

The Believer and the Historian

Theological Interpretation and Historical Investigation

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Christian theology can best address the conundrum of “Faith and History” by reclaiming a distinctively theological approach to understanding the Bible and the history with which it is concerned.

The question we have been asked to address is “How is history relevant to the work of biblical interpretation in theology?” I admit that when I first received notice of this topic, I was tempted to respond in the words of St. Paul, “Greatly in every way!” and let it go at that. For I suppose that if we were to summarize everything that we have learned on the topic of faith and history over the last few generations, we could do so in just two sentences: “Christianity is a historical faith,” and “It is hard to say just what that means.” Still, a glance through the bookstores shows that popular interest in matters of faith, history, and the Bible is as lively today as ever. A more thorough airing of the issue is clearly in order. For simplicity’s sake, we begin with our two summary sentences.

Christianity is a historical faith. However weary we may be of this hackneyed affirmation, it has one distinct advantage: it is true beyond all reasonable doubt. We need only consult the opening and closing chapters of the church’s holy scriptures, which encompass the whole of created reality in a vast sweep from creation to consummation, from “In the beginning” to “Behold, I make all things new!” Or again, we need only recall the centrality the creeds assign to certain events: incarnation, crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, and resurrection on the third day according to the scriptures.

But of course these considerations simply point us toward the crux of our problem. We can assume that the affirmation “Christianity is a historical faith” is true in some sense. But what do we mean by history? And how is the history with which Christian faith is concerned rightly to be known? These are the decisive questions at stake in the modern debate

about "faith and history." How we answer them will determine the way in which we respond to the specific question posed above.

The term "history" is used in a variety of ways. Let me distinguish four senses. First, we use the term to designate past events as they truly happened, which would in principle supply the standard for our efforts to understand and reconstruct those events. Second, history can refer to the tide of public events and circumstances that shape a given epoch and that test a given person or community's character, foresight, and wisdom. We say, for example, that Rosa Parks or the Polish dockworkers were thrust upon the stage of history. Third, history refers to the academic or scholarly discipline that historians pursue in their reconstruction of the past. For the last two hundred years, history in this sense has become a highly specialized and self-consciously modern discipline, famously represented in theological circles by the methods and procedures known as historical criticism. Fourth, we use the term to refer to the kind of books and articles that historians produce and publish about the past, such as John Bright's *A History of Israel*.¹

When we say that Christianity is a historical faith, we chiefly mean history in something like the first two senses. Christian faith, and the biblical testimony from which it stems, is concerned with the truth and reality of events as they actually transpire. Christian faith affirms that Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised again, and it would make a difference if these events could be shown never to have happened. In addition, Christian faith is surely concerned with "the signs of the times" and with being able to read and respond to them appropriately. A contemporary example of history in this latter sense has been the drastic and profound reevaluation of the churches' traditional teaching with respect to the Jewish people, a reevaluation occasioned in part by Christian recognition of complicity in the events that led to the Shoah.

Yet the modern problem known as "faith and history" concerns not only history in these first two senses but also history in the last two, as books and articles about the past written by modern historiographers. Because Christians have always been concerned with history in the sense of the truth and significance of events, *modern* Christians must be prepared to understand scripture and the events to which it testifies using the methods of modern historical research. Furthermore, they must be ready to trim the sails of faith in accordance with the results of such research. They must not interpret the Bible in ways inconsistent with the original sense of scripture, or make affirmations about past events unsupported by historical evidence. In sum, modern historiography provides Christian faith with access to the Bible and to the history to which the Bible gives witness.

Perhaps the most impressive statement of this position is found in Van A. Harvey's *The*

¹J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). A similar list of the senses of "history" is found in A. K. M. Adam's valuable book, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995) 155.

