biblical History*? If you think about art, that makes us think of literary artistry. If you think of biblical, that makes us think of theology. If we think about history, that alerts us to a third major impulse in Scripture. Another reason for the title could be that historiography is not a science. We are learning more and more nowadays that science is not a science. It is not a hard thing. It is not devoid of interpretation. A third reason is perhaps because of my heavy use of the visual arts in trying to help us understand what we find in written text. I particularly use a lot of visual representational art such as portraiture. It is verbal representational art.

What is the real reason for the title I chose? Because Robert Alter has written two very popular well-selling books called *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, I parrot these two titles by Robert Alter in which he talks about the necessity of reading the Bible from a literary perspective. I would not want readers to deny theology or the historical impulse. Robert Alter is a little fuzzy on the historicity aspect because he talks, at times, about historicized fiction or fictionalized history. Both of those make me a little bit nervous, particularly historicized fiction. I think that there is much that we can learn about reading the Bible and grasping what it has to teach us by becoming more aware of how its literature and narrative works. We will talk about some of those things in just a minute.

In the preface I also give a provisional definition of what historiography or history writing is. I have said it already in response to the visual representational art. We can call historiography verbal representational art. Often we think of history as being a cold recording of the brute facts, but that is a very naïve understanding of history. If that were the case, then you would only have one history book on the library shelves for each period in world history. But instead you will find many, many books on, say, 17th century British history. You will find many books about each period because there is always an interpretive aspect to an historical work. The historiographer always makes some creative interpretive choices in how to depict a particular time period and it begins with an historian capturing a vision of that time period. We will talk about some of those things also as we get into chapter 2.

Let us move into the introduction. In the introduction, I start off with a weird little story. It was a partially true story. In other words, there were many aspects to the story that bear a relationship to reality. I was talking really about the interests that my grandparents had. I have a brother; we might have been in an attic. This event never actually happened, although my older brother, when he read the book thought, “I kind of remember that.” The story itself is not historical. It did not happen that way. Many of the individual aspects are real. My grandmother was interested in music. She was interested in flowers and, believe it or not, she was born with that strange little appendage that was like an extra thumb. She played the piano with that thing until it was surgically removed. About the time it was potentially possible that she might hold hands with some eligible bachelor, they thought they had better remove it. All of those aspects are true, but the story itself was not true. That is important to recognize; it is not true as a history. But it served my purpose because I was trying to illustrate some things. I was not trying to establish anything. It is very important. When we get to chapter 3 we will talk about the importance of historicity in the Bible. Some people will say, “It really does not matter whether or not the stories are true because they can shape our way of thinking, our mindset, and our lifestyle without even having to be true.” The question is are you simply trying to illustrate a truth that is established on some other

basis? In that case, a parable, which does not have to be an historical account, can illustrate a truth, though it is seldom adequate to establish a truth. If Jesus tells the parable, then by virtue of His authority He has the right to establish theological truth just by telling us that. When we get to chapter 3 we will talk about some of those issues.

In terms of this story, I used it because I hoped that it would illustrate some of the challenges that we face when we pick up the Bible and begin to ask questions about what we encounter there. In the attic the little guys discovered a painting, and they had to begin to make some genre decisions. They had to decide what kind of painting it was. First of all, they had to establish that it was a painting. I suppose they could do that on the basis of brush strokes. Then on the basis of the fact that something was recognizable, they began to think it was representational. I see a little girl there, maybe about age 12 sitting at a piano, flowers atop the piano, basketball at the foot of the piano. It is a strange sort of arrangement. Maybe it is a portrait. They had to make a genre decision, and they did that on the basis of the internal evidence, which was right there in the painting. However, then they had the benefit of discovering some other paintings which served as external evidence. They had external confirmation that their genre decision was probably moving in the right direction. Now, if this painting is, in fact, a portrait, then that tells us something about the truth claim of that portrait. These are all the kinds of terms I hope you begin to get familiar with as you work through the book.

