

“The Art of Biblical History,” II

We want to wrap up the discussion of this book. Let me continue to highlight a few things.

Chapter three asks the question “Is historicity important?” I gave it the general title “History and Truth.” These are questions that I thought about as fundamental questions that I wanted answers to as I started working on this book. So I ask this question, “Is historicity important?” Is it important that the biblical narratives that claim to be historical are actually historical? Could we not simply have the equivalent of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*? Could this not be a fictional account that nevertheless influences the way we think about life, live life, and conceive of the world in the universe, even if in a fictional sense? Is it really all that important? Yes, historicity is important! It is important because otherwise salvation does not mean anything. What you think about the importance of the historicity of the biblical text says a lot about what you conceive to be the essence of the Christian faith. I quote Gerhardus Vos in here to that effect. The soteriological (salvific) aspect of the Christian faith is very definitely dependent on what God has done in history. It is rather cold comfort. We are real people living in a real world, inflicted with real sin and a real problem under the judgment of a real God. If nothing real happens, if it is just a new way of thinking, it does not affect our salvation. What one thinks about the importance of the historicity of the biblical text has a great deal to do with what one conceives as the essence of Christianity.

I used the example from George Ramsey’s book, *The Quest for the Ancient Israel*. I used his very cleverly titled final chapter in that book, “If Jericho was not Raised, Is Our Faith in Vain?” His conclusion, I think, is that no, we can discover that Jericho was never razed to the ground, and our faith would not be much affected by it. What bothered me in his use of this particular catchy phrase is that he never really addresses the more fundamental issue upon which this is a play on words. If Christ were not raised, would our faith be in vain? Paul very definitely tells us yes; if Christ was not raised, our faith is in vain because of what Christ accomplished in relation to our real problem of real sin under the judgment of a real God. Ramsey does, however, point us to something that we need to think about. The fall of the walls of Jericho is not the same as the resurrection of Christ. Could it be that, as long as Christ is raised, if all the other historical truth claims of the Bible could be proven false, our faith would not be much affected? If that were the case, then there would be no credibility to the account of the raising of Christ. That is right on target. Say, for instance, that we debated the historical truth claims of the book of Joshua. If someone could demonstrate to our satisfaction that those stories about the fall of the walls of Jericho were never meant to be taken as historical accounts, then, of course, we would not only be able to dispense with that story, but we would have to. We would be wrong to claim otherwise if it were demonstrated that they were not making historical truth claims. However, most readers, and it continues to seem to be the case, have read those stories as making historical truth claims. After all, they fall within the sphere of redemptive history as it is working its way through the Old Testament. It tells about what God has done in the life of the people of Israel. If historical truth claims are being made and it was proven that what was claimed has no truth value, then it would cause us to question the confidence that we place in Scripture. By what right do we have confidence in other truth claims if it can be shown that this truth claim, in fact, has no truth value?

One of the parade examples of the areas in which archaeology and the Bible disagree is the archaeology of the city of Jericho. We do not have time to get into it, but let me just say that the evidence is very much under discussion at this point. I am much more prone to stick with the biblical truth claims and wait for the archaeology to show itself as a fit than I am to rethink my whole view of Scripture on the basis of a supposed lack of fit between the interpretation of the data from Jericho and the biblical text. In

fact, the actual archaeological data is subject to interpretation as, for instance, Bryant Wood is proposing that we put it right in line with the biblical text. So, there is much uncertainty in archaeological conclusions, and we need to be careful of allowing them to carry too much weight in our rethinking of Scripture.

It is important; if Jericho was not razed is our faith in vain? Not necessarily, as long as Christ was raised. But if Jericho was not razed, and that was the claim of the text, then maybe we are not so sure that Christ was raised. It is the same Bible that tells us of the one as told us of the other and apparently was wrong. So, it would be incorrect to say that it would be without consequence.

That is an example of how one's concept of what Christianity is, based on God's self-disclosure. At the heart of it is God's redemptive work in Christ, the incarnated Word in real life and time and space. If that is the essence of Christianity, then, of course, historicity is important. Again, we must allow that we understand the texts as they were intended to be understood.

