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*Why Bother with Historical Criticism?: Lessons for
Biblical Studies from the Philosophy of History*

Abstract:

This article seeks to integrate insights from the philosophy of history to support the continued use of the historical-critical method in biblical studies. Though the historical-critical method has been much-maligned within biblical criticism over the past seventy years, this essay attempts to demonstrate the value of investigating ancient Israel's past as part of a full-fledged biblical criticism.

Keywords: Historical Criticism; Philosophy of History; Biblical Criticism

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Since the last half of the twentieth century, many biblical interpreters have become reticent toward the procedures and aims of historical-critical scholarship. Such interpreters include postmodern biblical critics, rhetorical critics, and adherents to the so-called “canonical approach,” among others. While the skepticism toward historical criticism has come primarily within the realm of biblical theology,¹ it has also extended to the secular, descriptive task. Although these interpreters, with their distinct approaches and methodologies, diverge on several important points,² they share a hesitancy to attribute much, if any, interpretational value to the historical-critical paradigms. Leo G. Perdue traces this cynicism within biblical studies, the so-called “collapse of history,” to dubious philosophical underpinnings, the fragmentation of theological approaches, the failures of modernity, a rejection of the descriptive approach by some, the rise of postmodernism, and history’s failure to speak for many different ideological voices (1994: 4–11).³ In shying away from historical criticism, these varying viewpoints of the biblical text have produced fresh, innovative, and interesting readings by focusing rather on the final form of the biblical text.

Yet traditional historical-critical scholarship of the Bible, including the various approaches subsumed within it, persists.⁴ Its interpreters continue to peer back behind the words of the biblical text to discover the meanings of those words and the historical world to which those words refer. Archaeologists unearth and interpret new finds, sometimes leading to debates about corroboration with the biblical witness, and they continue to reveal more about the social, cultural, and religious world of those who lived in biblical times. Source and textual critics persevere in postulating texts and traditions behind the present form of the text. Those operating outside of the historical-critical paradigm sometimes find these readings compelling, but many times they do not. Others still see the entire enterprise as futile.

Indeed, practitioners of traditional historical criticism have erred and have needed correction,⁵ but this essay will attempt to demonstrate that we should not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Historical criticism has its place alongside these newer, final-form approaches.⁶ Yet its practitioners must proceed responsibly to avoid the incredulity of interpreters from the latter camp. In the space I have been gifted here, I will utilize insights from the philosophy of history⁷ to suggest guidelines for practitioners of biblical historical criticism to continue with caution, while

nonetheless offering constructive guidelines for a historical study of the Bible. I hope that incorporating insights from philosophers and professional historians who have pondered how we can meaningfully reconstruct the past within the discipline of the philosophy of history, an interdisciplinary stratagem not often taken in the defense of biblical historical criticism (Younger 1999:304),⁸ will help to provide a foundation upon which we can build a useful and appropriate historical investigation of the Bible.⁹ Indeed, biblical historical criticism has its roots in the professional study of history and a deeper dive into the general discipline of history should be helpful. I attempt here to set forth principles that avoid the kind of reckless practice of historical criticism which has, in recent years, created an aversion to this approach.

We begin by looking to how, given its many critiques, historical criticism *ought* to proceed at its best. Specifically, historians must, in order to be effective, operate with respect towards their subjects, with attention to narrative form and the historian's biases, with caution toward historical boundaries, and with a large, diverse network of peers. Next, we will show *how* historical criticism operates at the logical level, an element often overlooked by its opponents. Finally, we will examine the *why* of historical criticism and uncover its humanizing, and thus theologically significant, *raison de etre*.

Historical Respect

A common criticism leveled against traditional historical criticism is its arrogance. In this perception, historical criticism stands at an objective distance from its object of study with the benefit of hindsight and the proper tools to make correct judgments about the past.¹⁰ It resists the foundations of historical criticism as "scientific" or "positivistic," and urges historical critics to sufficiently attend to the interpretive and artistic dimension of the histories they write.¹¹

Most readers of biblical criticism will be able to sympathize with such claims. Many of us have read the works of biblical historians and wondered where they bought their time machines and historical mind-readers. With a cool detachment, some historians confidently reach certain conclusions that otherwise remain under intense debate. Others seamlessly deduce the motivations of historical characters, who have been dead for thousands of years.¹² In viewing some historical conclusions that appear

off-putting in their hubris and omniscient mood, it is clear to see why many potential students have turned from studying the Bible's past.

To assuage some of these objections to historical criticism, we begin with the common assumption that historical study, and by extension historical criticism, functions in the same manner as the natural sciences. Put directly, the accusation of history as a positivistic, scientific discipline is a philosophical straw man. Although rises in the discipline of history correlate to boons in scientific knowledge, whether we speak of ancient Greece or the Enlightenment, such correlation does not lead to identification. In fact, the connection between the discipline of history and the natural sciences is not assumed by historians, but is very much an ongoing conversation, with practitioners often acknowledging both the convergences and the distinctions. R.G. Collingwood, who worked both as a historian and a philosopher, recognizes that history is a science in so far as it is an "organized body of knowledge" (2014: 249).¹³ For him, history's correlation with science is a matter of defining the latter term. History shares with the natural sciences an interest in evidence and interpretation through the boundaries of a critical method. Yet, for Collingwood, history's interpretations have a different goal than the natural sciences' concern for the physical objects of space and time. History's aim is human self-knowledge, which overlaps, not only with natural sciences, but also with philosophy and art.¹⁴ Patrick Gardiner and Isaiah Berlin are notable among those thinkers who similarly acknowledge history's intersections with natural science while underscoring its interest in particular human events, which is opposed to the natural sciences' preoccupation with generalizing rules (Gardiner 1961: 60; Berlin 1960: 1–31).¹⁵ Biblical historians also wrestle with distinctions and intersections between history and science, though their work does not often leave room for meta-level reflections on the philosophy of history (Provan, et. al. 2003: 42). I will not belabor the point, only note that blanket statements of historical criticism as rooted in positivistic science do not reflect the actual practice of historians, who view their work as a related, but not identical, body of knowledge to the natural sciences.