Let us talk about the truth claim of something like a portrait. What is a truth claim, as opposed to truth value? It is what is actually there, in terms of a portrait. What would be the truth claim of a piece of writing or even a verbal speech? A truth claim is the information it is seeking to convey or, to use a sophisticated literary term, the nature of its speech act. In other words, an assertion or a propositional statement makes an informational truth claim. It is asserting something to be the case. An imperative performs a different kind of speech act. It is actually issuing a command that is to be obeyed. Proposition is to be believed. Command is to be obeyed. We have different kinds of truth claims made by different genres or types of literature. Similarly with a portrait the truth claim is that there was once an individual who is adequately represented with pigment on canvas in this portrait. You might even say this is an accurate rendering of that individual. You probably know from looking at portraits that they are not all photographic in quality. Some of the best portraits, Rembrandt's portraits for example, are often rendered with very free brushstrokes. Does that mean that they are less accurate than a portrait that Norman Rockwell might paint? In one sense, they are less accurate. In another sense, they may be at least as accurate in capturing something of the character of the individual being depicted. So in using this story, I wanted to open up some of the issues that are involved. There are issues of genre recognition, internal evidence, and external evidence.

We also will talk about the embodied intent. This is the intent of a piece of work, whether it is visual art or verbal writing. What appears to be the intended truth claims being made by that work of art or that piece of writing? This is to be distinct from the authorial intent. Some people say you can never really establish the authorial intent. Insofar as the author has accomplished his or her purpose, then we may discern the embodied intent in a piece of work—we can say this must come close to the authorial intent. The creator seems to have accomplished it well. Truth claim has to do with what the text or, in this case the portrait, is trying to get across, what it is asserting. Truth value has to do with whether the claims being made should be believed or obeyed. It is a very important distinction between truth claim and truth value. Sometimes I think conservative Christians make a mistake when they do not distinguish those two. They say if you do not believe the interpretation of this passage the way I interpret it, you just do not believe the Bible. Though they are not self-consciously thinking it through, they are saying, "If you do not buy my assessment of this text's truth claim, then you have no right to say that you embrace the truth value of the Bible." We are mixing up two different issues.

Take, for example, one of the examples I use in the book. Say that one of you tells me you have written something for me and you want me to read it. For the sake of argument, let me say that I believe you to be very competent in what you write and absolutely truthful in all you say. I can unashamedly embrace the truth value of what you have written for me. But I have no idea what the claim will be until I see what it is you have actually written and make a genre decision. You may have written a grocery list, you may have written a business letter, or an obituary—you may have written all kinds of things. I can say without even looking I believe in the truth value of what you have written, but still I have to ask some questions and debate and study to understand the truth claims that are made by what you write. The more we understand how an historian has done the work, the better we can penetrate to what the work is about, the world of the past as it really was. That is to say, the better we pay some attention to the glass through which we look, the better we shall understand what we are looking at.

Let us move on into chapter 1. Chapter 1 begins with a statement that you may or may not agree with and that is that “most agree that the Bible is not a history book.” You might be asking why we have a class called Old Testament History that has the Bible as its text. I agree with that statement that the Bible is not a history book. Its essence is not strictly history. It is probably reductionistic to say the Bible is a history book because it is so much more than that. We also need to say what else it is not. It is not a book of philosophy, a theology text book, or a book of science. If you are looking for an overarching genre description, what I call the macro genre, then you have several options, depending on the nature of your belief toward the Scriptures. One description of the Bible is that it is a religious book. Even an unbeliever or a secularist would say it has got to be a religious document, a religious book of some sort. It must be a holy Scripture for some community. Some Christians and Jews would not regard the Old Testament as their Scripture. Others would say, “This is authoritative for me.” The biblical self-testimony we have in 2 Timothy 3:16 is that this is not just a Scripture for you. It is God breathed; this is God’s Word and thus it applies to everyone whether you believe it or not. There are various options in terms of how we would assess the claim that this is God’s Word, but I think we would want to land with Scripture on that ladder and say these are God’s very words. Thus it is much, much more than a history textbook, but that does not deny its vital interest in history. The narratives in the Bible are predominantly historical narratives. In the section of my book that deals with the Bible’s macro genre and the issue of truth, I really discuss this business of truth claim and truth value. Make sure you understand the distinction between truth value and truth claim.

