

Rethinking “History” for Theological Interpretation

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Abstract — In recent years, theological interpretation of Christian Scripture has often been distinguished by its wholesale antipathy toward history and/or to historical criticism. Working with a typology of different forms of “historical criticism,” this essay urges (1) that historical criticism understood as reconstruction of “what really happened” and/or historical criticism that assumes the necessary segregation of “facts” from “faith” is inimical to theological interpretation; (2) that this form of historical criticism is increasingly difficult to support in light of contemporary work in the philosophy of history; and (3) that contemporary theological interpretation is dependent on expressions of historical criticism concerned with the historical situation within which the biblical materials were generated, including the sociocultural conventions they take for granted.

Key Words — *history, historicism, historical-critical paradigm, Acts of the Apostles*

The problematic nature of “history” for theological interpretation is the inevitable consequence of the segregation of “theology” from “history” in biblical studies in the modern era. This is not to say that “theology” has been completely exorcized from critical biblical studies, because many interpreters continue to write about “the theology of the Yahwist,” “the theology of Thomas,” or “the theology of Matthew’s Gospel.” The sort of “theology” sponsored by critical biblical studies, however, is entirely devoted to the descriptive enterprise, with the result that, at the hands of modern biblical studies, theology is itself a historical enterprise and, as such, is historically determined. If one wants to move beyond the question of what ancient people thought about God or how they understood

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God to have addressed them, additional work is necessary—work normally done not so much by biblical scholars as by homileticians or theologians, or by biblical scholars who, for the sake of applying the results of historical scholarship, have temporarily donned the hat of the preacher, pastor, or theologian. God can speak today only after history has spoken.

Theological interpretation takes a critical stance with respect to this vision of biblical studies, though champions of theological interpretation are not always as clear as they might be regarding the status of historical inquiry in the theological task. In this essay, I want to defend two claims concerned with the role of history in theological interpretation. First, I will argue that historical inquiry grounded in the suppositions and principles of what I shall call the “historical-critical paradigm” is inimical to theological interpretation of Scripture and, as such, has no place in theological interpretation. Second, I will argue that recent work in the philosophy of history redirects the way we think about “history” and NT “texts” in ways that support the aims of theological interpretation of Scripture at the same time they render problematic the historical-critical paradigm. In order to sketch these arguments, I need first to clarify several terms.

HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: DEFINING TERMS

In the best of times, discussion among theological interpreters and, especially, discussion between theological interpreters and its critics have generally been a case study in misperception and miscommunication; in the worst of times, those same conversations have been fraught with caricature and misrepresentation. This is often the result of issues of definition, themselves due to (1) the variety of interpretive interests that parade under the nomenclature of “historical criticism” and (2) the general lack of an agreed-upon understanding of what constitutes “theological interpretation.” Without claiming to resolve these ambiguities, I want at least to explain how I will use these terms in this essay.

Historical Criticism and the Historical-Critical Paradigm

Today, historical criticism typically refers to three interpretive projects:

1. The reconstruction of past events in order to narrate the story of the past. Within biblical studies, this is historical criticism proper, and I will refer to it as historical criticism 1. Outside biblical studies, this simply is the work of the historian, and this indicates why biblical scholars in the modern era have tended to regard themselves as historians rather than as theologians.

2. Excavation of traditional material in order to explain the process from historical events to their being textualized within the biblical materials. This work includes a range of methods usually developed under the rubric of historical criticism, from historical criticism proper to tradition criticism, form criticism, source criticism, and redaction criticism. I will refer to this as historical criticism 2.
3. Study of the historical situation within which the biblical materials were generated, including the sociocultural conventions they take for granted, to which I will refer as historical criticism 3.

I claim that theological interpretation has no room for historical criticism 1, that theological interpretation is interested in historical criticism 2 only insofar as it serves rhetorical interests,¹ and that theological interpretation is very much hospitable toward and dependent upon historical criticism 3.