Moreover, because historical criticism is a human-centered activity (see the conclusion below), it is the responsibility of the historical interpreter to treat historical characters as subjects. That is, the historian ought to put forth an effort to understand historical persons and the world

in which they lived. As historians, we are in the wrong to presume thoughts and actions of our subjects without first rigorously studying as much as one can about that person and the historical context (Berlin 1960: 26–27).¹⁶ We must enter into historical inquiry with fear and trembling, recognizing the chasm between ourselves and actors of the past, knowing that we study them and their time from a murky distance, but that it is also our duty to allow them to speak as products of their time and as fellow human beings. Mark Day contends the historian must operate with charity, beginning with a default stance of openness to the historical person, assuming her or his reasonableness in acting in or testifying to a historical event. Although historical actors are capable of lying, bias, and irrational behavior, such a posture provides “constraint on the interpretation of others” while also bearing in mind that further evidence may press the interpreter into skepticism of that actor’s thought or claim (2008: 148–149).

In recognizing the temporal distance from our historical objects, especially within the discipline of biblical studies where the temporal distance is so great, it is imperative that we understand our subjects within their own historical contexts. That is, we must rigorously study the thought world and society of biblical authors and characters. We are compelled to know as much Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic as possible. We must study the political landscape of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. We must familiarize ourselves with archaeological data and sociological models. We study these areas of knowledge, not to know the biblical world better than those who lived in it, but to attempt to be sympathetic to them. To construct, as much as we can, the worldview of the ancients is to admit that the particular topic a historian may study does not arise in a vacuum, but within a complex network of understanding. The responsible historian will attempt to make use of the concepts of her or his subjects, not the historian’s own subjects (Day 2008: 137–144).¹⁷ Perdue, who otherwise downplays the use of historical criticism in Old Testament theology, concedes that historical context assists the interpreter in understanding meaning, and will continue to provide a fruitful dimension of historical-critical study (1994: 303–304).¹⁸

The French historian Marc Bloch finds respect towards our historical subjects as foundational, not only as a cog of the historiographical method, but to the discipline of history as a whole. He writes,

When all is said and done, a single word, “understanding,” is the beacon of light of our studies. Let us not say that the true historian is a stranger to emotion: he has that, at all events. “Understanding,” in all honesty, is a word pregnant with difficulties, but also with hope. Moreover, it is a friendly word. Even in action, we are far too prone to judge. It is so easy to denounce. We are never sufficiently understanding. Whoever differs from us— a foreigner or a political adversary— is almost inevitably considered evil. A little more understanding of people would be necessary merely for guidance, in the conflicts which are unavoidable; all the more to present them while there is yet time. If history would only renounce its false archangelic airs, it would help us to cure this weakness. It includes a vast experience of human diversities, a continuous contact with men. Life, like science, has everything to gain from it, if only these contacts be friendly. (2017: 134–135)

Bloch’s statement becomes more profound, and more urgent, when we learn he was killed by a Nazi firing squad after composing this statement. His death at the hands of those infamous for their “misunderstanding” underscores how the world needs more understanding, whether with respect to our own time or the past. History is a discipline bound up with human nature (Bloch 2017: 26–27), and it is our responsibility as biblical historians to respect the humanness of biblical actors and authors, giving credence to their world and its events.¹⁹

Interpretation

The aspect of historical criticism that undoubtedly witnesses the most scrutiny within biblical studies is historical interpretation.²⁰ That we have evidence, testimony, and data concerning the past is doubtful only to the most radical epistemological skeptics. But making sense of this information introduces a host of issues.²¹ Whose interpretation of historical realia is best? How would we even begin to claim one interpretation as better than another? What about the historian’s own biases and worldview? Is the past as neat and tidy as historians tend to make it? Can we even claim we know what a historical author was trying to say?

Hayden White’s influential *Metahistory* alerted historians to their own perspectives in writing history. For White, our historical explanations are posterior to our own “linguistic protocols” (1973: 426), which give shape to historical interpretations. Historians must then be cognizant of

their own present linguistic stances from which they write about the past.²² Our discipline has certainly suffered from a lack of self-awareness, as recent subversive approaches have revealed to us.²³ Truly, historians of any subject often remain blind, not only to their linguistic protocols, but to their entire *Weltanschauung*, which can even dictate evidence the historian chooses to include. And in our present social climate, it might be wise for historians to acknowledge their worldview in order to assist readers who do not know authors apart from their names on the cover.²⁴

Tangential to the claim about a historian's limitations in interpretation is the simplicity with which historians can view historical phenomena. One thinks of Jean-François Lyotard's deconstruction of modern "metanarratives,"²⁵ and how this is easily appropriated in critiques of modern historiography (Ankersmit 1989: 148). In Old Testament theology, the twentieth century witnessed the rise and fall of theologies that attempted to describe ancient Israel's conception of God in a singular manner.²⁶ But many practicing historians resist simplistic explanations of historical phenomena. Richard J. Evans claims that historians should be, and have been, "hostile to 'oversimplification,'" as they seek rather to question all narratives, whether those of their peers or even those of past testimonies (1997: 126–127).²⁷ Sarah Maza writes, "Historians often avoid putting their money on one type of cause over another, instead explaining how various factors accumulate over time to a point of no return" (2017: 173). In the same way, historians of the Bible ought to defy naïve, overarching explanations for historical phenomena and look ever deeper into the historical world into which they explore.