I deal with D. F. Strauss in this chapter, but I am not going to talk about him further. I encourage you to look at some of his criteria for demonstrating the non-historicity of biblical text. He got the field of mainline or liberal biblical criticism off on the wrong foot in terms of the criteria that he established many years ago. He launched the field of biblical scholarship in some wrong directions. Do not overlook that discussion of Strauss. It is important.

Then we come to chapter 4, which was again one of the longer chapters. It asked the question of history and moderate scholarship. Most scholars are not malicious or malevolent, trying to do people harm. Most scholars are trying to do right. Why do they disagree as much as they do? You can tell from the major headings in that chapter that I think each of the predominant approaches that we have before us all come to different conclusions. There is the traditional historical critical approach, the social science approaches, and then also the moderate literary approaches. They are in some sense one-sided, or deficient in terms of doing justice to the full interest of Scripture. Let us take up the historical critical approach as a first example. The historical critical approach is based on three principles as outlined by Ernest Roach. It appears that it is deficient in terms of its ability to embrace the theological truth claims of the biblical text. There are the three basic canons of historical criticism as traditionally practiced, and up to this day these three principles of assessing evidence are still propounded. The principles are criticism, analogy, and correlation. Those are three principles of historical criticism that you will hear talked about quite often.

Traditionally, criticism has been taken to mean that one should have an initial skepticism toward one's sources. There is another way of thinking critically; a presupposition of skepticism is perhaps too negative. You can say you need to think critically about what you are reading; that is a positive thing. After an initial emotional engagement with the text, being drawn into it, then you need to step back and think critically. Have I understood this text? What is it claiming? Distance yourself and become a little more cerebral and think critically about it. There is nothing wrong with that kind of criticism. But criticism, which is fault finding from the start and has a presupposition of skepticism, is wrongheaded. It assumes from the start that the text is going err; it is going to fail me. That is the way it is often practiced.

The principle of analogy says the present and, in particular, contemporary experience is the key to the past. I cannot allow as potentially historical something that is outside or beyond my personal experience. That would be a very narrow notion of analogy. It would be limited to just what I have experienced. That would rapidly become absurd if we thought about it. Surely things are happening that I have not

experienced. You could broaden analogy a little bit by limiting it to that which is commonly experienced worldwide. I argue based on the work of William J. Abraham in his book *Divine Intervention and the Limits of Historical Criticism* that really we need to broaden this much more widely. We need to say not only is the present the key to the past, but maybe the past is the key to the present. I cite his example of imagining a primitive tribal situation, which has no concept of modern science and no concept of anything like a moon landing. Nevertheless, they are convinced through argumentation and reason that perhaps something entirely out of their experience did, in fact, take place. I know a man who refuses to believe that a human being ever walked on the moon. He said that is Hollywood, they are always doing that kind of thing, it is just Hollywood. Maybe through time if we worked harder we could convince him that, in fact, a moon landing did take place. He would need to be willing to broaden his sense of what is possible beyond just what he himself has experienced.

Remember the two little boys in the attic? They had never seen an extra appendage on someone's thumb. So to them that was impossible. That must be abnormal. They gave it a figurative rendering. Maybe that is to convey a sense of the virtuosity of this piano player that she was so good it was like she had extra fingers on her hand. Their mother, however, was in the know and knew that her mother had actually been born with that extra little appendage, which had to be surgically removed. Their personal experience was inadequate. By the same token, the principle of analogy, if applied too narrowly, can force us to do an injustice to the biblical text. The Bible talks about miracles, it talks about God becoming man, it talks about a lot of things that are outside our immediate personal experience. They are certainly not things that are happening every day, constantly around the world. They are unusual, they are unique, but the normal cannons of historical criticism leave little room for the unique or even for unusual circumstances.

