

ON HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY, HISTORICAL CRITICISM, AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY: REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

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I. STUCK ON JOSHUA

I find myself repeatedly drawn to the books of Joshua and Judges. I hope it is not a secret enjoyment of violence, or something worse. It seems that in books such as these the challenge to identify the God portrayed here as the God and Father of Jesus Christ is so acute. If we can in fact hear a clear and searching word of God here, then perhaps all our other efforts in listening to Scripture can be made even more fruitful. So I have decided to use my own work in the book of Joshua as a foil for thinking about several matters related to biblical authority, theological interpretation, and historical-critical study. The issue becomes poignant for me precisely because I have been able to learn best and most in studying Joshua by using critical methods and theories that have often been looked upon by evangelicals with suspicion.

In an essay in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*,¹ and in a subsequent presentation on this campus entitled "From Holy War to Holy Love: The Theological Challenge of the Book of Joshua," I tried to make progress in reading Joshua at the point of its presentation of so-called Holy War, or Yahweh war. In these essays I argued five propositions:

First, in reviewing the literature that attempts to deal with the ethical problems posed by the conquest, I argued that none of these approaches satisfactorily makes the narratives depicting the divinely directed extermination of the Canaanites usable as Christian Scripture.

Second, I identified the problem lurking behind the traditional apologetic approaches to Holy War as the assumption by interpreters that the book of Joshua itself wholeheartedly endorses mass extermination and commends this to the read-

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er. Identifying this assumption suggested to me the possibility of another approach. This suspicion was reinforced by a consideration of the nature of the material as *tradition* that passed through many phases of development before reaching its present canonical shape.

The third proposition, argued in the main exegetical section of the paper, was that a series of transitional expressions found throughout Joshua 2-11 structure the narrative into a coherent whole in which every battle after the conquest of Jericho and Ai is depicted as a *defensive* response to Canaanite aggression. This aggression was in turn presented as a response to Yahweh's action through Israel, and therefore as a repudiation of Yahweh's rule. Moreover, these transitions and other related passages shift the semantic level at which the text is to be read. The original narratives were saga-like materials celebrating Yahweh's gift of the land to Israel. The transitional passages, however, understand Israel's presence in Canaan, especially the conquest of Jericho and Ai, as an act of Yahweh, comparable to the Exodus, and Canaanite resistance is seen as stubborn rejection of Yahweh's will, comparable to Pharaoh's hardness of heart. The transitions generate the assumption that a positive response was, indeed, possible, and the narratives about Rahab and the Gibeonites depict two positive responses by non-Israelites.

The fourth thesis argued that these transitions are a middle term between the earlier saga material, which had primarily local and cultic interests, and the later editorial contributions of the deuteronomistic school. In attempting to integrate this observation with a standard critical theory, I suggested that this intermediate level could have been related to the so-called JE stage of the Pentateuch's development and could have formed its conclusion, creating a narrative moving from creation to conquest. The shift of semantic level from local cultic celebration to theological paradigm was extended by the deuteronomists, who found the tradition a fit vehicle for articulating distinctive deuteronomistic views of scripturally conditioned obedience, whole-hearted love for Yahweh, and the king as guardian of the covenant.

The fifth proposition was simply that we can find justification for carefully using the text of Joshua analogically—whether we call it typology or allegory at this point is immaterial to me—seeing the book of Joshua and its narratives as paradigms of a certain kind of spiritual or moral life and warfare, especially as construed in deuteronomistic terms. The “enemy” to be exterminated, the “Canaanite,” if you will, is not a human community, but rather that evil within the community and in its members which implacably opposes divine rule. The CBQ piece ended here, but in an on-campus presentation I then set up the basic parameters of an exposition of Joshua along the themes (borrowed from Woudstra) of the land, the Lord, the Law, and the Leader, commenting along the way that the interpretation thus offered was remarkably compatible with some distinctives of Wesleyan theology, particularly Deuteronomy's stress on loving God with all the heart. This use of “holy war” material to advance the case for “holy love” thus illustrates how the interpreter's own theological tradition can work positively within the exegetical process.

This work was met with differing responses. Some negative assessments were concerned with disquieting Walter Brueggemann!¹² Most of the questions that arose related to my use of historical-critical methodology and the implications of this approach for the historicity of the book of Joshua in its present form. It was tempting then, and is even more tempting now, just to brush off such concerns. After all, evangelical interpreters have become fairly

comfortable with several species of historical indifference in biblical interpretation. I have not found that approach satisfying, though, and would like now to try to address some of the issues raised not just by my own interpretation of Joshua, but by others of the same sort.