Part of the strong reaction against simplistic explanations is the high perch from which they are offered. When taken in tandem with White's cautions, postmodernism produces a stark challenge to any valid historical interpretation. Whether Lyotard's denouncement of metanarratives, Foucault's work on mental illness (1994: 370–376), or Derrida's deconstruction of language,²⁸ postmodernism has sought to tear down the footings of western modes of discourse to make space for new readings of texts, and especially historical ones. From the postmodern view, it seems nearly impossible to use the language of the privileged modern academic historian to speak on behalf of the poor and marginalized (Jenkins 2000: 191–192).²⁹ Yet, practically speaking, this does not hold true. Because of the use of modern history, we are able to tell stories of heroes of our own culture who have subverted the power of their day, such as

Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.³⁰ Evans counteracts postmodern claims by noting that they divert “attention away from real suffering and oppression...” (1997: 158).³¹ In the realm of Old Testament studies, we are pressed to deal with a subject, ancient Israel, who constantly witnesses to its existence in an act of liberation from Egypt and who writes from the perspective of a minor player in the socio-political world of the ancient Near East, constantly worn down under the hegemony of greater military and political entities.³² In my estimation, it would be disingenuous for a biblical historian, in particular, to deny that studying the past in any organized way prevents us from telling the histories of the powerless.³³

And what of the oft-debated question of whether an interpreter is ever able to discern an author’s intention? The objection to this has its origins in Wimsatt and Beardsley’s article on the so-called “intentional fallacy” (1954: 1–18).³⁴ The concept gains steam under the rubrics of postmodernism, which doubts our ability to make judgments on any author’s meaning.³⁵ Ironically here, we must point to a matter of authorial intention to make the counterclaim to objections of authorial intention. Wimsatt and Beardsley were concerned with poetry, a genre of literature that is often *intentionally unintentional*. Poets frequently imbue ambiguity into their writing and allow for degrees of interpretation. This is not so with historical records, which attempt to relay a witness or evidence to actions of the past. For instance, humanity’s earliest writing is found on economic tablets from Mesopotamia. These short tablets describe transactions between parties for trade to keep records for these dealings. Room for interpretation here is minimal. As literary genres, including history, and languages become more complex, surely authors begin to write more that is unintentional in their language and more that can often be misconstrued by later readers. Yet misunderstanding of this kind is a matter of degree, dependent upon literary genre, temporal distance, knowledge of the historical context in which the texts were written, and so on. To aver that we can *never* read intentionality into the text of another author is nonsense.³⁶ Yes, we must acknowledge our distance from the historical subject and the tendencies toward our own interpretations. But to speak meaningfully about the past and to do so with the respect of our subjects, we must assume they intended to communicate meaningfully about the events of their day. This is no simple assumption, and it requires both self-awareness on the part of the historian to realize her or his own worldview and a deep study of the historical subject’s worldview.

We have seen thus far that historiography must not be an arrogant affair.³⁷ It necessarily involves a deep engagement with historical actors and their contexts, not assuming or casting aspersions from a safe distance. The writing of history entails the hard work of thorough research and a sympathetic imagination toward the past. It may also include recognition of our biases and acknowledgement of the perspective from which we write, but it must involve that we can somehow speak meaningfully about the past.

Boundaries in Historical Interpretation

Although White astutely demonstrated the poignant role of interpretation in the historical enterprise, this does not mean that historians are free to interpret as they wish. Rather, the other side of writing history is dealing with the constraints of evidence. Yes, historical evidence does not interpret itself and requires thorough study before it can be fitted into a broader historical picture. But historical evidence—coins, annals, chronicles, inscriptions, archaeological data, testimony, and more—provides boundaries for the conclusions historians can make.³⁸ Evidence does not provide a jumping off point for the historian to use her or his imagination unfettered. Bloch trenchantly argues, “Explorers of the past are never quite free. The past is their tyrant. It forbids them to know anything which it has not itself, consciously or otherwise, yielded to them” (2017: 59).³⁹

In traditional historical criticism, we give priority of place to the primary sources, those that are more “evidentially reliable” (Day 2008: 27–29). Of course, this is a difficult judgment for the historian to make and it is a judgment that should not be made rashly.⁴⁰ Yet before we enter a later section on historical logic, we should note here Day’s claim that the historian’s judgment of evidence should be consilient. That is, it should “account for a wide range of phenomena by postulating fewer hypotheses that explain the phenomena” (2008: 148–149).⁴¹ In short, we ought to choose the relationship between the evidence at hand that requires the most simplistic explanation. This tactic yields a more reasonable explanation with less nuance to create in logical argumentation. This is not to deny, as mentioned above, that the past can be messier than our typically monocausal view of the past. That would be, and is often in biblical studies, the case when evidence from the past is sparse. But our explanations must

logically work to cohere many levels of causes, and consilience remains a logical approach in so far as it acknowledges the full range of evidence, whether primary or secondary, and seeks to paint a fuller picture of the events of the past.⁴²

For students of the Old Testament, for example, consider the biblical events describing King Hezekiah. We have at our disposal the narratives of 2 Kings 18–20, Isaiah 36–39, alongside Assyrian Annals, archaeological data, and realia such as the so-called “Hezekiah coins.”⁴³ These are real objects and witnesses to events of the late 8th century BCE in Judah, and we must take them into account when studying this particular time and place. They indicate to us the following minimal boundaries for historical interpretation: that a King Hezekiah existed in this period and ruled over Judah, that there were battles between the Judahites and Assyrians during Hezekiah’s reign including an attempted invasion of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, and that foreign imagery and culture bore some semblance of influence on the tiny nation of Judah. It would be a steep uphill climb for a historical interpreter to argue against such facts. The evidence becomes slightly more precarious when we consider testimony of these events. For instance, there are differing versions of why the Assyrian invasion of Jerusalem never occurred, depending on one’s source. We must also note that the Judahite scribes further attest a religious reformation in Judah under Hezekiah, a detailed relationship between Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, and a diplomatic visit from Babylonian envoys. Finally, the place of 2 Kings and Isaiah within the Old Testament canon ascribes these events to the same people group who rebuilt the Persian colony of Yehud under the reign of the Persian King Cyrus. Interpretations of this data range from the so-called “minimalist” response that the testimony reflects a later people group who adopted the Judahite story⁴⁴ to a hermeneutic of historical trust that the Judahite account of the repulsion of the Assyrian army should be treated with the same respect as Sennacherib’s own perspective.⁴⁵ Without drawing judgments about these interpretations, I hope to show by this example how historiography is possible from boundary-providing evidence.