The principle of correlation says that things do not simply happen unprompted. You do not have events popping up without any precursor. There is a nexus of causation. There is a sense in which one event prepares for and leads to another event, which then prepares for and leads to a subsequent event. The principle of correlation as it is traditionally practiced says that there are two possibilities for bringing about change in the historical process. There are two possibilities for driving along history as we know it. One causative agent is natural causes. A sudden earthquake or a volcano, for instance, can bring Pompeii to a sudden end. That is an historical event brought about by a natural event. Another example is the flooding of the Midwest in America. All kinds of natural events change history as we know it.

The other possibility for bringing historical change, according to the historical critical method, is human personal agency. William Abraham asks why human personal agency is a causative agent. I argue that many come to the historical questions as theists, as those who believe there is a real God. In particular, many are biblical theists, so they believe that the God who is depicted in the Bible as a personal being is the true God. If this is the case, then by what right would we deny this personal God the possibility that He could be a personal agent in historical change? In other words, by what logic would we say that God could not bring about in the historical sphere of time and space historical events? The historical critical method from the very start, going back to Strauss, says anything that smells of divine intervention or anything else is immediately eliminated as possible historical explanation. What I argue is twofold. The traditional practice of historical criticism has been anti-theological from the start. It does not allow God a place in the historical process. Thus, when it comes to the Bible in which God is at the heart of historical process and redemptive history, the traditional historical critical method does not know what to make of the Bible. It has to reconstruct a different history. It cannot buy the biblical history. That is the problem.

The solution is not to say you are not interested in historical thinking or in these principles. The solution is to rightly define the principles. Define criticism as thinking carefully and objectively, not as fault finding. Define analogy as very widely saying that maybe the past is the key to the present; maybe unique events do occur. Define correlation so as to take into account God's overarching purpose in history. If you do that, again, as William Abraham points out, something even like the resurrection of Christ is not a bolt out of the blue. It is not something absolutely unexpected. It did surprise people at the time, but God had been preparing for it from the beginning of His dealings with His people, Israel. He had been leading up to it. There is this nexus of causation. There is this principle of correlation, even with a unique event like the resurrection of Christ.

The overarching question is why do scholars disagree? Those who take this traditional historical critical approach are going to disagree with those who are taking the Bible at face value, who are asking why God cannot be involved. It is because of this anti-theological bias that they will come to differing conclusions.

Second, there are social scientific approaches that are becoming increasingly popular now. Under this heading would be sociological approaches and also archaeological approaches, what is called the new archeology. What typifies these two approaches is an attempt to approach the standards of the natural sciences. Both sociological approaches and new archaeological approaches are driving toward a quantifying assessment of evidence. They want to do careful observations and infer general laws of historical change. This means that they tend to have a very low regard for idiographic narratives. We get the word idiographic from the same root as idiosyncrasy. Idiographic means those narratives that focus on a great individual who is a cause of historical change. These social scientific approaches say they are not really interested in the great individuals. In fact, they are rather inconsequential. Karl Marx, for instance, despite the influence that he had, says it is not the great individuals that change history. Rather, it is more mundane things like food production, population growth, migration, and climate. These approaches try to look at those pieces of evidence in order to tabulate and quantify them. Thus they are not idiographic in perspective; they are what we call nomothetic. This term is from the Greek word *nomos*, which means law. They are trying to find those general laws that would determine historical change. There is a lot of room for studying these factors, but the problem is often the sociological and the new archaeological approaches try to free themselves from what they regard as the shackles of the biblical text. Some of them would say the story that the Bible tells gets in the way of the history I am reconstructing from my studies. Pollen counts over so many years or studies of material evidence that I can count, qualify, and tabulate take priority in an attempt to come to general conclusions about what causes things to change. People who take that approach and dismiss the biblical text are going to come to conclusions that differ rather widely from the picture the biblical text presents or the picture that traditional historical criticism might achieve.