Then I have a section called “The Bible as a Foreign Book.” The point there is to recognize that the Bible was written over a period of 1,000 years, ending around 2,000 years ago. It was written not only in a different time, but also in a different place from 20th century America. There is much that we must do in terms of developing an ancient literary competence. I use the story of these two single missionary women who had so much trouble over a glass of lime juice. They experienced culture shock in a big way because they did not know what things meant, what things connoted in that particular culture. In addition, we experience language shock, linguistic shock, if we go into a foreign culture. Go to France sometime and try to speak English. In some places people are not going to understand you and may not approve of your attempts to speak French either. Language shock is something that we are well aware of. We know culture shock and language shock; we need to recognize that there is also a certain literary shock when we read literature from a distant time and place. I am not saying that the Bible is in some way insufficient to address us. It just calls upon us to do some study and work. We are dependent on the work of others. Were it not for translators, we would not be reading the Bible in English. That alone demonstrates that we need to use ordinary means to develop an ancient literary competence that will enable us to understand the Bible on its own terms.

Foreignness of the Bible is, in general, only marginally more true of the Old Testament than of the New Testament. In the West, we probably have a greater heritage from Greco Roman Hellenistic backgrounds and the world which was at least part of the New Testament world than we do of the ancient Near Eastern Oriental environment. In either case, I think one needs to do some work to get in synch and to begin to read text on their own terms. One of the best ways to do that is to read the Bible a lot and to get used to the way the Bible tells its stories, the way it recounts its histories.

You not only need to be developing this literary competence, but you need to be in synch with the judgments that are made in the biblical text in order to rightly understand it or at least to accept it. You might be able to understand the truth claims through diligent study while being unwilling to embrace the truth value and thus the specific claims that the text is making over your life. A point of tension develops when there is this disparity between what the values, worldview, and claims of the text are and what you embrace as the values in your own world. We talked earlier about polygamy. Would they have felt the same discomfort that we feel? Do we need to kind of get in synch with them? We need to go back and put ourselves in their place. As we do that, we are trying to put ourselves in synch with the Ultimate of the biblical text. We can go back and understand the original human recipients of the text, but for the most part, we are trying to align ourselves with the worldview of the Ultimate Author of the Bible. In other words, we want to align ourselves with God's way of seeing things, which would involve not simply looking at polygamy, but at looking at the full range of what God feels about marriage and structures of marriage.

Let me mention perspicuity of Scripture. That is a very important concept and it is one that we need to take some comfort in. When you start talking about truth claims and truth values and using a lot of big words it can become very intimidating. We may wonder why we even bother reading the Bible. Well, that is ridiculous. We do believe that the Bible is perspicuous, but we need to carefully define that. It does not mean that everything is obvious to every single person who reads the Bible. If everything were obvious, then we would not have classes at seminaries. We would not even have to have seminaries. The perspicuity of Scripture means that those things that are necessary to salvation are sufficiently clear. They are in one place or another made sufficiently clear in Scripture that the unlearned as well as the learned can, by the use of ordinary means, come to a sufficient grasp of the truth. You do not come to an exhaustive grasp of the truth. You do need to make use of ordinary means, which would involve those who have gone before and have translated the text for us, maybe using several translations. We need help, commentaries, sometimes to open things to us. It is clear that if you can read and you have a text in the language that you read, God can cause that which is necessary to your salvation to shine through the text to you with sufficient clarity. You do not need a scholar sitting at your shoulder to come to a sufficient grasp of the truth. If you want to enrich your understanding, then, of course, you study hard, gather tools around you, and take classes and there is more that can be learned. Perspicuity is very important, but it says that there is a certain limit to that which is clear. That which is clear is what is necessary for salvation. Nothing could be less perspicuous than what I have just been trying to say, but you get the basic idea. That is described at about page 36 and following in the book.