The progenitor of the modern historical method, and one who draws the ire of those skeptical of the modern historical program, is Leopold von Ranke. The nineteenth-century German historian sought to incorporate a more rigorous method into the study of history, thus separating it into its own discipline apart from other academic specializations.⁴⁶ But what has become the most polarizing facet of his system is Ranke’s encouragement

for historians to study the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, or “how it actually was.” Such a claim seems impossible from the present vantage point. How can we know what *actually* happened in the past? But much of our angst toward Ranke comes, coincidentally, from us imposing our own historical time on Ranke’s. For one, there is some debate about our common translation of *eigentlich* as “actually,” when it could have meant something along the lines of “essentially” or “properly,” equivalents that would ease the arrogance of our usual interpretation of that word. But, more importantly, we must remember that Ranke wrote in the wake of Romanticism (especially Voltaire), a movement that had little regard for historical evidence and was keener to take liberties with historical interpretation.⁴⁷ In essence, this slogan of Ranke’s is meant, not to confidently venture that we can, through scientific positivism, gain pure understanding of the past, but to set boundaries on fanciful interpretations of the past by carefully respecting the evidence of the past through an organized *Wissenschaft*—a *Wissenschaft* that was determined to be distinct from other forms of knowledge.⁴⁸

The Historical Community

Though the discipline of history is a *Wissenschaft*, it is, as Bloch states, “a science still in travail” (2017: 185). And part of the enduring struggle of the discipline of history is that no one work or interpretation of the past can lay claim to the sole understanding of any one historical event. This means that historians are compelled to seek verification, criticism, and differing viewpoints of their work. Such a practice stresses the interpretational aspect of history. One historian’s triumphant event may be seen as an act of oppression through the lens of another. One historian’s trust in the historical veracity of the exodus event is another’s idealized narrative of the postexilic community. Such conversations enable historians to anticipate objections, hone their explanatory reasoning, and perhaps even be convicted of seeing the past a new way.⁴⁹ The hermeneutics of historical research requires an ongoing dialogue of the historian with others also familiar with the same evidence to gain a fuller picture of the past. Therefore, Bloch can assert, “... historical research will tolerate no autarchy” (2017: 47).

This process for the historian typically involves the tedious and anxious processes of submitting articles to peer review journals and presenting papers at academic conferences. But the insecurities of the historian aside, the input of the scholarly community assists the entire

discipline at a greater understanding of the past. This is not to say there will always be historical consensus after enough conversations (indeed, that will be rare), but that the practice of historiography is, in Day's appropriation of Gadamer, "dialogic" (2008: 162–166). In interacting with historical interpretations in the past and present, historians increase the number of voices providing input and gain clarity from their initial conclusions, which are always provisional.⁵⁰ In their prominent book *Telling the Truth about History*, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob similarly contend that history requires an epistemological position with "intellectual spirit of democratic scholarship" (1994: 283) and that it must be "a shared enterprise in which the community of practitioners acts as a check on the historian..." (1994: 261). Indeed, as a practice heavily dependent upon interpretation, history is only better for multiple viewpoints. Diversity within the guild will check much of the past pitfalls of the discipline we have already discussed, such as monocausal explanations, Western-only perspectives, and interpretations without evidential support. Such a conception of historical study militates against a charge of arrogance and suggests instead that our views of the past fit better as a guild rather than individually.

Historical Logic

Final-form, literary analysis of biblical texts has a distinct advantage of working with materials evident and available to any researcher. The canonical approach, narrative criticism, and postmodern literary criticism all deal with the text as it stands before us and has little-to-no need for getting behind this text.⁵¹ Conversely, the historical-critical approach, in the minds of many in the camps of the former, masquerades as a tactic to achieve certainty about the historical realities to which texts point. For instance, Prickett writes regarding the origins of modern historical criticism, "This quest for historical certainty in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in itself partially the result of an earlier failure... to give theology the same kind of external certainties as those apparently enjoyed by the natural sciences in the age of Royal Society and of Newton" (1986: 25). And though many final-form interpreters do not completely deny the aims of historical criticism, postmodernists in particular react to what they perceive as historical criticism's search for absolute truth and attempt to poke holes in such epistemological assumptions.⁵²