In order to clarify further the target of my concerns with historical criticism, let me go on to acknowledge assumptions and attitudes generally identified with historical criticism 1 and historical criticism 2, assumptions and attitudes to which I will refer as the historical-critical paradigm. I refer to practices of historical investigation grounded in the following presuppositions:

1. that history has existed as an object or sequence of objects outside the historian's own thought processes
2. that the historian can know and describe this object or sequence of objects as though they objectively existed
3. that historians can remove their own interests—whether theological or philosophical or political or social—as they engage in the task of doing history
4. that historical facts are discovered in a past that exhibits a recognizable structure and
5. that the substances of history can be grasped through intellectual efforts, without recourse to the transcendent²

In biblical studies, these presuppositions are themselves served by the principles of historical inquiry classically articulated by Ernst Troeltsch. These include:

1. Cf. Klaus Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1984); idem, "Rhetorical Criticism, New Form Criticism, and New Testament Hermeneutics," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht; JSNTSup 90; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 390–96.

2. See Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Ideas in Context; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1–6.

1. the principle of criticism or doubt, which strips religious inquiry of any claims to unique authority by insisting that its historical claims must be examined with the same method and thoroughness as one might bring to all other historical claims
2. the principle of analogy, which undermines the possibility of miracles because these are unrepeatable, unique events and
3. the principle of correlation, which explains all events in the world fully in terms of other events in the world. Accordingly, God cannot influence or intervene in the world because God is not a material cause.³

These assumptions and principles I take to be both integral to the practice of historical criticism 1 and 2 and hostile to the practice of theological interpretation.

Theological Interpretation

With the multiplication of attempts at defining theological interpretation,⁴ the discerning observer may begin to perceive some recognizable patterns emerging from the haziness of former days. My own view is that theological interpretation is not and never will be a carefully defined “method”—and, indeed, that no method, once adopted and faithfully practiced, will inevitably lead to a “theological interpretation” of a given text. As with other forms of “interested” exegesis, like Latino/a or African approaches to biblical studies, theological interpretation is marked less by technique and more by certain sensibilities and aims. Above all, theological interpretation is identified by its self-consciously ecclesial location. Thus, theological interpretation concerns the role of Scripture in the faith and formation of persons and ecclesial communities. Theological interpretation emphasizes the potentially mutual influence of Scripture and doctrine in theological discourse and, then, the role of Scripture in the self-understanding of the church and in critical reflection on the church’s practices. This is biblical interpretation that refuses the reduction of the

3. Ernst Troeltsch, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” in *Religion in History* (ed. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 11–32.

4. Cf., e.g., S. A. Cummins, “The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recent Contributions by Stephen E. Fowl, Christopher R. Seitz and Francis Watson,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 2 (2004): 179–96; Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009); Richard B. Hays, “Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis,” *JTI* 1 (2007): 5–21; R. W. L. Moberly, “What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?” *JTI* 3 (2009): 161–78; Darren Sarisky, “What Is Theological Interpretation? The Example of Robert W. Jenson,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010): 201–16; Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 19–25 (esp. pp. 21–23).

Bible to a disparate collection of historical and/or literary documents, reading it instead as a source of divine revelation and an essential partner in the task of theological reflection. To push further, theological interpretation is concerned with encountering the God who stands behind and is mediated in Scripture.

Christian theological interpretation finds its focus in the church's two-testament canon of Scripture. On the one hand, this means that theological interpretation emphasizes biblical texts in their final form. On the other hand, this means that theological interpretation recognizes the force of Wilhelm Wrede's complaint—namely, that those who work with the idea of the canon place themselves under the authority of the bishops and theologians of the first four centuries of the church—while rejecting his conclusion.⁵ Against Wrede, theological interpreters embrace the ramifications of the ecclesial location of their task. Theological interpreters grapple with the Bible as the church's Scriptures and, then, as Scripture to be read in relation to the church's Rule of Faith.⁶

With the important but preliminary matter of definitions behind us, we are now in a position to rethink "history" for theological interpretation.

HISTORICAL INQUIRY AGAINST THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

My first claim is that historical inquiry grounded in the suppositions and principles of the historical-critical paradigm is inimical to theological interpretation of Scripture and, as such, has no place in theological interpretation. I base this claim on two grounds.