Then, we get into a section on genre criticism and biblical interpretation. The point here is to talk a little about what we mean by genre. You can describe a text on various different levels. At a very basic level, you might say that one text is narrative and this other literary text is poetry. Those are two high-level genre descriptions. But then you can work down to a sublevel and say this is historical narrative or this is a parable in narrative form. You are still describing genre of literature at a more specific level. It is very important to recognize the genre of the literature that we are reading so that we do not make mistakes, misuse it, or misinterpret it. There I give the example of the rich man and Lazarus. There are a lot of disagreements. Some people say that this is a true story about a real man named Lazarus and a real

rich man named Dives. But *dewets* or *divees* in Latin means “rich man,” so his name came about from the Latin. It is a bit of a mistake to think we have discovered his personal name. Lazarus, on the other hand, is a good Semitic name, but it seems to be the Greekicized version. It is a Semitic name that has been turned in a Greek direction for a name that would mean “God is my helper.” The fact that Lazarus is given a name in this story by itself would not indicate that he was an historical individual, but rather the name may be given him for its symbolic value. Here is the poor man, the beggar, whose name is “God is my helper.” The rich man would not help him, but God did.

I discuss that not just as a controversial point, but something that I think is probably best understood as a parable and not necessarily as an historical account. If it is understood as an historical account, people begin to try to work out the topography of heaven and hell and the fact that the rich man could see Lazarus nestled in Abraham’s bosom. They think, “I did not realize that was possible.” You get yourself stuck in a lot of difficult points if you think of it as an historical account rather than a parable.

Let us talk about what poetics is. When you use the term “poetics” speaking of literary study, what is the shorthand way of describing poetics? Do not confuse it with poetry. It sounds like poetry, but poetics is a term that is now used for the study of literature. You can have a poetics of narrative or you could have a poetics of poetry. Oddly enough, the study of poetry is sometimes called porosity, which sounds like it comes from prose. However, the simplest definition of poetics is that it describes what is done by scholars when they try to distill a grammar of literature from looking at many examples of a particular kind of literature. Poetics is the study leading to a grammar of literature. Think about the grammar of a language. If you try to learn a language that has not been committed to writing, the first thing you do is try to learn the language by listening to it. You try to figure things out and learn to speak the language, if possible. Then you begin to ask yourself, what are the principles involved here? What are the common denominators between sentences that seem to work this way and have this effect? As you do that, you distill those principles out of the language. You are then able to begin to write a grammar. Interrogative sentences take this form. Indicative sentences tend to take this form, imperative sentences take this form. You put together a grammar of the language. In the same way, by reading a lot of narrative text in the Old Testament, you can begin to get a sense of how these things function. What is it that makes them work? How do they communicate? Thus you are alerted to things like the significance of repetition, key words, and poetry as heightened speech, even in a narrative context. We talked about all those things briefly at the beginning of this course.

Poetics is something that is a burgeoning field in biblical studies nowadays as people are taking serious looks at the literature in the Bible and trying to figure out the workings of that literature. As we progress in that, it helps us not only to understand the Bible better, but also to avoid some older conclusions that were really off target.