Historian and the Believer,² from which I have somewhat mischievously drawn the title of my lecture. Van Harvey's title places "the historian" before "the believer" and thereby hints at the substance of his argument. Harvey believes that the tides of intellectual culture have permanently eroded the bases of traditional Christian belief by creating a new way of knowing reality, namely, modern historical consciousness. Harvey argues that historical knowledge possesses a *moral* integrity that the modern person is obliged to honor. The morality of historical knowledge demands that the historian form judgments about the past based upon an impartial assessment of evidence, that he or she hold to those judgments in a manner proportioned to the weight of the evidence and that he or she dispute claims about the past that historical evidence does not warrant. Harvey holds, furthermore, that the canons of historical knowledge are so foundational in relevance and so extensive in implication that they set the parameters within which Christian faith and theology must operate.

At the close of his book, Harvey suggests what faith in Christ might look like within the limits of modern historical knowledge. He offers a Christ shorn of "the sending of the

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only begotten Son and of the vicarious atonement," as well as of "the idea of pre-existence, the birth and temptation narratives, many of the miracles, those stories that clearly reflect Old Testament prophecies, the resurrection and forty-day traditions, and the ascension."³ Nor can the believer claim that the resulting

image of Christ is of uniquely decisive importance to humankind, since historical criteria disallow claims to uniqueness or exclusivity. In sum, *The Historian and the Believer* ends on this note: the historian holds title to the vineyard of faith, the believer must purchase seed at the company store, and the prospects for harvest are bleak.

A generation after its appearance, we can see that the key premise of *The Historian and the Believer* is that modern historiography provides Christian faith with uniquely truthful access to the meaning of the Bible and to the history with which the Bible is concerned. Is this premise warranted? I think not, for two reasons. First, Harvey overestimates the capacity of modern historiography to provide a uniquely truthful and foundational approach to the meaning of the Bible and to the history with which the biblical writers were concerned. To put it another way, he conflates history in the first sense, as the truth of what happens, with history in the third and fourth senses, as what modern historians do and produce. Second, Harvey underestimates the possibility that there exists a self-consciously *theological*

²V. A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: MacMillan, 1966).

³Harvey, *Historian and the Believer*, 280, 267.

and *ecclesial* approach to biblical interpretation that possesses its own “integrity, durability, and discipline”⁴ and that has good reasons to understand both the Bible and history in ways neither reducible to, nor confined by, the conventions of historical criticism.

Despite the title of this essay—“The Believer and the Historian”—I do not wish to simply make Harvey’s argument in reverse. I recognize that the historian’s craft possesses a discipline, integrity, and morality of its own, and I do not wish to insist that historians must operate within terms dictated by theology. However, I do suggest that Christian theology today can best address the conundrum of “faith and history” by (1) reclaiming a distinctively theological and ecclesial approach to understanding the Bible and the history to which it gives witness that (2) makes grateful but critical use of historical criticism while refusing to assign it primary or foundational significance. Such an approach is superior, I believe, to its alternatives, namely, an approach that rejects historical criticism entirely (whether out of fundamentalist or postmodern conviction) or one that assigns it a foundational role that it is not suited to play.

To make this case, I will first explore the concept of *theological interpretation*, then examine the challenge posed to traditional theological interpretation by historical criticism, and conclude with a recommendation for how best to pursue theological interpretation in the contemporary context.

HISTORY AND TRADITIONAL THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

What is theological interpretation? Let me propose the following definition: theological interpretation refers to an approach to understanding the Bible that has as its central concern true knowledge of God and faithful orientation in the world. Like other interpretive approaches, theological interpretation has distinctive presuppositions and aims. The main presupposition of theological interpretation is that the Bible is sacred scripture, that is, it has its origin, subject matter, and purpose in God. The central aim of theological interpretation is to understand sacred scripture *as* sacred scripture, namely, in a manner that critically advances knowledge of God and orientation in the world.

From their earliest days, Christians, like Jews, interpreted the Bible theologically as a matter of course. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that Christianity and Judaism came into existence as communities of theological interpretation. Four features characterized Christian theological interpretation before the rise of historical criticism and shaped how Christians traditionally understood “history.”