II. Commitments and Ground Rules

Regarding Scripture and criticism, I remain happily housed within the language of the Asbury Theological Seminary confession of Faith, which regards the Bible as "without error in all it affirms." This statement, taken from the Lausanne Covenant and the commentary on that document produced by its framers, intentionally included the term "affirms" rather than "says" in order clearly to set the trustworthiness and reliability of Scripture in the context of responsible interpretation. That is, a category like "inerrancy" or "infallibility" does not really become meaningful until we really know just what the text is trying to *communicate*, which is a great deal more than just "what it says." This is why I could not assent to the radicalization of this commitment found in the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," which turns inerrancy into a hermeneutic decreeing *in advance* what interpretations *are allowed*, even prescribing the literary genres God *must* inspire scriptural authors to use. The Chicago Statement thus excludes interpretations by Origen, Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory, and Thomas Aquinas from orthodoxy! Such modernism is rightly eschewed here at Asbury. I do not believe commitment to the trustworthiness and reliability of Scripture forecloses in advance on any interpretative alternatives. Rather, it pre-commits the interpreter to submit to whatever Scripture is found to have communicated as it emerges in the encounter with Scripture.

This commitment to be obedient to whatever the Bible teaches commits me as well to a rigorous exegetical practice, which includes the use of historical-critical methods. Since some in the evangelical movement regard most forms of historical criticism as incompatible with a commitment to biblical trustworthiness and reliability, I wish here to set out as working principles some general ground rules that I have formulated in conjunction with the helpful discussion of this subject by Carl Armerding:³

First, historical study is undertaken with a commitment to the truth value of Scripture and to traditional protestant, supernaturalist theism. No text is regarded as suspect merely because it narrates the miraculous.

Second, where responsible applications of disciplines like source, form, and redaction criticisms reveal a good probability for a process of development in the shaping of the text of the Old Testament, *all stages* are regarded as participating to some degree in divine revelation and inspiration. Development is not inimical to the truth-value of Scripture. The progressive development of Scripture has a role in the overall picture of God's historical revelation.

Third, amid the diversity of materials and emphases found in Scripture, and especially in the light of the diversity of voices discerned by historical-critical methods, the church consistently privileges the *final or canonical form* of Scripture as the normative context for theological interpretation. I should stress that normative here does not mean the "only context." Recognition of the canon does not purchase us permission to regress to a precritical reading. Rather, the final form of the text is the apex of its development, and so it alone finally bears witness to the full range of divine truth. Uncovering the diversity of voices, perspec-

tives, and even ideological positions that emerged on the way to that final form is an important step in discerning precisely what the canonical shape of the text has achieved.⁴ While I affirm this, I am not so sanguine that John H. Sailhamer is justified in concluding that "Whatever prehistory we may be able to reconstruct for the text, it is not a source of revelation or inspired instruction."⁵ What concerns me here is that he seems to assume that from the claim that previous stages are "not inspired" he can conclude that in fact, there is nothing that we can learn about the meaning of the inspired text from looking at previous stages. He also seems to brand earlier stages of the text, which certainly did function as sacred Scripture for their audiences, as somehow not inspired. Thus inspiration is a static feature of the final text and not a dynamic divine influence that superintended the whole process of the text's creation. I suspect the writer to the Hebrews and the readers of the book of Psalms at its earlier stages of compilation would disagree with Sailhamer.

Fourth, if faithful and diligent interpretation leads to the conclusion that a biblical writer *did not intend* the reader to believe an event actually occurred in the sense understood by modern historians, I believe the interpreter is free, in following the inspired writers, to adopt a non-historical interpretation. I cannot see how we can say in advance that any particular literary genre, including narratives that do not aspire to an antiquarian function, could *not* be used by God. The interpreter remains bound to the text's message, which can be disclosed by faithful interpretation.⁶

Fifth, I practice biblical interpretation as an expression of *fides quarens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. Faith itself is grounded in God and his mighty acts, not in our demonstrations, defenses, and apologetic efforts. But faith must still ask the nature of what it believes, the full character of that which it affirms, and so it seeks *intellectum*. Faith requires the full employment of our minds in the search for truth, and ultimately depends radically on the Spirit of God to brood over the church and lead us to truth.