Assessing the Historical Data

First, in the general absence of corroborative or competing historical evidence to sift and assess, historical criticism has little alternative other than to base its evaluation and renarration on presumptions about what its practitioners regard as possible or plausible. These include the assumption that facts and faith can and should be compartmentalized from one another and the assumption that God and God's activity lie outside the

5. Wilhelm Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter* (ed. and trans. Robert Morgan; SBT second series 25; London: SCM, 1973), 68–116 (esp. pp. 70–71).

6. I leave open at this juncture how best to construe that relationship, which I have discussed elsewhere: *Practicing Theological Interpretation* (Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). Cf. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010); William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

parameters of historical inquiry. Even if someone might wish to argue that these presumptions and protocols make for good historical inquiry, I think we can agree nonetheless that they exclude the interests and commitments specific to theological interpretation, as I have defined it.

Let me illustrate the problem with reference to Gerd Lüdemann's essay, "Acts of Impropriety: The Imbalance of History and Theology in Luke–Acts."⁷ Let us put to the side Lüdemann's naive reading of the claims of ancient historiographers regarding their own aspirations. Let us also set aside his references to the 2nd-century B.C. treatise *How to Write History*, penned by the satirist Lucian of Samosata, which Lüdemann reads uncritically as though it were a straightforward instruction manual for Roman historiographers.⁸ And let us put to the side Lüdemann's modernist assumption that both Jews and Christians—apparently all of them, always and everywhere—employ their Bibles "as history books so as to establish the historical foundations of their respective faith communities."⁹ Let us observe instead that Lüdemann's fundamental complaint is that Luke is theologically motivated by his conception of "salvation history."

The history of salvation is reflected in the path of the gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. The worldwide missionary activity, i.e., throughout the Roman Empire, and the person of Paul form the focus of the presentation. Everything else—the beginning in Galilee, the crisis in Jerusalem involving the death and resurrection of Jesus, the church in Jerusalem, and the experimental mission of the Hellenists (in Luke's perspective)—leads toward this one goal. The Jerusalem Conference is located in the middle of Acts, chapter 15, as the pivotal point. It separates the primitive period of the church from the present and forms the presupposition for Paul's independent mission that begins after his separation from Barnabas. The Pauline era is meshed with, and legitimized by, the holy past of the primitive Jerusalem church.¹⁰

This by itself is not necessarily a bad thing, we are told, because all historians have their biases. In the case of Luke, however, this bias leads to the fabrication of facts. For Lüdemann, this becomes clear in Luke's apologetic favoring the Roman state. In the ensuing discussion, Lüdemann success-

7. Gerd Lüdemann, "Acts of Impropriety: The Imbalance of History and Theology in Luke–Acts," *TJIT* 24 (2008): 65–79. Cf. his earlier book, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

8. Idem, "Acts of Impropriety," 73–75. Contra Lüdemann's uncritical appropriation of these texts, see, e.g., John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke–Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography* (WUNT 2/175; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

9. Lüdemann, "Acts of Impropriety," 65.

10. *Ibid.*, 69.

fully demonstrates that certain representatives of Rome (for example, the centurion Cornelius) are portrayed in a positive light by the narrator of Acts and less successfully paints with broad strokes his view that Luke is pro-Rome¹¹ but never actually identifies where or how Luke has fabricated "facts" in support of his apologetic. If anything, according to Lüdemann, Luke's view of salvation history leads him to exclude from his narrative account data concerning the historical veracity of which Lüdemann is certain and which, for Lüdemann, Luke must have known.

From here, Lüdemann goes on to "induce from Luke's work the following assumptions:

1. The Holy Spirit is instrumental in salvation history.
2. All things are predetermined by the will of God.
3. The spread of the Primitive Christian mission is unstoppable.
4. Roman power is sympathetic to Christianity. (A corollary of this is that any pro-Roman traits or characterizations in Acts and the third Gospel are open to historical doubt.)
5. The unbelieving Jews will go to any lengths to thwart Christian goals and purposes. (As with the previous statement, any negative statement about them is likewise open to historical doubt.)¹²

We might argue that Lüdemann has misconstrued the theology of Acts—e.g., with reference to Luke's alleged doctrine of predetermination or Luke's attitude toward the Roman Empire; but this is beside the point. As his own parenthetical glosses suggest, evidence of theological assumptions such as these within the Lukan narrative is directly correlated with a negative assessment of the historical value of that narrative. Here and throughout, then, Lüdemann does little more than assume that Luke is a historian whose work ought to measure up to the standards I have enumerated as the "historical-critical paradigm" and claim that Luke fails to meet those standards on account of his theological interests. The sniff of Lukan theology is testimony to the failure of Luke the historian. In short, Lüdemann's claim that Luke has falsified history "for the sake of piety, politics and power"¹³ is based not on sifting competing historical data but on the presence of Luke's theological commitments.