First, traditional theological interpretation equally and simultaneously understands the world in light of scripture and scripture in light of the world. Scripture and world are not

⁴C. M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: Theological Hermeneutics* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993) 26.

initially disconnected realities to be put into relation by a subsequent act of interpretive ingenuity. Rather, scripture is God's truth for the world, and God's relation to the world is the theme of scripture.

Second, traditional theological interpretation assumes a mutual fit between scripture's literal and spiritual senses. While Christians understood this fit in a variety of sometimes conflicting ways, they generally agreed that scripture's literal sense is neither *timeless* nor *time-bound* but inexhaustibly *timely*, relevant to every present age.

Third, traditional theological interpretation approaches scripture as a manifold unity whose coherence is rightly discovered with the aid of the *regula fidei* or rule of faith, that is, a brief traditional summary of the church's faith. Scripture's parts are therefore discretely meaningful in themselves yet stand in multiple relevant connections to each other. Scripture coheres . . .

. . . as the story of the one human family on earth;

. . . as the complementarity of Old and New Covenants, two dispensations of one economy of salvation, first entrusted to carnal Israel, but after its failure and obsolescence, to spiritual Israel, the church of many nations;

. . . as testimony to the glad tidings of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, and finally, traditional theological interpretation approaches scripture for the purpose of guiding the church's conduct and creed. The church's confession of God as Trinity and of Jesus Christ as *vere deus vere homo* gave doxological summary to the church's experience with scripture over time and guided new generations of Christians into future readings of scripture. At the same time, such confessions were open to restatement, to addition, and even to correction in light of new circumstances and better insights.

Now, it seems plausible to suggest that these and other characteristic features of theological interpretation shaped the way in which Christians understood and experienced "history." In light of theological interpretation, Christians were concerned with history as:

Protological and eschatological history. History in this sense concerns the ultimate origin and destiny of the human family and creation, the context apart from which every other context is fragmentary and incomplete.

Providential history. History in this sense concerns God's guidance of human affairs, a deeply hidden guidance that operates counter to the visible tide of human events.

Covenant history. History in this sense concerns the fellowship that God graciously initiates, sustains, and promises to consummate with God's chosen people. Beginning with the second century, Christians have frequently understood history in this sense to concern a great reversal whereby the benefits originally intended for Abraham's natural descendants were forfeited and granted to another people, the Gentile church.

Incarnational history. History in this sense concerns the death and resurrection of one

man in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19). Consequently, Christ marks the center and turning point of the ages and the beginning of the final victory of God.

Doxological history. History in this sense concerns the ability of the covenant people to recognize and proclaim the benefits of God, so that God’s glory and goodness may be praised throughout the earth.

Christians knew and recognized history in all these dimensions, thanks to scripture, or more precisely, thanks to the fact that the Christian community read and used scripture theologically. History, thus, was not the exclusive property of a book or a fictional world to be entered at the cost of leaving the real world behind. Rather, theological interpretation enabled Christians to perceive—however dimly and imperfectly—every local time and place within the more encompassing history of God with the world.

The church’s experience in the modern world severely challenges traditional theological interpretation and its conception of history. It is important, however, to note that it does so in more than one way. One set of challenges concerns the rise of modern historical consciousness, which creates new ways of reading the Bible and new ways of conceiving the history to which the Bible testifies. Another challenge concerns how Christians are properly to understand the church’s relation to the Jewish people in the present day. As we think further about our topic question, “How is history relevant to the work of biblical interpretation in theology?” we will give attention to both of these challenges. With that in mind, let us turn first to the challenge of modern historical criticism.