Finally, another approach that is very popular today is the modern literary approach. I think we can learn a great deal from reading the Bible better from a literary perspective. The problem with these approaches, however, is that many of the practitioners come out of an unbelieving historical criticism. They find that it is much more interesting to read the Bible as it stands. There is a problem, though. An unbeliever or someone not wanting to be addressed or challenged by the biblical text, who pursues a traditional historical critical approach, dissecting the text, takes away its voice by taking the text apart. Once they begin to read the Bible as literature again, its voice is restored. It begins to speak. The text begins to speak because they are not taking it apart, they are actually reading it. So then the question is how do I escape the claims of this text? I am not saying that any of this is done consciously. I am psychoanalyzing what may be happening at a subconscious level.

Someone might ask how to escape the clutches of this text. Now that I am hearing its voice, how am I going to process that voice? If this is God speaking to me about what God has actually done in the past, I may have to respond. If it is just pure literature, then I do not need to worry so much about it. I should not be threatened any more than I would be by what Frodo, Bilbo, or one of the characters in *Lord of the Rings* might have to say to me. That is a story world, though, and I live in the real world. If God is speaking into the real world about events in the real world and challenging me in the real world, then I am threatened. I think many are attracted to moving toward viewing the Bible as pure literature, not utilitarian literature, just literature for art's sake. Thus there is an anti-historical tendency in some literary approaches. This leads them to come to different conclusions as well if they do not really think the Bible is doing any more than telling nice stories—it is not really focusing on real events. Then they are going to come to differing conclusions as to what the real events actually were. At the end of that chapter I use the example of studies of Jericho and the conquest.

In chapter 5 I ask the question, “How do we go about reading the Bible and asking it historical questions?” Very simply, we need to know where we are coming from, where other people are coming from, and where the Bible is coming from. We need to think a little about what our background beliefs are. What is my worldview? What do I think about God? What do other people think about God? What does the Bible say about the world and the way it works? Is my worldview in synch with the biblical worldview? If not, then I am going to feel a certain tension with what that text tells me because I do not see things that way. Is my worldview in synch with this other commentator or this scholar? If not, I may feel some tension with him or her. It is very important to recognize when our points of tension are on the basis of fundamental worldview issues. Out of our commitment to a particular worldview flow the methods that we prefer. I have a lot of room for a lot of different kinds of methods that can help us understand the Bible better, but I orient this discussion around those two issues of truth claim and truth value. When we come to the Bible in trying to discover what it is telling me about history our first major task is to listen carefully and try to discern its truth claims. This will require that we have an open attitude to the text. If you are negative and do not believe a word somebody is going to say to you, you are not going to listen very well unless you are building a case against them. You need an open attitude, and then you need to give attention to the context of utterances. You do not want to take things out of context or you will misunderstand. Be sure to find my example in the book that illustrates what attention to context means.

Second, we seek to test what we believe to be the truth claims. We seek to determine the truth value of them. If you are a believer, you might say you already embrace the truth value of the Bible. You believe this is God's Word and are confident that it speaks truth. I am glad you can say that, but there is still value in checking and trying to establish the truth value. If for no other reason, it is helpful for apologetic purposes. You should try and show that the Bible is internally consistent in what it claims. Furthermore, you need to make sure it is consistent with external evidence we can find. By doing this test it will alert us to the fact that maybe we have misinterpreted something. Maybe we can perfect our understanding. If we find that something does not quite fit, maybe we need to rethink our initial interpretation. We need to consider how it fits. I am confident that ultimately they fit even if we do not immediately see it all.

The final thing has to do with the presentation of arguments. You will want to be familiar with the chart that Toolman suggests of how to lay out an argument. It looks a little complex, but it is a very helpful thing to get behind in terms of being able to assess the cogency and the validity of an argument. In order to make certain claims stick and to build a case for something, sometimes you need to go through various argumentative steps. Doing historiography and establishing an historical reconstruction is very similar to what a lawyer does in a court of law as he or she tries to establish what actually happened in

the past. He brings his summation, his argument, where he tries to put all the pieces together in a way that is convincing.

Chapter 6 deals with Saul, which you have heard more than enough of already. Look at those charts and you will see how what we talked about in class is laid out in terms of the arguments upon which the case is built.