A Competing Narrative

Someone might reply that, Lüdemann's essay aside, some data external to Acts can be compared with Luke's narrative, and on this basis we might

11. Against this common view, see C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and the earlier Richard J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

12. Lüdemann, "Acts of Impropriety," 72.

13. *Ibid.*, 77.

take some steps toward an assessment of the historical value of Acts. For example, in his essay “What Is Meant by the Historicity of Acts?” Charles Talbert surveys recent literature regarding the value of Acts for our knowledge of the early church.¹⁴ Among the issues he surfaces are some that assume an assessment of the “facts” of Luke’s narrative in relation to sources external to the narrative—for example, the verisimilitude of Acts (that is, whether narrative details related to “contemporary color” cohere with what we find in other sources), the sequence of events (that is, whether the chronology of Acts coheres with the chronology of events known to us from other Greco-Roman, Christian, and Jewish sources), and Luke’s portrait of Paul (that is, whether we can find coherence between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the Pauline letter corpus).

This approach to Acts as history leads to the second basis for my claim that historical criticism 1 is no friend to theological interpretation. This is that historical criticism 1 evaluates data with the anticipated outcome of an alternative narration designed to replace the one the church has received and valued as Scripture. That is, the attempt to recover what actually happened, which is only an alternative way of referring to historical criticism 1, requires a series of interpretive judgments concerning events recounted in the narrative of Acts, which then provide the raw material for a further, competing narrative. This approach, if it has any theological interests, assumes that the object of exegetical study is a new and purportedly more historically accurate account generated by historians today on the basis of which the church might then turn to engage in the theological task. And it assumes that theology and history are different things and that theology is the superstructure built on the historical foundation stones of modern historical investigation. It thus assumes a segregation of history and theology predicated on a dichotomy alien both to premodern thinking and to virtually all religions today. Indeed, writing in *History and Theory*, C. T. McIntire has aptly observed that the separation of faith and fact or sacred and secular runs counter to traditions that hold “the religious as a way of life, and not as something that can be confined to a special private realm or removed from life altogether.”¹⁵ Failing to account for this reality, historical criticism 1 lacks the cognitive categories for making sense of the reality that the church regards the narrative of Acts, set within the canon of

14. Charles H. Talbert, “What Is Meant by the Historicity of Acts?” in *Reading Acts in Its Mediterranean Milieu* (NovTSup 107; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 197–231.

15. C. T. McIntire, “Transcending Dichotomies in History and Religion,” *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 80–92 (quoting p. 86). On theological assumptions in historical inquiry more generally, see, e.g., Murray Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005); Alan Torrance, “The Lazarus Narrative, Theological History, and Historical Probability,” in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 245–62.

Scripture, already as an exemplum of the church's theological task. Focused as it is on such a different agenda, historical criticism I cannot conceive of Acts in its role as theological history informing in its present form the church's faith and life.

Of course, theological interpretation has no reason to reject the work of those who want to write a new history of early Christianity. Likewise, theological interpretation has no need to anathematize the attempts of those who want to demonstrate or deny the historical veracity of the Acts of the Apostles. The book of Acts is capable of an array of uses and is hospitable to a constellation of interpretive practices. Theological interpretation simply recognizes those attempts as something other than theological interpretation. What is more, theological interpretation is unwilling to grant those new narratives the status of Scripture or to allow the church's faith and life to be normed by them. In another context, N.T. Wright has claimed that, "without the real human Jesus of Nazareth, we are at the mercy of anybody who tells us that 'Christ' is this, or that."¹⁶ Someone might find in this defense of historical Jesus studies grounds for a parallel claim concerning the early church: Without the real early church, do we not open ourselves willy-nilly to whatever interpretive winds might blow? To both claims, regarding the historical Jesus and the historical early church, we reply, simply, that within the church we do not depend on even our most talented historians to portray reality for us; rather, in the church, we recognize that those interpretive winds are already tamed by canon and creed.