III. The Place of Historical Criticism in Theological Exegesis

First, this study illustrates the need to enlarge our exegetical and theological assumptions. Almost no modern commentary on Joshua makes use of the obvious theological openings offered by the data I have presented.⁷ The presence of diverse historical meanings in the text demands a hermeneutic that likewise operates with multiple levels of meaning. Long before the New Testament or early Christian and Jewish allegorists touched the text of Joshua, its compilers had transformed the historical tradition of the conquest, with all its moral-historical problems, into a gigantic metaphor for the religious life. We need, therefore, a theological-expository framework capable of assessing responsibly the multiple metaphorical motions within the biblical tradition itself. Whether this requires, as Andrew Louth has said, a "Return to Allegory," or a reassessment and rehabilitation of von Rad's call for "typological exegesis," the multi-layered quality of the text as disclosed by historical criticism necessitates a corresponding theological hermeneutic.⁸ The *literal sense* of Scripture turns out to be *manifold* and often *figural*!⁹ This observation is as old as Hugh of St. Victor or Thomas Aquinas, but bears fresh consideration.¹⁰ When those who start with Wellhausen and von Rad discover they share unexpected talking points with Ireneaus, Origen, and Augustine, something remarkable has clearly transpired.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned in my work on Joshua was *the need to revise*

our understanding of the place of historical-critical exegesis in theological interpretation. The irony that a historical-critical analysis led me to a reaffirmation of a pre-critical hermeneutic, typology or allegory no less!— should not suggest a kind of critical self-immolation in which the historical-critical analysis, having delivered us over to Alexandria, falls away without continuing positively to shape the exposition. I want here to share some musings on the task of biblical theology, particularly the connection between historical-critical exegesis and theological application.

Biblical theology is in a sweat about how to move from critical exegesis to theological exposition. Starting with Stendahl's division of interpretative labor into the "descriptive task" and "hermeneutical question," thinkers in this area have sought various ways to "bridge the gap" between non-confessional historical-critical exegesis and normative theological exposition.¹¹ We try to move from a critical "whereas" to a theological "therefore." Often this attempt has taken the form of a rethinking of historical criticism so as to render it softer, friendlier to theology. However, in my judgment, this is precisely what ought *not* to be done. No discovery of inner hermeneutical dynamics within the biblical tradition can, of itself, lift exposition out of the particular contingencies of historical exegesis into the realm of contemporary theological exposition. No exegetical maneuver, critical or conservative, can guarantee the needed "therefore."

I would like rather to describe what I believe ought to be done in other terms, and thus to relate historical-critical exegesis to theology along different lines. My starting point is the famous definition of the task of systematic theology with which Karl Barth's *magnum opus* begins. Theology, or "dogmatics" as Barth called it, evaluates and corrects what the church says about God in the light of the Word of God given in his own self-revelation, found in the incarnation, and certified and identified definitively in Scripture. Since Barth held the Bible to be the only certain source and definitive criterion for determining the content of God's self-revelation, the attempt to speak of God becomes in a vital and essential sense speech about the Bible. Indeed, talk about the Bible is the primary vehicle by which we talk about the God of the Gospel. As if to embody this claim, successive volumes of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* increasingly emphasized the exegetical task in the midst of traditional theological discourse.

But how are we to judge the competence and quality of talk about the Bible? Here Barth allowed full scope to all the exegetical disciplines, including historical criticism. Indeed, he is charged by some with conceding to radical criticism far too much and then proceeding to protect theology from its results. His concern, however, was to protect historical study from always having to "lead to" or undergird theological exegesis. Such provision of a historical-critical "whereas" for the theological "therefore" would subvert theology by tethering it to human ingenuity and the seasonally shifting tides of historical research. It would also subvert historical criticism by co-opting its task in the name of an ideology of faith. Rather, Barth identifies historical-critical exegesis with faith's quest for understanding, for defining and refining the content and character of faith.¹² At the very least, historical-critical study of the Bible enables us to determine to what degree our speech about the Bible is competent, how far it answers to all that is known of the Bible's actual nature, how congruent the church's proclamation of God's word from a particular text actually is with what can be known of the text itself. At this point exegesis assumes a

critical function. Although historical-critical analysis cannot “produce” the contemporary speech of God—no hermeneutic can—historical-critical methods can indicate how responsible, competent, and disciplined our talk about the Bible is. It can show to what extent we are listening to the text, and, by sharpening the specific profile of a biblical text, can provide a basis for criticizing our biblical-theological statements. It assumes a positive role in theology’s evaluation of the church’s talk about God.

Turning to Joshua, my redactional and literary analysis does not suddenly transport the ancient text into the modern church. It does, however, sharply question any reading of Joshua that understands conflict with the Canaanites analogously with the church’s historical confrontation with any external human community. One thinks here not only of liberationist readings, but also the habit of evangelicals to see in victorious Israel an image of the church militant in its evangelistic mission. Both moves that distort the inner analogies generated by the compositional process. My analysis suggests that the closest analogue the community of faith can find to the Canaanite will have to be interior to the community: the enemy is we ourselves!