One example that is given has to do with the flood account. An older scholar, a Frenchman by the name of Simone, said that the repetition of the waters rising (and the waters rose and the waters rose) is too much. He said no single author would have written that way. It is not compact. It is inefficient, according to Simone. Then Bernard Anderson came along and said that actually seems to have a dramatic effect. You get the feeling of the water rising (and then it rises more and then it rises more). He said this repetition is to be understood as a literary feature that is used with an intent by a single author. He said we should not assume that no single author would have written that same phrase that many times and thus conclude that it must come from different sources, which some obtuse editor put together. The question then arises, if an author would not have done it intentionally, why would an editor have done it intentionally? Editors are supposed to make things better, so why would an editor do worse than an author? So this study of poetics is really helping us.

The example given in that chapter has to do with Judges 4 and 5, which deal with the Deborah and Barak story. In Judges 4 you have the prose account. In Judges 5 you have the poetic account. Sometimes Bible commentators seek to show how chapters 4 and 5 are contradictory with one another and say they are examples of how the Bible can disagree with itself. I think to do that is to make a genre mistake. You need to realize that one is prose and thus gives us more of the straightforward account of what happened. The other is poetry, and poetry is given to hyperbole, imagery, and fancy terms. We need to make allowances for that and not find contradictions where there are none. Once you do that, I think you can see how the two are quite compatible, recognizing that one is poetry and the other is prose.

I will mention one specific example, the instance of the slaying of Sisera by the woman Jael as she drove the tent peg through his head. It is clear that he was sleeping when she did this, but in the poetic account, it speaks of him as falling, as being fallen and it keeps on going over that. It is almost like one of these modern films where you keep seeing the terrible crime reenacted, having a flashback. That is the way the poetry describes it. I think we make a mistake if we read a poem about a fallen adversary and interpret it in a flatly literalistic fashion. I try to give some arguments for that in the book to show that it is quite allowable to speak of someone who died in this situation as being fallen. Even in the prose account when it describes Jael bringing the Israelites into the house, it describes Sisera lying there dead, fallen. The idea is to get in synch with the workings of a particular kind of literature. You will find that the problems were probably on your part as an interpreter, not on the biblical text as a document. That is chapter 1; it is one of the longer chapters. Let us go on and talk briefly about chapter 2.

Chapter 2 is entitled "History and Fiction." It asks the question, "What is History?" I hate to use the term fiction because it is so confusing, but I use it because other writers are using it and I think people are confused by it. I try to use it in a way that can bring some clarity to the discussion. The first thing I try to do is to say, when we use words like history and fiction, we need to be very careful to define what we mean by them. History, for example, can be used in a number of different ways. David Bevington in his book says, "I have studied the history of the Tower of London. I went to the Tower of London and I bought a history of the Tower of London." When you say you have studied the history, you are talking about studying the past. I have studied what can be known about the Tower of London, and then I purchased a history. That is, I purchased a book that is someone's assessment of the evidence and a reconstruction of what happened there. We also use the term history in ways like this: "If you do not pass this test, you are history," meaning you are a thing of the past, to be forgotten. We need to define terms. We need to recognize that sometimes we use "history" to refer to the past, per se, a little bit inaccurately. Other times we can talk about history as an event. We also need to understand that sometimes we talk about history and we mean history as account. It is an interpretive recounting of significant past actions. When we talk about history in that sense, we are bringing an historian into play. We get an historian's vision of the past and an historian's ability to replay or recount that past to us. Likewise, with fiction, a problem arises in that people are not careful to define that term carefully. When we speak of fiction, are we speaking of it as a nonfactual genre of literature or are we simply using the term fiction to describe something that is not real? Let me give you an example. I could look at a painting of a still life of fruit and say, "That is not an apple; that is a fiction." In a real sense, I am telling the truth. It is not an apple. It will not nourish you. You cannot come up and grab it off the painting and eat it. It is not an apple; in fact, it is pigment on canvas. It is a visual fiction that has been crafted in such a way to give us a true picture of an apple, but it is not an apple. There is crafting involved in the painting of a still life.