Yet, we must tread lightly in claiming that historical critics search for absolute certainty. This does not fall within the aim of most, if not all, practicing historians. Bloch iterates as much when he notes that historical certainty and universality are “questions of degree” (2017: 17). Tucker reinforces his arguments with the contention that history writing is the best explanation of the evidence at hand (2004: 254–262). Day contends that historical knowledge is both “underdetermined” and “defeasible” (2008: 148–149).⁵³ Berlin notes that historical language is necessarily fraught with “such words as plausibility, likelihood, sense of reality, [and] historical sense” (1960: 30). Evans writes, rather bluntly, “No historians really believe in the absolute truth of what they are writing, simply in its probable truth, which they have done their utmost to establish by following the usual rules of evidence” (1997: 189). We see that Evans, with his insistence on historians doing “their utmost to establish” the truth, does not want to denigrate the search for historical knowledge. But he concedes that an element of probability is necessarily part and parcel of a historical epistemology. Thus, I think that Evans would agree with the assessment of Keith Jenkins, his postmodern interlocutor, that the truth of history is elusive (2000: 193). Yet he would disagree that it is a futile endeavor. For historians, a well-educated investigation of the past that yields sparse results is more worthwhile than no investigation at all. Surely this is more than mere self-justification on the part of the historian but lies in the initial impulse for her or him to pursue historical studies. And neither, as we have noted do historians believe their work is final, but they must yield to peer review and the possibility of further evidence. Biblical historian V. Philips Long writes, “Just because *absolute* objectivity is a chimera does not mean that we must resign ourselves to *absolute* subjectivity...” Instead, for Long, the plausible or probable nature of historical knowledge is “driven by the larger model of reality that we each embrace” (2002: 9).⁵⁴ Finally, Collingwood summarizes this process well when he writes,

...no fact ever has been wholly ascertained, but a fact may be progressively ascertained; as the labour of historians goes forward, they come to know more and more about the facts, and to reject with greater and greater confidence a number of mistaken accounts of them; but no historical statement can ever express the complete truth about any single fact... This is perfectly well known to all historians. No historian imagines that he knows any single fact in its entirety, or that any historian ever will (1965: 43).⁵⁵

So, if historians do not seek unconditional certainty, with what logic do they proceed? In short, historical logic is inferential.⁵⁶ There is not space here to enumerate the depth of this form of logic, as it is at present an entire subset of study for logicians and has gained popularity for researchers working on artificial intelligence.⁵⁷ Inferences may take the form of Bayesianism, which seeks to relate the evidence and the hypothesis by proportion to which they support one another (Day 2008: 37–44).⁵⁸ Inferences also may utilize explanationism, which attempts to explain the evidence from the hypothesis (Misak 2017: 25–38).⁵⁹ Or inferences may incorporate abduction, which rules out hypotheses that do not fit the evidence.⁶⁰ None of these logical tools offers certainty, but they do assist us in reaching more likely historical propositions.

In practice, historians may or may not be conscious of or intentional about the type of inferential logic they use. But, as they attempt to explain historical phenomena, they will undoubtedly use inference because it is an earnest attempt to be reasonable and pragmatic. Inference is reasonable in that it seeks to make the most sense of the connections between the evidence and testimony.⁶¹ It is pragmatic because it acknowledges that we, and the historical actors we study, exist in real time and space.⁶² And in time and space, we often must use the best logic available to us, which is often inferential. In fact, we use inferential logic all the time in real life when we conduct “historical” investigations, such as when we piece together data at hand to find lost car keys or try to discern why the restaurant we used to visit suddenly has a closed sign on the door. Historians formalize this process for events temporally more distant and with fragmented evidence, especially as the temporal distance increases. But this does not mean that our hypotheses are without logical foundation. While this sort of logic will not appease the hardline empiricist, it provides workable rationales for understanding the past.⁶³

To return to the example of Hezekiah’s run-in with the neo-Assyrian army, archaeological digs in Jerusalem remain limited, and we have conflicting and rhetorically-charged reports of what happened. On the one hand, there are strictures to what we will be able to say about this event, as we have mentioned above. But on the other hand, it is an important inquiry for the guild to pursue due to the bearing it has on everything from the redaction of the Deuteronomistic History, the reliability of the Old Testament as scripture, and what causes mighty empires to fall.

And, because of this importance, biblical historians and Assyriologists alike will continue to pursue it. They will do so by drawing conclusions that may appear to be gospel truth given the depth of their research and conviction in their writing, but that all know will be contingent upon the dialogue of the guild and further evidence.

Conclusion

A common thread among philosophers of history is that the discipline concerns what it means to be human.⁶⁴ Although we may take natural phenomena into account of our histories, we will only do so in so far as these phenomena relate to the actions of humans. Herein lies history's distinctiveness from other sciences. Human behavior may at times occur in predictable patterns. It may also appear in unique, particular events. Of course, we study history to shape the present, and to understand why the present is the way that it is. Yet we also study history to discover why we, as human beings, are the way that we are in all of our universalities and particularities. It is this foundational assumption of history that I hope ties together the preceding analysis and encourages us to continue to pursue historical-critical scholarship.

Because history deals with other humans, this requires historical respect towards our subjects. We must recognize that, though years (and, in the case of biblical studies, millennia) separate us, we share the same human condition. And, as it concerns biblical theology, we share with historical actors and authors the same relationship to the God we claim to be constant throughout the ages. Such an approach requires us to place modernist arrogance to the side and encounter the past with questions, understanding, and respect. Even though we cannot deny our interpretations in the act of writing history, the historical-critical approach necessitates that we do our best to study the linguistic and thought-worlds of the past, and sympathetically assume that those who left traces of their time intend to communicate something about the events of their lives. In doing so, we must allow the evidence to set the boundaries of our interpretations.

In the present dialogues about the past, historians must continue to see their work as a humanistic enterprise. Historians (and in our case, biblical scholars) are bound to respect the humanness of our interlocutors, both ideological comrade and foe. Since our branch of knowledge is defeasible and is so heavily dependent upon interpretation, it requires a

community of those committed to understanding more about the past. And in these dialogues, perhaps we will learn more about who we are now.