Historical-critical interpretation also serves a second role. Again, I find Barth a helpful starting point. Contrary to common prejudice, Barth retained in his theological vision a significant place for the human response to God’s word, arguing that knowledge of God’s word not only involved the sovereign divine act of self-disclosure, but also entailed human self-determination, by which he meant not only human decision, but human struggle with obedience. The act of acknowledging God’s word engages our whole being personally with God’s purposes.¹³ Barth insisted critical study, though not a means by which we can mechanically extract the “here and now” divine speech from the text of Scripture, yet remains a crucial means by which believing interpreters acknowledge their own determination by the word of God. This acknowledgment responds to the historically contingent, rational, and discursive character of the divine word by an attempt at historically informed, critical reading that strives above all to a form of *listening* and restating.¹⁴

Therefore I have had to reformulate my own convictions about the task of biblical theology. However important the questions may be that are so exhaustively summarized and tabulated in books like Gerhard Hasel’s,¹⁵ I now find them all to be inadequate. I now no longer privilege the question posed in many forms from Gabler to Stendahl—“how do we move from then to now” or the like. My overarching question is now “How does God use the Bible to rule the church?” From that standpoint, I then have to ask “How might the exegetical disciplines most fully and violently expose the reader to the fullest range of what is communicated in Scripture?” I use the term “violently” looking over my shoulder at two masters of interpretation, George Steiner and Franz Kafka. Steiner wrote:

In that great discourse with the living dead which we call reading, our role is not a passive one. Where it is more than reverie or an indifferent appetite sprung of boredom, reading is a mode of action. We engage the presence, the voice of the book. We allow it entry, though not unguarded, into our inmost. A great poem, a classic novel, press in upon us; they assail and occupy the strong places of our consciousness. They exercise upon our imagination and desires, upon our ambitions and most covert dreams, a strange bruising mastery. Men who burn books know what

they are doing.¹⁶

But it is Franz Kafka who captures the real trauma of reading truly and deeply:

If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? So that it shall make us happy?...we should be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.¹⁷

Therefore exegesis, even—especially—scholarly technical exegesis, must become something that involves exposure of our total selves to the totality of all that God might wish to say from the text of Scripture. In this context, a refusal to read historically can appear to be a thinly disguised species of moral and spiritual cowardice.

This character of attentiveness, of disciplined, even painful and traumatic listening, however shot through with our inescapable ideological preconceptions, still yields those preconceptions to the sovereign God. We listen for a critical word of God from Scripture, and thus cannot be happy with interpretations which, from the outset, work overtly to construe Scripture in conjunction with an ideology, thus domesticating it. Thus the very act of historical interpretation itself can become a way of acknowledging the word of God.

IV. Tradition-History and Historical Authenticity

I have argued that certain ethical dimensions of Holy War were a matter of concern for the compilers of Joshua, at least to the extent that the Holy War traditions in their earliest form represented an unusable past. Editorial moves assigned to these traditions a non-militaristic, non-territorial, theological and even spiritual function. Thus, the conquest came to illustrate the necessity of an affirmative response to Yahweh's action. The deuteronomistic redaction then provided this affirmative response with a concrete context and character, in which the conquest narratives became a paradigm of heart-motivated obedience to the written Torah under the aegis of God's chosen king.

This process of theological transformation by which the book of Joshua emerged has serious implications for how the book functions theologically. Its primary impact is to force a reformulation of the most commonly asked interpretive question. We no longer ask simply, "How could the Christian God have demanded the extermination of the Canaanites?" Rather, those who wish to think along with the biblical narrators ask instead, "How did the shapers of the book of Joshua employ these narratives, with all their historical and theological problems, to proclaim the will of God for successive generations?" I would like to point out here that this refocusing of the question not only moves away from the issue of historical ethics, but also moves away from certain types of historical apologetics which would ground the book's theological message in a demonstration of its historicity (or lack thereof). Classically, traditio-historical approaches to the texts have been taken to lead *necessarily* to a devaluing of their historicity.

Since I understand biblical theology to operate primarily from a standpoint of *assent* to the authority of the canonical witness, mainly *listening* to the text's message as opposed to other agendas (such as testing, proving, or disproving its historical validity in terms of modern standards), I do not find the issue of historicity *directly* decisive to expounding the theological message of Joshua. Still, certainly one important consequence of my study is to stimulate reflection on the *character* of the biblical narrative's historicity. While a hermeneutics of assent seldom asks *whether* the text is historically true, it still must ask *how* is it true.