HISTORY AND HISTORICAL CRITICISM

The story of theological interpretation in recent times is bound up with the emergence of historical criticism and the related methods that make up modern biblical criticism. Originally, historical criticism emerged as an extension of theology’s interest in the literal sense of scripture. Gradually, however, historical criticism came to define its own premises and goals independently of theological interpretation. The key premise was that scripture could be fruitfully understood by setting aside the claim that it was the inspired medium of God’s Word and by treating it as the product of human authors, essentially similar in character to other ancient and modern writings. The key goal of historical criticism has been to determine the most primitive meaning of a biblical passage in its original historical setting, using criteria of judgment that are as neutral and non-theological in character as possible.

In many ways, the harvest of historical criticism over the past two centuries has been impressive indeed. Above all, historical criticism has succeeded in bringing into focus what we might call the *humanity* of the scriptures. It has *broadened* our conception of history by teaching us to view the origin and development of biblical literature within the wider context of the ancient world and its peoples, cultures, and religions. It has *deepened* our conception of history by teaching us to understand the context of biblical literature in multi-

contextual terms, simultaneously shaped by religious, economic, political, and ideological concerns. It has *diversified* our conception of history by making us sensitive to differences in genre, setting, and audience that separate different stages and elements of biblical literature. Finally, it has *chastened* our conception of history by enabling us to distinguish between report and fact, and thereby teaching us that different cultures presuppose different conceptions of the possible, and to evaluate biblical literature using concepts such as legend, folk tale, myth, and so on.

Yet these strengths have also come with some enduring limitations. A key to the success of modern forms of rationality is abstraction. Some aspect or dimension of reality is understood in greater depth at the cost of excluding or disregarding in principle other dimensions. Division of labor and specialization contribute to further abstraction even within a single field of knowledge or inquiry. This process can be fruitful as long as its inherent limitations are not forgotten and the knowledge gained by such abstraction is not confused with the truth or fullness of reality. Without such a recognition, abstraction can become more than limiting; it can become dangerously misleading and distorted.

Unfortunately, the career of historical criticism has spawned certain myths about what a historical approach to the Bible can achieve. Let me identify three such myths.

Myth one. Historical criticism provides access to the *literal sense of scripture*. Undoubtedly, much of historical criticism's authority depends on the belief that historical criticism sets scripture free "to speak for itself," unmuffled by personal piety and ecclesial tradition. Ironically, however, access to the literal sense of scripture is just what historical criticism is least suited to provide. Historical criticism, as it has traditionally been practiced, disregards the Bible's character *as scripture* from the outset. It abstracts a passage from its canonical setting, from the history of the church's experience with that passage, from the search for the center of the canonical witness as a whole, and from the interpreter's own theological and religious interests. What is gained by this abstraction is the ability of the contemporary historian to stabilize and illuminate biblical passages as testimonies to the human past. But what is often lost is the ability to hear the testimonies of the human past as the medium of divine witness to the present. And that is what is intended by the literal sense of *scripture*.

Myth two. Historical criticism provides authoritative access to the truth of the past. A proper evaluation of the historian's craft demands that we neither under- nor overestimate its competence to describe the past. We should resist a facile postmodern skepticism that seeks to erase the distinction between truth and error, between historiography and historical fiction. The opprobrium rightly directed against those who deny the Holocaust indicates how much depends upon preserving the justified intention of von Ranke's much maligned goal of knowing the past as it really was. However, we must resist the temptation to erase the distinction between the fullness of the truth of the past and the modern historian's reconstruction of it under general rules of evidence. Modern historiography consciously sets aside those dimensions of historical reality that are of greatest concern to biblical writers, such as the protological, eschatological, providential, covenantal, incarnational, and doxological dimensions. The modern historian can teach us that the biblical writers fre-

quently articulate these dimensions in the language of legend or folk tale, but he or she cannot render a verdict about the reality of these dimensions as such.