Critics of the historical-critical approach are correct when they note that the Bible is not history as we currently know the discipline of history. Though historical materials exist within it, and sections such as the Deuteronomistic History reflect a proto-history, the texts within the corpus of the Bible are too diverse to come close to the Rankean vision of professional historiography. Rankean historiography will also not tell us directly about God or divine revelation.⁶⁵ Yet simply because the texts were not written within the parameters of our current understanding of history, does not mean we should avoid historical analysis when studying the text. It is my belief that historical study of the biblical text arises from it. A dominant characteristic of the Judeo-Christian faiths, against many of the religions around which these emerged, is the belief that humanity is valuable to God and, therefore, humans ought to respect the image of God (Gen 1:26–27) found in other humans. The study of history in the West, then, is an extension of this belief. Ranke and many of his successors were theists who sought to provide dignity to the actors of the past whose stories had been blurred by the lenses of Romantic narrators. And for the modern Western world shaped by Judeo-Christian values (although we now might also add to “secular humanism,” no doubt emerging from such values in the West), we must continue to investigate the truth of the past with respect for these image-bearers who can no longer speak. Not only will we demonstrate an interest in antiquity for its own sake, but perhaps we will learn our own lessons along the way, given that modern humans are still endowed with the gifts and pitfalls of being human.⁶⁵

In biblical studies, this means that the various branches of historical criticism still hold value. Historians and archaeologists will continue to ask, “Did it actually happen this way?” when reading biblical narratives to understand the actors, or at least the writers who chose to portray historical actions in certain fashions. They will also, perhaps more constructively,⁶⁶ assist us with detailing the practical context of daily life in biblical eras. In source and form criticisms, we can begin to understand the emphases of the earliest communities that produced and uttered this literature, as well as the editors and their communities who thought it important to keep these traditions and form them into a new creation. Textual critics will enable us to understand the earliest religious leaders who transmitted, and sometimes altered, texts for particular reasons. In short, these different historical-

critical methodologies will enable us to understand human actions, and in so doing, teach us something about our own human nature.

Perdue, though critical of the aims of historical criticism, concedes that it is necessary to understand the human aspects of the Bible. The well-rounded biblical critic must understand, not only the texts left behind by those of the past, but their authors and actors as well. He writes, "To deny one in favor of the other [historicality and the language of the text] or to privilege one while subordinating the other runs counter to what is fundamentally true about what it means to be human. Thus, history and text belong together" (1994: 303–304). I hope that underscoring this sentiment aids our discipline, however small, in creating a body of scholars who are able to complement one another's approaches and therefore further our understanding of what it means to be human, and specifically one who encounters the God of Israel.

End Notes

¹ In writing about the legacy of the literal interpretation of scripture by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Frei writes, "...historical criticism and biblical theology made for decidedly strained company" (1974: 8.)

² Practitioners of these methodologies may object to being lumped together, but I wish to focus here on the reticence with which they approach traditional historical criticism. Carroll 1998, Jasper 1998, and Longman 1999 are helpful introductions to these issues. Childs notably wishes to differentiate his canonical approach from postmodern literary criticism because it fails to see the importance of the biblical text within the history of the communities where the text is authoritative (1979: 74).

³ Alter attacks the speculative nature of "excavative" approaches, that look behind the text for meaning (1981: 13–14). Johnson Lim is more foreboding in his assertion that historical criticism may soon become a relic of the past (2000: 252–271).

⁴ Barton 1998: 9–20; Miller 1999: 356–372; and Krentz 2002: 48–54 serve as overviews of the disciplines that fall under the rubric of historical criticism.

⁵ In my primary area of research, the contextual approach of the Old Testament, I think of Samuel Sandmel's warning about "parallelomania." See Sandmel 1962: 1–13. Within biblical theology, the so-called "Biblical Theology" movement in particular has come under an insuperable attack. For a stringent review of this movement and its weaknesses, see Barr 1976: 1–17. See also Brueggemann 1997: 42–60.

⁶ Thus, I count myself with those whom Lim says call “for a synthesis of traditional methodologies and contemporary theories” (2000: 257). Lim specifically mentions Barton as a supporter of this stance, which is apparent in much of his work. I would also add the notable example of Rolf Rendtorff, who also contends for a blending of diachronic and synchronic methodologies. For Barton, 1999: 427–438 and 2007: 187–90. For Rendtorff, see 1999: 67.

⁷ Zammito acknowledges the challenge of whether we can speak of a theory in the philosophy of history, but contends with a large majority of practitioners that we must move to construct such ideas (2011: 63–84). In this essay, I do not wish to get bogged down in the details of the philosophy of history. But I do desire to elucidate guiding principles of practicing historians.

⁸ Younger’s own essay here is one of these rare examples. There are also some examples within the volume to which Younger contributes. Yet these examples primarily focus on specific arguments, such as the matter of history as interpretation and the phenomenon of testimony (typically in references to the minimalist/maximalist debates). Here I attempt to provide a foundation for biblical critics to understand the aims of historical criticism as explained by philosophers of history. Since, in my experience, literary critics and historical critics often talk past one another, I hope this essay will assist us to have more mutual understanding between these camps. Two helpful introductions to the history of historical criticism of the Bible and its varying approaches appear in this volume from colleagues Hayes and Miller (Hayes 1999: 7–42; Miller 1999: 356–372).

⁹ Here I would like to take up David Steinmetz’s challenge to develop “a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting” (1980: 38). Steinmetz is among those who contend that historical criticism is not obsolete but is in need of repair for a return to a holistic (for him, “Medieval”) model of biblical interpretation.

¹⁰ See Adam 1995: 32–35; Brueggemann 1997: 8–14; Prickett 1986: 24–25.

¹¹ See Adam 1995: 4; Brueggemann 1997: 8–14; Perdue 1994: 19–20. Ankersmit has notably taken up this claim within the philosophy of history. See Ankersmit 1989: 137–153 and 1990: 287.

¹² Admittedly, most of us learned to eliminate equivocation from our writing, which likely contributes to this phenomenon in much historiography. For example, Gardiner, though allowing for some room for error in hypotheses elsewhere (129), asserts that historians should “insist that their formulation represent the *end* of historical inquiry, not that they are stages on the journey toward that end” (1961: 95–96).