Three aspects of the analysis presented here can be imagined to stimulate concern among readers eager to affirm the historical reliability of the narrative. First, the acceptance of categories such as etiology and *saga* can suggest doubt about the antiquarian seriousness of the tradition. Second, and more seriously, traditio-historical analysis of the biblical material does not focus primarily upon the *content* of the biblical narrative as a whole, but on the *functions* that the individual narrative units served as they were used in various contexts in the life of Israel. The evident diversity and polyvalence of function is hard to reconcile with the univalent sense sought after by many modern readers in the West. Third, the portrayal of the individual narratives acquiring a new linguistic and literary shape as they moved to new contexts to serve new functions could be used by skeptically inclined interpreters to justify an attack on the veracity of the overall picture presented by the final form of the text. That the material has developed under the impact of constant reuse conjures up the image of the book of Joshua being "rewritten" three or four times until the final form of the text can only be regarded as historically worthless. Interpreters of either the classical liberal or fundamentalist persuasions who rigidly tie the text's theological integrity and authority to its strict conformity to modern historiographic criteria of precision will feel the text's theological integrity threatened by a more complicated process of composition.

Saga and Historicity

In response to the first concern two observations may be made. First, not all of the narrative genres grouped under the heading of *saga* can be characterized as pure invention. In fact, many of these genres represent informal, oral history whose setting in life was the family or village. The popular nature of such materials does complicate their use in modern historical discussions, but does not automatically deny to those accounts a substantial rootage in historical memory. Indeed, the complete synthesis of antiquarian interest and the poet's art constitute the essential character of these traditions.¹⁸

Second, a question must be posed: have some evangelical interpreters decided in advance that no narrative genre can possess theological authority except those accepted by moderns as historical? This would seem to be the intent of the 12th and 18th articles of "affirmation and denial" in the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," which effectively prohibit non-literal interpretations of the creation and flood, along with non-historical interpretations of any other narrative. Despite these assertions by the Chicago Statement, some advocates of inerrancy continue to argue against this *a priori* narrowing of the scope of interpretation. For example, Carl Armerding formulates the principle that "if their i.e. evangelical interpreters' investigation convinces them that the text does not

intend them to believe that the event narrated in the text literally occurred, they are open to criticize the historical base of the narrative."¹⁹ Thus the discussion of the genre of the accounts in Joshua as *saga* does not preclude their having significant antiquarian authenticity. Nor does a commitment to the truth of Scripture necessarily predecide the genres that divinely inspired writers are permitted or, more commonly, denied a proscription that effectively subordinates Scripture to reason and tradition.

Function and Reference

Moreover, the stress on diverse functions need not lead to historical skepticism. Even from a secular standpoint, any concrete series of events remains almost infinitely complex, and capable of diverse readings with a certain claim to legitimacy. That the Old Testament in general and the book of Joshua in particular openly present diverse and, at points, contrasting construals of Israel's settlement in Canaan should at least suggest that the leading ideas of the deuteronomists still have not squelched other voices and other views within the tradition. That is, we are not dealing with a thorough-going propagandist. More important, however, is the insight deriving from Wolfhart Pannenberg's discussion of events and meanings. If meanings are inherent in events, and if events are only understood from the perspective of their future, then a theological historiography would naturally prize not only the earliest traditions, but would also see in the subsequent development of the interpretation the unfolding of the events' inherent meaning under the pressure of the future. To play historical facticity against tradition development by declaring as "unhistorical" all points in a narrative that reflect the perspective of the later bearers and receivers of the tradition sends one back into a dualistic divorce between fact and value, a split that the biblical authors did not accept. Thus the *full, true meaning of Israel's settlement* as a complex historical occurrence *was not finally known* until the book of Joshua attained its canonical form as the result of centuries of tradition development.

Redaction and Historicity

Another possible objection to the book's possessing a history of compilation is that this could lead some to devalue its theological proclamation as grounded in historically false accounts. This is a possible conclusion only if one begins *a priori* with a skeptical disposition or if one allows as historically grounded only historical-theological claims that measure up to the requirements of modern historiography, narratives that "prove their point" by adducing "evidence" acceptable to the modern (usually fundamentalist or revisionist) theologian and whose veracity can be demonstrated. Those who, for whatever other reasons, are not inclined to regard the traditions of the biblical tradition with skepticism, need not be driven to skepticism by accepting a lengthy compositional history. It should be noted at this point that the earlier discussion of genre is relevant: even if it appeared that a text does not aspire to be historical in the strict sense, that only invalidates its theology for those who have already decided what genres God and his inspired writers are allowed to use. In the case of Joshua, it is possible to maintain confidence in the basic profile of the events presented, even if we are not able to reconstruct from the text the kind of historical picture demanded by modern historiography.