I had a painting teacher in college who was always aggravated when people looked at his representational paintings. Dr. Steele was an impressionist, but people would criticize him. They would say, "I do abstract art; I am a true artist and you go out and copy nature." He would say, "That is not quite fair. If you would focus closely and come up and look at a two-inch square of any of my canvases, you will not find individual leaves and individual blades of grass. You will not find any aspect of nature that you could put under a microscope. You will find an abstract painting. It is just that I construct my abstractions, my fictions, in such a way that they give a true picture of the past." It is important to realize there is a difference. You can say that is a fictionalized painting because it is making use of brushstrokes, and it is not the thing itself. There is nothing wrong with using fiction in that sense. That does not bother us. However, to say this is a fictional painting, the genre of the painting is not representational, it is nonfactual, would be more disturbing.

When we come to the Bible someone like Robert Alter will at one point describe the Bible as fictionalized history. If all he is saying is that an historian has captured a vision of the past through his deft, verbal brushstrokes and has painted a clear, adequate, and authoritative picture of the past, I have no problem with that. It is a well-crafted historical account, a fictionalized history. I am not sure he always means it that way though because he sometimes speaks of historicized fiction. To me that is an entirely different thing. There the genre is fiction, non-factual, and it simply has been cast in an historicizing mode. What I did in the introduction with the little boys in the attic would be historicized fiction. It sounded like it could have happened, but it really did not, so it is historicized fiction. It was not fictionalized history. It is like an historical novel. The point of an historical novel is that you are writing a novel where the story line probably did not actually happen, but it is told in an historicizing way. It is set in an historical period. On the other hand, a novelistic history, if we could use that term, would be predominantly a history with certain novelistic traits. But if it is not historical, then it fails as a novelistic history. That is confusing, but it is important to try to understand what those terms mean.

Next I try to compare history writing to representational art, which I show in many ways. I will give a couple of examples of this. Sometimes when I was in painting classes, the art teacher would say things like, "You are focusing too much on details. You need to blur your eyes so that you see the major contours, the major passages of dark and light, and the major tonal areas." You would see us actually looking at our subject as though we were falling asleep. We were trying to weed out extraneous detail in order to capture the overarching contours in the painting. We could also be less effective by trying to paint every last little leaf as opposed to giving the right impression and then giving a few significant details. The human mind, if you give the overall impression and then a few significant details, is capable of filling in the rest. You can have a very realistic painting that, if you inspect it very closely, is not photographic in quality at all. It is suggestive. It gets the human mind started and the human mind then is able to visualize that scene as it really was. I think another thing that he often taught us to do was to back up from our canvas. You need to get some distance on that canvas so that you can see the overall shape of the composition as it is taking place. You need to back away from your subject so that you can see its overall shape. It is a similar thing to blurring your vision. You need to back away. This applies to historiography in that historiographers must be selective. The ideal chronicler does not exist, although with the invention of camcorders, some people have tried to become the ideal chronicler. There are some people who almost try to record everything that happens as it happens, particularly if you have a newborn baby.

Every historiographer must be selective and some of the best historiographers are the ones who can suggest a great deal with very little. That is what we have in the biblical text. The stories we read in the Bible are very suggestive. They are very selective in the details that they use, but they are very effective and no less historiography by virtue of their selectivity. Likewise with the backing away from the

canvas, we often say of contemporaries of ours that it would be interesting to see how history assesses this individual. We say that because we are so close to the events that we really do not know their significance or their consequences. Sometimes it is only with the passage of years or maybe even decades that an authoritative history can be written of a certain individual or of a certain period of time. In a way, that individual or event is known by the long-term effect that it has. It is no less accurate a history if it is written some years later than if it were written on the day that the event happened. It would be a mistake to say, since the book of Kings concluded with the time of the exile, that we cannot trust those events that are much earlier because too much time has elapsed. Sometimes the lapse of time can give a clearer vision as to the real significance of what went before. This assumes that proper memory or proper records have retained those events. The assessment of them at a later day is often more on target because of the temporal distance from it.