Myth three. Historical criticism interprets scripture from a neutral or independent vantage point. Modern biblical studies sought to interpret the Bible independently of any philosophical or ecclesial approach to the Bible, and it has been at least partially successful in doing so. But this success does not mean that modern biblical studies can interpret the Bible independently of philosophical and theological presuppositions entirely. Every written history rests on premises that are not themselves established by historical inquiry but presupposed by it. Jon Levenson points out that many of the same nineteenth and twentieth-century Protestant scholars who jealously guarded historical criticism's independence from theology nevertheless portrayed ancient Judaism in profoundly negative terms that reflected the church's doctrinal supersessionism.⁵ Today, biblical scholars are on guard to avoid such characterizations. What accounts for this change? It is not, I think, simply an increase in our knowledge about ancient Judaism. Rather, the shift represents a more fundamental reassessment of the vitality and significance of Judaism as a religious tradition independent of Christianity. In short, historians are themselves embedded in history, and the premises they bring to their work are implicitly philosophical and theological in character.

A preliminary conclusion that I would draw from this brief survey of the strengths and limitations of modern historical criticism is a negative one. Christians undermine the prospects for a fruitful resolution to the conundrum of "faith and history" whenever they do either of two things: when they pursue theological interpretation in a manner that rejects historical criticism entirely (whether out of fundamentalist or postmodern conviction) and when they assign it a primary and foundational role.

An example of the former is found in the phenomenally popular "prophecy scholarship" of writers such as Hal Lindsey and Timothy LaHaye, the latter being the author of the best-selling *Left Behind* series.⁶ It is sobering to contemplate the fact that, for many Christians, the problem of "faith and history" chiefly concerns figuring out the correct timing of the rapture and other end-time events. Yet Christians unsympathetic to these books nevertheless need to understand the nature of their appeal, which should not be explained in psychological terms alone. Prophecy scholars vigorously affirm one key element of theological interpretation: they interpret the world in light of the Bible and the Bible in light of the world. LaHaye exhorts his readers to study the Bible in order to discern the signs of the times and to remain alert to contemporary events in order to understand the Bible better. Moreover, he seeks to motivate his readers to embrace "holy living in an unholy age." That being said, there can be little doubt about the enterprise's liabilities. The approach suffers from a narrowness of historical vision that refuses to register the breadth, depth, and diver-

⁵J. D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Westminster John Knox, 1993) 1–32.

⁶See, e.g., T. LaHaye and J. B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1999) 21–23. The book provides the hermeneutical foundation for the *Left Behind* novels.

sity of the biblical witnesses and contemporary events. It willfully neglects every insight into what I earlier called the humanity of the Bible. The authors "shoehorn" contemporary life into the confines of a few passages of scripture isolated from canonical and historical context. In sum, the enterprise nourishes a dangerously narrow knowledge of God and orientation in the world, at once fragile, volatile, and vulnerable to political manipulation.

Yet the conservative error has its liberal counterpart in projects that seek to assign critically reconstructed history a theological role that it simply cannot bear. One otherwise out-

standing and extremely useful book that tends a bit in this direction is Mary C. Boys's *Has God Only One Blessing?*⁷ Boys's excellent book addresses the new theological situation created by recent church decisions to repudiate supersessionism, the teaching that the church has replaced the Jewish people in God's covenant. She aims to show how

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supersessionist conviction has distorted traditional tellings of the Christian story and how, in contrast, Christians might tell the story of their faith in ways that are not supersessionist. Boys successfully sketches traditional Christian conceptions of covenant history and shows how these have been profoundly shaped by such contrasts as carnal Israel, spiritual church, disobedient Jews, faithful Christians, law that kills, grace that gives life, and so on. My concern, however, touches on the alternative story that Boys proposes to put in place of the traditional narrative. Her account is not a reading of the church's canon of scriptures but a reconstruction of early Christian history behind the text. Following the conventions of modern historiography, Boys departs from making claims about God and speaks instead about the varieties of ancient belief in God. She emphasizes the pluralism of Second Temple Judaism, the emergence of the Jesus movement as a historical phenomenon, and the gradual, often painful, parting of the ways between the two communities. Yet her historical account, though plausible, is unable to replicate the role in the church's life played by the traditional interpretation of covenant history, however deficient it may have been. The history of religions can contextualize nascent supersessionism in its ancient local context and thereby deprive it of its claim to normativity. But it cannot generate any alternative hearing of scripture that renders more truthful knowledge of God and more faithful orientation in the world.