Several aspects of the compositional development of Joshua can be naturally construed

as compatible with confidence in the narrative's essential grounding in real historical experience. That material was gathered from several diverse sites scattered across the land points to serious historiographic interests, national awareness, and access to a wide range of traditions. This by no means automatically mitigates the historical trustworthiness or reliability of the narrative. From the appearance of the biblical accounts and archeological evidence, the Israelite settlement was probably a complex series of events involving far more than is recorded in any or all of the biblical narratives. The distinct episodes were apparently preserved separately, at the places and by the people with a direct interest in each respective narrative. Separate transmission of each discrete account at various sites accounts for their varying styles and widely divergent etiological elements. However close to the original events these accounts might have been, in isolation from each other they would not present a "true" picture of the total complex of events comprising Israel's settlement in Canaan. The process of transmission and compilation does not involve a "rewriting" of the book any more than Luke's use of Mark, Q, and other material constitutes a "rewriting" of those materials. Deviations for "what actually happened" are no more falsification than Matthew's and Luke's changing of the order of the temptations of Jesus are. Neither Matthew nor Luke, nor the authors of Joshua were "wrong." We are the ones in the wrong if we force them to accept our way of relating event and meaning. They are rather incorporated into a larger work that incorporates historical material into a broader purpose. The genre of the accounts—etiological saga, cult narratives, and the like—and the involved process of compilation do complicate tremendously the modern historiographic task of reconstructing the events, but we cannot for that reason brand the text historically untrue. Far from perpetrating historical distortion, the compilers' activity would possess the historiographic virtue of reuniting the separate traditions, thus restoring each story to its context in the whole chain of events which mirrored the original reality more and more as it grew.

The suggestion made here does involve two points. It suggests that the activities of the deuteronomistic editors be understood seriously as a species of antiquarian historiography, done in good faith, despite the obvious theological interest of the writers.²⁰ Ironically, conservative authors have at times mocked attempts to portray redactors as historians.²¹ Such denigration of a type of scribal editorial activity which undeniably appears in the Bible is strange on the lips of those who would advocate its truthfulness. Ancient writers do, in fact, appear to have sought out old materials to incorporate into later accounts, as a survey of Neo-Assyrian historiography shows. This in no way guarantees that the narrative is accurate, or that, if accurate, is of such a nature that modern historiography, playing by its peculiar rules, can reconstruct its own kind of history from the text. It does, however, suggest antiquarian seriousness alongside theological intentionality. The latter remains, however, as the controlling interest.

V. On the Limits of Historical Criticism

I conclude by restating the basic points I have tried to make thus far: First, historical-critical study of the Old Testament, whether it is informed by conservative-orthodox or liberal-revisionist presuppositions, is still not capable, of itself, of generating theological truth. Nor is any other method so capable, or even more capable. Historical methods produce historical results; literary methods produce literary results. Theologically, each is equally barren! Only

theological methods produce theological results. Historical-critical exegesis has a vital role in registering how closely we have read the text, how carefully we have considered each text in its context, how thoroughly we have sought out the text's own contexts, and how deeply we have tried to *listen* to the text, rather than simply cite it.

Second, I have tried to explain that the questions of the modern historian do not embrace comprehensively all forms of reality in the past. The historian of today, even the evangelical one, using modern methods, and the materials those require, still falls far short of covering comprehensively the full scope of experiences in the past. We must realize that there is a great difference between saying Joshua "cannot be used to reconstruct a modern comprehensive historical presentation of the Hebrews' occupation of Canaan" and saying "the events in this text did not happen, or at best did not happen this way." I am not here talking about the distinction between human and divine action; but of the limits on modern historiography even at the point of human actions. Thus *saga* as a genre does not meet the criteria of modern historiography; yet it may, and probably does, nevertheless articulate past reality.

Third, I have tried to point out that, in the end, a so-called radical use of critical methods, by which I mean a use that does not decide in advance that a conservative historical conclusion *must* be arrived at, is no less faithful than a conservative historiography which defines the parameters of a correct conclusion before the investigation is undertaken. I affirm fully that the biblical text tells the truth about the realities of Israel's past experience. I also would plead with revisionist and conservative alike that modern historiography labors under limits which cannot be transcended merely by switching camps. There is in our affirmation of the historical reality of the Bible's portrayal of the past an element of faith, an intuition that a book emphasizing truthfulness would not deceive, and therefore an element of hope that pervades the historical enterprise.