¹³ Walsh also appropriates a more general notion of science in 1967: 35–37.

¹⁴ Collingwood's thoughts on this matter are dense, but particular claims about the relationship between history and science can be found in the following: 1965: 1–10, 234, 305, 318; 1965: 32, 48–49, 136.

¹⁵ The relationship between history and science is a preoccupation of most of Gardiner's work, but his most essential viewpoints can be seen on pages 28–64. See also Walsh 1967: 18, 25, 30–47.

¹⁶ This also strikes at the motivation for Collingwood's influential theory of "re-enactment," in which the historian is called upon to inhabit the particular thought world of a historical subject (2014: 282–302). One can discern this theme throughout Collingwood's *Idea*, but these pages constitute the most concentrated section on re-enactment in this book. Day recognizes similarities between re-enactment and a fully empathetic approach, yet correctly identifies Collingwood's theory as purely rational. (2008: 122) I do not find myself sympathetic to Collingwood's purely rational approach, acknowledging instead the interplay of reason and feelings. Day also stresses that Collingwood has pressed reason too far as a totalizing feature of history (2008: 128–129).

¹⁷ See also Shoemaker's point in this regard on interpretation of Collingwood's "re-enactment" phenomenon in 1969: 107. See also Bloch 2017: 35.

¹⁸ See also Frei's sentiments along the same lines. Frei finds some appeal in Johann Gottfried von Herder's concept of *Einfühlung* in theological study, though he is also frustrated that Herder left the concept fully unexplained (1974: 184–92, 321).

¹⁹ From the perspective of biblical studies, see a similar sentiment in Krentz 2002: 47.

²⁰ As mentioned above, there are many essays within V. Philips Long's volume on ancient Israelite historiography dealing with this issue of history writing because of long-running debates between so-called "minimalists" and "maximalists." Many of these essays are found in 1999: 142–278.

²¹ White indicates the disagreement among historians about causation and how to interpret is the difference between history and "the sciences," where there is more agreement on methodology. This is a narrow view of science and assumes more about modern scientific agreement than is true. White's point is to enumerate the different approaches to historical explanation (1973: 12–13). In some ways, Levin anticipates White's analysis, but he clearly believes that the best history writing combines literary artistry and historical accuracy (1967: 1–33).

²² Note White's own admittance to writing from an "Ironic condition" as he understands nineteenth-century European historiography (1973: 434). Neither is White observation wholly new, though he is the first (to my knowledge) to extrapolate on the concept of interpretation in history. For example, see Santayana in the early 20th century (2021: 239–40).

²³ Although I could note several remarkable examples, I will mention only Scholz 2007 and McCauley 2020.

²⁴ Day resists such an idea, however. For him, it is part and parcel of writing and reading history to assume that the historian is “not omniscient” and does not hold the only true interpretation 2008: 179.

²⁵ Lyotard’s most well-known work in English appears in Lyotard 1984.

²⁶ Although a remarkable work in many respects, Eichrodt’s theology (1961) was frequently criticized for a singular focus on the theme of covenant at the expense of a depth of other images he could have used.

²⁷ See also Gardiner, where he notes that cause is a matter of perspective, not something out there for the historian to grasp (1961: 109).

²⁸ See Jenkins’s reading of Derrida and his “emancipatory” aims (2000: 192).

²⁹ Jenkins writes the provocative statement, “To make (to realize) a meaning, to bring a meaning into the world is ultimately an act of violence...” (Jenkins 2000: 192). Presumably, to write history in the modernist vein is to assume an advantaged stance and thus act (however unintentionally) with violence towards those not of the same level of privilege.

³⁰ See also Evans 1997: 128–129. Evans also adds the suffrage movement as an example.

³¹ Jenkins counters that postmodernism does not deny the reality of events, only the signification of them through words (2000: 190). Either way, Evans, in my opinion, strikes at the more pertinent point that, in order to address injustice, we must be able to communicate and understand history in a meaningful way. For a reading sympathetic to Evans, see Zammito 2011.

³² It is important to note that, within their own society, biblical writers were privileged. But, when writing on behalf of their people, biblical authors were clear that their land was an insignificant one in ancient geopolitics, dependent upon their survival and thriving only at the hands of YHWH. Moreover, I do not suggest that what we find in the Old Testament is history in the modernist, Rankean sense. It is debatable as to whether it even functions as history in the same sense as Herodotus and Thucydides. For attempts to debate this particular issue, see the collection of essays on pages 461–578 of Long 1999. But Aleida Assmann’s studies on the memory suggest that, what we find in the Old Testament is an example of the merger of memory and history. (2008: 49–72) See also Halpern 1998: 276–277.

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³³ In addition to these points, Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob accept that narrative can shape meaning, but do not wholesale concede that the identification of narrative fundamentally negates meaning. They note that postmodernism has in fact crafted its own narrative, thus undermining its

more radical claims about narrative and meaning. Appleby et. al. 1994: 235–36.

³⁴ Within biblical studies, see Prickett 1986: 24.

³⁵ In the broader discipline of the philosophy of history, Jenkins largely follows Derrida to claim that a postmodern view of history is “anti-representational” (2000: 185). Outside of postmodernism, author’s intention remains a concern of Brevard Childs, who distances himself from New Criticism, but finds an affinity on this point (1979: 74–77). Also see Perdue 1994: 153–154.

³⁶ Day is correct that, when we make sense of a literary product, “we assign meaning and intention together” (2008: 138). Keith Windschuttle similarly critiques White’s *Metahistory* by claiming that literary devices do not encroach upon the deepest structures of language. He writes, “White has mistaken the surface for the substance, the decoration for the edifice” (1996: 241).

³⁷ Maza notes that contemporary historians assume the critiques of White and the postmodernists, but continue to write about the past as “compelling, fact-based stories” (2017: 233).