To anticipate what is to come, we might go on to recognize that the newly constructed narrative of the early church given us by historical criticism I does not actually recount for us what really happened. This is because it too bears the imprint of a series of interpretive judgments, each of which is open to criticism. Put sharply, the lofty aims of historical criticism I deconstruct themselves on account of the subjectivity intrinsic to each stage of historical analysis. The alternative I champion is a theological interpretation that reads Acts (for example) as a narrative representation of historical events, which by definition must focus on the narrative of Acts itself and not on the events to which this narrative can only partially bear witness.

HISTORY AS NARRATIVE IN THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

In reality, study of the NT *as* NT already refuses to play by the rules of the historical-critical paradigm, as Wrede rightly saw.¹⁷ Although it

16. N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 93.

17. Likewise, Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (2nd ed.; London: SCM, 2000); contra, e.g., Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997).

is possible to study, say, Matthew's Gospel from the standpoint of the historical-critical paradigm, the location of Matthew's Gospel in the four-fold Gospel canon, in the NT canon, and in the two-testament Christian Bible reflects a theological judgment that in no way arises necessarily or intrinsically from the material vicissitudes that gave rise to Matthew's Gospel in the latter part of the 1st century. To employ the phrase "New Testament" is to make a theological judgment to which the historical-critical paradigm gives no quarter. That some NT students continue to imagine that they can operate on the basis of the historical-critical paradigm *and* read these documents *as Christian Scripture* is testimony to nothing more than the inconsistencies between "theory" and "practice" that have now begun to show as fault lines in the discipline of biblical studies. To push the matter even further, it is difficult to know on what basis we might embrace study of the New Testament as part of a two-testament Christian Bible *and not also concern ourselves explicitly with the relationship between canon and creed*, since, historically, these two, canon and creed, are the product of mutually influencing, interwoven processes; to do so, however, is to have set a firm boundary between ourselves and the sort of interpretive work sponsored by the historical-critical paradigm.

However, what is at issue for us at present is how to think about the historical enterprise in ways that support the aims of theological interpretation of Scripture. My second claim, then, is that recent work in the philosophy of history redirects the way we think about "history" and NT "texts" in ways that support the aims of theological interpretation of Scripture at the same time they render problematic the historical-critical paradigm. I will argue that what is at issue for theological interpretation of Scripture is not the question of events and their meaning insofar as these can be identified behind the text—because, after all, events do not carry with themselves their own interpretation. What is at issue, rather, is the theological character of these narrative representations of historical events—representations that are, by definition, oriented toward a theological telos. Some will recognize that, in thus phrasing the issue, I am following Hayden White's understanding of history-writing as "the narrative representation of historical events"¹⁸—a view that undermines any attempt at historical criticism grounded in the historical-critical paradigm. I will construct my argument on the basis of four, closely related observations.

First, those responsible for history-writing are forever engaged in choice-making concerned with what to exclude and include, and how to relate one event to another. This accounts for the two basic, essential, and distinguishing tasks of the historiographer: selectivity and narrativity. De-

18. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

cisions are required—and not only for the obvious reason that a record of everything would be impossible to produce (cf. John 20:30–31; 21:25) but also to escape the democratization of events whereby nothing has significance because everything is of equal consequence. Yet, decisions involving valuation are inescapably subjective, oriented as they are toward particular interpretive aims and set within particular chains of cause-and-effect.