VI. So Why Practice Historical Criticism?

In the light of all the limits that I have described regarding historical study, especially the study of the text's organic literary development, one might be tempted to join modern literary critics in asking why the biblical interpreter cares at all about the relationship between the text and the events it narrates, and especially about the processes and means by which the compilers of the text forged its unity of conception. One typically hears calls to move "beyond" traditio-historical study, with the strong implication that such study is not simply to be transcended, but abandoned as well, and that with some relief. "Going beyond" quickly becomes "leaving behind." But must this be? From the outset I must say I am not yet ready to join the post-modern, anti-enlightenment chorus in its chant that historical criticism is dead or, worse, should never have lived. I suspect we will find that historical criticism is like an intellectual Elvis—its supposed death will always remain problematic and debatable, and it will ultimately become even more influential (and profitable!) "dead" than it would be if it continued dominating the center of the stage as a puffy, wheezing, overdressed performer. My own efforts recently have focused on reconsidering the role of historical criticism, and particularly redaction criticism, in order to see if these disciplines may be applied in ways that serve as a point in interpretation where the insights of the diachronic, historical, analytical disciplines, most notably source criticism

and form criticism, are brought into conversation with the insights of synchronic literary criticism. My answer makes three appeals, all of which in some ways reflect my own values—values, though, that I suspect others share. I refer to the textual, the humane, and the theological arguments.

1. Historical criticism functions within a paradigm of interpretation that construes the meaning of the Bible by relating the text to the circumstances of its formation. The interpreter senses the urgency of at least trying to listen to the text, to hear it, as much as is possible, in its own context, in the light of its own story. To the modern narrative theologian the historical critic would protest “biblical stories have their own story too!” A historical interpretation dares not to presume we can understand the Bible when we are indifferent, or even resistant to hearing its story, the road it has traveled on its way to us.²² I am therefore interested in a method that is holistic and comprehensive, that gladly seeks and incorporates as much knowledge as can be found about the text and all matters relevant to its meaning. I look with some wistful nostalgia at the 16th and 17th centuries, in which the entire syllabus of liberal education was quite naturally included in a commentary on Genesis 1-11.²³ I am happier with interpretations in which several different methodologies converge. Thus a synchronic reading which fails to account for the text’s formation is ultimately dissatisfying, as is an analysis which identifies every source and redactor down to the last gloss but fails to move to a synthetic and integrative vision of the work as a whole.

2. A historical interpreter seeks an awareness of the human community that bequeathed the text to us. Ultimately, the historical critic is interested in studying the text in order somehow to see through the text to the human beings who produced it and handed it over to us. At bottom, this is not a disparagement of the text as a literary and aesthetic object, but it is a subordination of the text to the human communities speaking in it and through it. Of course, many practical and theoretical difficulties plague the quest for the intentions of writers and editors. But we are not trying to read the minds of ancient people through the medium of the literature, nor are we trying to analyze their personal development psychologically. Rather, we are trying to understand what the writers have gone to great effort to say and the editors and scribes have gone to great effort to preserve for us. Thus I adopt a communications system model of exegesis, which commits me to understanding the whole process by which the “message” comes to the recipient. Ironically, communications system theory has often been employed to do just the opposite.²⁴ We do this by trying to hear what they have written as much as possible within an understanding of the framework within which they wrote and passed along their words to us. Thus despite the daunting dangers of falling into the “intentional fallacy,”²⁵ it remains still the passion of historical critics to see the present text’s profile sharply etched against reasonable hypotheses about its origin. Put another way, this is not a quest for authorial *intention*; it is a quest to take full and accurate measure of the author’s *achievement*, seen in the appropriate historical and cultural framework. Here the historical critic is concerned to grant a certain seniority or privilege to those who wrote, compiled, and preserved the texts, as opposed to contemporary critics who elevate the reader and critical essayist over the text. Even if the attempt fails—and what interpreter does not ultimately fail?—I feel obliged to recognize these writers’ own contexts and concerns in interpretation. I find it ultimately a dehumanization of the text to ignore its character as a human

achievement.²⁶

But why should these persons and communities occupy so significant a place in the interpreter's work? There are, of course, many reasons, some of which are implicit in what has already been said. But for most biblical interpreters, and certainly for me, a third factor must be considered. The majority of historical-critical interpreters come to the Old Testament as part of a religious quest. Whether they are Christian or Jewish, conservative, liberal, "neo-" or "post-," they ultimately seek religious knowledge in the text. Religious knowledge, however, is a multi-leveled phenomenon which includes historical awareness and a sense of community with the human bearers of religious traditions, past as well as present.²⁷ Most religious communities vest the period of the text's events and formation with unique and normative significance, making it all the more urgent that interpretation keep faith with the ancient bearers of the biblical traditions. The Old Testament is understood finally as a message, which places the emphasis not on readers and their construals, nor even on the text as an aesthetic object, but on the messengers who produced it and ultimately, in a religious context, on the divine author of the message and the divine sender of the messengers.²⁸ Ironically, many see historical interpretation in tension with a theological and religious study of the Bible. The fact is that historical interpretation finds powerful warrants in theological and religious concerns. Thus historical interpretation serves not only the needs of a wholistic, comprehensive, humane approach to interpretation, it also can be a form of theological faithfulness, even obedience.