³⁸ In an opaque statement, Ankersmit takes the approach that evidence is more like a painter’s brushstroke that puts constraints on a historian responding to the discovery of this evidence than it is like a magnifying glass into the past (1989: 146). Zagorin’s response to Ankersmit on this point is clearer and more in line with what I maintain here (1990, 272). See also cautions in the interpretation of evidence in Day 2008, 159–62.

³⁹ See also Collingwood 2014: 241, 316; Evans 1997: 91, 126; Roberts 1996: 265.

⁴⁰ For an understanding of this issue within Old Testament studies, see Deist 1999: 373–390.

⁴¹ This concept, and the related idea of “colligation,” trace their origins to the philosopher and scientist William Whewell. For a detailed application of colligation to the philosophy of history, see Roberts 1996: 16–37.

⁴² Roberts writes, “The greatest explanatory power... is gained neither by counting more instances nor by manipulation; it is gained by describing the connection between the two terms of the correlation” (1996: 25). For a review of causation in the philosophy of history, see Tucker 2011a: 99–108; *ibid.*, 2011b: 220–30; Maza 2017: 157–98.

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⁴³ For the Assyrian perspective of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem, see COS §2.119B. Regarding the archaeological data of Jerusalem in this period, especially the expansion of the city during Hezekiah’s reign, see the influential article Broshi 1974: 21–26. For a recent summary of the

realia surrounding Hezekiah that has been discovered in Jerusalem, see Ngo 2021.

⁴⁴ For example, see Lemche 1999.

⁴⁵ For example, see Kitchen 2001: 50–51.

⁴⁶ For a concise summary of Ranke's method, see Evans 1997: 15–17.

⁴⁷ For this alternative view of Ranke, I am indebted to Day 2008: 5–9 and Tucker 2004: 68–85. Baruch Halpern strikes a similar chord in 1998: 9–10.

⁴⁸ In their defense of the testimony of the Bible as a legitimate source for historical reconstruction, Provan, Long, and Longman also recognize the distinction between Ranke's program and the positivism introduced by Comte (Provan et. al. 2003: 21–24, 38–43).

⁴⁹ This comment is inspired by Day 2008: 21.

⁵⁰ The understanding of historical conclusions as preliminary appears prominently in Appleby et. al 1994: 284; Collingwood 2014: 248.

⁵¹ Since adherents to these methodologies differ in their approach, I intentionally refrain from using Derrida's rallying cry of there being "nothing outside the text." But perhaps Jenkins's interpretation of this slogan is applicable to all, namely that we cannot pretend to know that the text is pointing to realities beyond itself (2000: 190).

⁵² In particular, see Adam 1995: 5, 20; Jenkins 2000: 187–88, 193.

⁵³ Day 2008: 148–149. For further explanation of this concept, see Tucker 2004: 197–99.

⁵⁴ See also Miller 1999: 357.

⁵⁵ Or, the ever-pithy Santayana, who writes, "History is always wrong, and so always needs to be rewritten" (2021: 237). Biblical historian Baruch Halpern says, "historiography is never accurate." Halpern uses the metaphor of a portrait. The painter will not get every detail correct in capturing reality, but will do his or her best to paint reality from his or her perspective. In the same way, the historian cannot capture the reality of the past in every detail and will be led by an interpretive lens, but must still strive to understand the historical subject as best as possible (1998: 8).

⁵⁶ Collingwood uses this term as a means of demonstrating how history is a science in that it pieces together data to draw conclusions, but historians are not able to empirically observe the events they describe, as natural scientists do (2014: 50, 251–52, 282). Santayana uses the same term in 2021: 238.

⁵⁷ For an overview of inferential logic as it is presently practiced, see McClain and Poston 2017.

⁵⁸ For a helpful introduction to Bayesinaism, see Day 2008: 31–37.

⁵⁹ Also see the volume by McClain and Poston above.

⁶⁰ For a review of these methods, as well as some other lesser-known logical tools for history, see Day and Radick 2011: 87–97.

⁶¹ See the discussion of consilience above. Collingwood stresses the importance of the historian’s identification with historical actors in his concept of re-enactment. I would not go as far as Collingwood in assuming the transferability of reason between ourselves and historical actors, but I do believe that, in so far as we share a common human nature with historical actors and thoroughly study their historical context and thought world, we might reasonably imagine their actions in history.

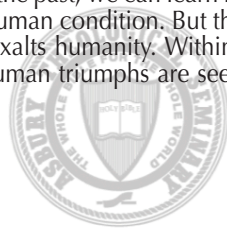
⁶² Gardner especially underscores the practical nature of historical understanding (1961: 12).

⁶³ See Misak’s similar statement about “the solipsist and the skeptic” (2017: 25).

⁶⁴ See Collingwood 2014: 7–14, 315; Collingwood 1965: 44, 123; Bloch 2017: 26–27, 42, 44, 151; Day 2008: 3, 180; Gardiner 1961: 49–54, 115; Walsh 1967: 18, 22, 25, 31; Berlin 1960: 2, 24; Halpern 1988: 7, 9.

⁶⁵ Certainly Collingwood is correct in his assessment that history cannot refer to divine actions (2014: 14). But what is possible, in my opinion, is that we can understand human experiences of God through historical criticism of the Bible.

⁶⁶ Perhaps the most influential motivation for studying history comes from Santayana’s statement that, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (2021: 68). In my view, this is only partially true. In studying the past, we can learn much about our foibles and the negative side of the human condition. But this stance also neglects that we can tell history that exalts humanity. Within biblical history, however, I must qualify that any human triumphs are seen as the result of a human yielding to God.

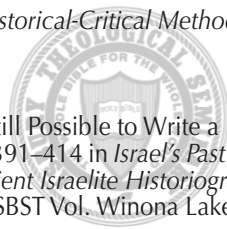


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