⁷M. C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist, 2000). Despite my reservations about the "alternative account" that Boys proposes, the book is a valuable resource for those seeking an overview of the church's legacy of anti-Judaism.

HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Let me now briefly sketch a third way that seeks to draw on the strengths of the conservative and liberal approaches while avoiding their weaknesses, namely, a postcritical approach that I believe represents the strongest available option today.⁸

Generally speaking, a postcritical model of theological interpretation grants the validity and limited usefulness of a historical-critical approach to the Bible, but not its claim to exclusive validity or priority with respect to other approaches. It insists on the independent integrity of a specifically theological approach to biblical interpretation that regards the Bible *as scripture*, as a source and norm for the worshipping community's knowledge of, and communion with, God. Postcritical theological interpretation rejects the idea that the Bible "speaks for itself" only when its character as scripture is ignored. Such a view actually gives unwarranted normativity to the presuppositions of the modern interpreter. Unlike conservative theological interpretation, however, a postcritical approach does not conceive the authority of scripture chiefly in terms of its *origins* but rather in terms of its *subject matter* or scope (e.g., God's identity and purposes) and in terms of its proper use in community (e.g., building up the community in love of God and neighbor). This shift allows postcritical theological interpretation to combine precritical methods of interpretation with a modern acknowledgement of the historical diversity of the biblical witnesses. Similarly, a postcritical approach acknowledges that the Bible is subject to ideological distortion. However, it holds that the most reliable and efficacious criterion for judging such distortion is ultimately found in the Bible's own witness to God, rather than in the reader's independent conceptions of justice and human flourishing.

Let me flesh out this introduction by returning to the four senses of history that I noted at the outset and by suggesting what a postcritical perspective has to say about each of them.

TRUTH OF WHAT HAPPENS

History in the first sense noted above refers to the "truth of what happens," *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. The premise of a postcritical approach is that history in this most metaphysically freighted sense is neither an infinitely distant *Ding an sich*, forever eluding human knowledge, nor a fact awaiting competent reconstruction. Rather history is a reality first known and knowable to God, the Lord of History, and to human beings only as they are able to see things in light of God. Furthermore, a postcritical approach assumes that the content of history as known to God is in fact constituted at its heart by God's own action in and upon human history.

⁸For an excellent introduction to the varieties of postcritical interpretation, see P. Ochs, *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1993).

In recent decades, many Christians have avoided speaking about the Bible as a witness to God's history with the world. They were frightened off by the criticism that the "Biblical Theology Movement" employed the term "history" ambiguously, a point famously made by Langdon Gilkey.⁹ But it seems to me that while we should do our best to avoid ambiguity, we need not be frightened off.

In my view, the canon provides the conditions for the possibility of discerning history in its relationship to God. It enables us to recognize, however imperfectly and disobediently, those dimensions of reality that are discernable only in light of God. But to do this faithfully and responsibly, we must take a self-consciously Chalcedonian approach, cognizant of both scripture's humanity and deity. A contemporary Chalcedonian approach welcomes the modern critical study of the Bible insofar as it brings into unparalleled focus the humanity of scripture. Modern critical study breaks open the kaleidoscope of the canon and enables us to see its constituent parts. Each element is now visibly unconnected to the rest, and we recognize its distinctive character more precisely than we could before, as legend, folk tale, communal memory, and didactic history.