NOTES

1. Lawton G. Stone, "Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Redaction of the Book of Joshua" *CBQ* 53/1(1991) 25-36. "From Holy War to Holy Love: The Theological Challenge of the Book of Joshua," unpublished.

2. Cf. His *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 276 n. 6.

3. Armerding, 9.

4. At the risk of sounding glib, I simply footnote Brevard S. Childs, *passim*.

5. John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 84.

6. For example, I follow Origen, Irenaus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and early 20th-century fundamentalist James Orr in rejecting the (Gnostic) "literal" interpretation of the seven days of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4a as seven 24 hour days.

7. Richard Nelson's recent commentary contains many observations, apparently made independently, that parallel those made in the *CBQ* article very closely, but nowhere does he actually seem to seize on the theological opening and grasp hermeneutically the potential involved.

8. A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 96-131; G. von Rad, "The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* ed. C. Westermann (Atlanta: John Knox, 1963).

9. For an intriguing analysis of multiple reference and the "plain sense" of Scripture, cf. B. S. Childs, "The 'Sensus Literalis' of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: FS W. Zimmerli* (ed. H. Donner et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977), 80-93.

10. Hughs wrote, "The mystical sense is only gathered from what the letter says, in the first place." Cf. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Notre Dame, repr. 1964, 83-111; the quotation is from p. 93. On Aquinas, cf. *Summa Theologica* Q.1, Art. 10, "Whether In Holy

Scripture a Word May Have Several Senses." A convenient source is Anton C. Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, New York: Random House, 1944, 1:16-17. Childs writes, "Thus, the term *sensus literalis* in Thomas' usage has been expanded to cover the grammatical and historical as well as the redemptive and theological purpose of God" ("The 'Sensus Literalis' of Scripture," 85).

11. K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," *IBD* 1:418-432.

12. For a complete exposition of the Anselmian formula, cf. Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (New York: Meridian, 1960).

13. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 2nd ed. 1975), 198-226, esp. 204-209.

14. Cf. also K. Barth, "The Authority and Significance of the Bible: Twelve Theses," *God Here and Now* (Religious Perspectives, 9; New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 45-60, esp. 53-55.

15. *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*.

16. George Steiner, *Language and Silence*.

17. Franz Kafka, quoted by George Steiner (*Language and Silence*, 67).

18. Cf. F. M. Cross, "The Epic Traditions of Early Israel: Epic Narrative and the Reconstruction of Early Israelite Institutions," in *The Poet and the Historian* (ed. R. E. Friedman; HSS 26; Chico: Scholars Press, 1983), 13-39.

19. Carl Armerding, *The Old Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 9.

20. For an extended treatment of this issue, see B. Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

21. Cf. for example the scornful remarks of K. A. Kitchen regarding the antiquarian seriousness of the editors of the Old Testament legal tradition: "It is very improbable that Hebrew priests under the monarchy or after the exile would go excavating in Late Bronze Age ruins specially to seek for treaty/covenant forms that in their day would be merely exotic literary antiquities..." (*Ancient Orient and Old Testament* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1966] 100). In this example, a scholar seeking to encourage us as to the historicity of the Bible ridicules the possibility of serious historical research by the most educated and literate segment of Hebrew society!

22. Again, I cannot assent to Sailhamer's repudiation of the "inspired" status of earlier stages of the text, and his reduction of concerns about the cultural and historical setting of the text, despite an adamant commitment to the "author's intent" (*Introduction to Old Testament Theology*, 84).

23. Cf. Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527-1633*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 1948.

24. Cf. Sailhamer.

25. For an exposition of the "intentional fallacy" in interpretation, cf. W. K. Wimsatt, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1967) 3-20.

26. I owe this particular formulation to W. Abraham, "Intentions and the Logic of Interpretation," *Asbury Theological Journal* 43 (1988) 11-26.

27. For a provocative analysis of religious knowledge, see J. Gill, *On Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

28. It is therefore supremely ironic that modern literary criticism, which often proceeds entirely on the basis of a dehistoricized text, would appeal to models of communication to distinguish itself from historical criticism. How can one treat the text as a message while disposing of the sender? Cf. M. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship) 6-10. While Powell significantly nuances this claim in a subsequent chapter, it still is unclear to me that his formulation genuinely preserves the character of the Bible as a message. To characterize historical study as exclusively genetic, as he does, absolutizes a procedure without probing the theoretical possibilities in historical-critical methodology and assumes that the ancient tradents were indifferent to the message character of the tradition.