Nevertheless, scripture in its final canonical shape presents us with an inexhaustibly rich witness that transcends the perspectives of all component parts. To affirm the inspiration of scripture is to affirm the relevance of this canonical context for discerning history theologically. Moreover, it is to affirm that scripture's legendary elements may nevertheless witness truthfully and reliably to dimensions of historical experience that are of central theological concern, such as eschatological history and providence. Each element of the biblical witness "is a fallible witness in no way distinguishable in this respect from all other products of the human hand and mind. Yet they bear in their canonical unity reliable 'testimony to divine reality.'"¹⁰

DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

A second sense of history concerns the decisive events of the day that set the context of living and call for response. How shall we read the signs of the time? For Van Harvey, the decisive event for biblical interpretation was the rise of historical consciousness, cutting us off from traditional biblical interpretation. Similarly, many today are inclined to identify the decisive event with the rise of a postmodern temperament, forcing us to abandon the premises of the so-called modern outlook.

Yet the project of discerning the signs of the times looks differently when viewed in light of the theological interpretation of scripture. For the canon does not witness only to God's engagement with history. Rather, the church's experience with the canon is the means

⁹L. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JR* 41 (1961) 194–205.

¹⁰B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 215.

by which the church is propelled *into* history in the present time. Here, too, modern critical studies are important. But arguably the most important contributions come not from inaugurating methods of historical criticism but from second and third generation approaches such as those that interpret scripture among the impoverished and socially marginalized, such as womanist biblical interpretation. These approaches force us to reconsider what is truly urgent and decisive in our surroundings in light of the Bible.

An example to which I have alluded is the desire among Jews and Christians to understand anew the canonical witness to covenant history in ways that do not read the other out of God's history with the world but view each other as siblings, estranged but destined for reconciliation, and therefore as already capable of fruitful conversation about ultimate things. It is noteworthy that work on a postcritical approach has been the joint endeavor of Jewish and Christian scholars, and that their search for a new approach to scripture coincides with interest in the new ways Jews and Christians can faithfully relate to each other. For many, the increasingly urgent question is how this approach might be pursued in ways that engage the Muslim community.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The third and fourth senses of history concern the discipline of the modern historian. Here it is especially fitting that I speak cautiously, since I speak as a theologian and not as a practitioner of the historian's craft. Of course, historians may approach the biblical texts from a variety of perspectives. Their evaluation of the past is to be informed by evidence and sound judgment. Yet it seems worth noting that it is possible for historians who are also Christian to consider that sound judgment may also rest finally on insights and perspectives that are irreducibly Christian in character. In order to consider what this might mean today, I think we could well consider again the judgment of Georges Florovsky, eminent scholar of Christian history and doctrine. In an essay entitled "The Dilemma of the Christian Historian," Florovsky wrote

[T]he Christian historian will attempt to reveal the actual course of events in the light of his Christian knowledge of man, but will be slow and cautious in detecting the "providential" structure of actual history, in any detail. Even in the history of the Church "the hand of Providence" is emphatically hidden, though it would be blasphemous to deny that this Hand does exist or that God is truly the Lord of History. Actually, the purpose of a historical understanding is not so much to detect the Divine action in history as to understand the human action, that is, human activities, in the bewildering variety and confusion in which they appear to a human observer. Above all, the Christian historian will regard history at once as a mystery and as a tragedy—a mystery of salvation and a tragedy of sin. He will insist on the comprehensiveness of our conception of man, as a prerequisite of our understanding of his existence, of his exploits, of his destiny,

which is actually wrought in his history.¹¹

Such an approach to historiography is no less critical than that set forth by Van Harvey—indeed, it is in one respect more critical: it acknowledges its deepest premises rather than claiming to adopt an illusory neutrality.

Permit me to conclude by suggesting a supplement to the topic question with which we began. Our original question was this: “How is history relevant to the work of biblical interpretation in theology?” The burden of my essay has been to suggest that this question really needs to be balanced by another, namely, “How is theology relevant to the understanding of history?” to which I will now in fact answer briefly in the words of St. Paul, “Greatly in every way!” and be done.

¹¹G. Florovsky, “The Predicament of the Christian Historian,” in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959) 166.

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