Accordingly, a narrative representation of historical events irrepressibly locates events in a web of significance, events that have themselves been chosen with an eye to their significance within that narrative web. Indeed, even the simple act of dynamic recall is an exercise in the allocation of meaning, according to subjective determinations, whether conscious or unconscious, of a significance plotted in terms of past, present, and future. If this “significance” is grasped in theological terms, this does not make the consequent narrative any less “historical” but instead reflects the ground rules of the community that grasps reality in just this way. As Albert Cook recognizes in his assessment of history in Israel’s Scriptures, “the Old Testament writer . . . cannot be faulted for regarding as evidence . . . the relationship of God to the Hebrews. This is so central to his conception of the unfolding of events that he would have been remiss in leaving it out.”¹⁹ The same would need to be said of Matthew or John, for whom God is an active agent working sometimes directly but mostly indirectly behind, in, and through these NT narratives. The same would need to be said of those who turn to Matthew and John as Scripture, who not only observe that these narratives assess the Jesus-story in theological terms but who embrace these narratives as the good news that calls for a reorientation of life determined by the God of Abraham and Moses, the Father of Jesus, the God who liberated Israel and raised Jesus from the dead. That this argument is made by Albert Cook is of special notice since his comparative literary perspective demonstrates the degree to which the biblical writers are engaged in forms of significance-making possessing analogues throughout the history of history-writing.

Second, history-writing is less *mimēsis* and more *diēgēsis*, more narrative representation than imitation of unvarnished events. “Memory” of persons and events is being formed long before the historian appears on the scene to take up the twin tasks of research and narration. Oral history represents and shapes the community of memory. History-telling precedes and constrains history-writing. Moreover, memories are in a perpetual state of flux, being surfaced or suppressed, shaped and reshaped, in relation to their perceived importance.²⁰ Further, “perceived importance” is measured by

19. Albert Cook, *History/Writing: The Theory and Practice of History in Antiquity and in Modern Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 139.

20. This perspective on memory undermines some aspects of the thesis put forward in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand

how an event or situation is understood as the consequence or cause of an event-sequence. From one perspective, for example, Jesus' death on a Roman cross has no peculiar significance at all; it is just one in a series of hundreds of these executions. We can easily imagine a late-1st-century historian writing the history of the Empire without mentioning it at all. From another perspective, say, that of the author of Mark's Gospel, Jesus' death marks the end of the ages and so occupies the centerpiece of Mark's narrative representation of historical events.

The late-19th century bequeathed to the 20th the imperative that historians emulate natural scientists in their pursuit of fixed laws. By the early 20th century, it was widely agreed, as Ernst Briesach has put it, "that history was an endeavor with the purely theoretical interest of reconstructing the past and without any practical interest, be it lessons, devotion, entertainment, or propaganda."²¹ This way of thinking has proven problematic on numerous grounds. Thus, for Wolfgang Iser, "the real" can no longer be separated from the perception of the real.²² "Historical writing," Brian Stock argues, "does not treat reality; it treats the interpreter's relation to it."²³ And Hayden White has emphasized the implications of the essential narrativity of historiography; how can promises of or aspirations to objectivity be maintained when it is self-evident that the historian's craft is exercised in selecting what events to include and in determining how to order those events in a narrative web of causality?²⁴

Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). Neuropsychology has increasingly observed the degree to which memory is malleable and dynamic—see, e.g., Daniel L. Schacter, "The Seven Sins of Memory: Insights from Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience," *American Psychologist* 54 (1999): 182–203; Elizabeth Loftus, "Our Changeable Memories: Legal and Practical Implications," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 4 (2003): 231–34; Karim Nader, "Reconsolidation: A Possible Bridge between Cognitive and Neuroscientific Views of Memory," in *The Cognitive Neurosciences* (ed. Michael S. Gazzaniga; 4th ed.; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 691–703; Oliver Hardt et al., "A Bridge Over Troubled Water: Reconsolidation as a Link between Cognitive and Neuroscientific Memory Research Traditions," *Annual Review of Psychology* 61 (2010): 141–67. We typically explain our own and others' behaviors through the historical narratives by which we collaborate to create a sense of ourselves and others as persons and as a people. Memory, then, is not passive retrieval of information, but a dynamic process of active reconstruction, through which we seek coherence. This is true both of individuals and of collectives (or "institutions"—cf. Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* [Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986]). Regarding Bauckham's work, see also Judith C.S. Redman, "How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research," *JBL* 129 (2010): 177–97.

21. Ernst Briesach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 323.

22. Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

23. Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Parallax Re-visions of Culture and Society; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 80.

24. See especially White, *Content of the Form*. For an assessment of White's influence, see the symposium "Hayden White: Twenty-Five Years On," *History and Theory* 37 (1998): 143–93.

With these considerations in mind, the pressing interpretive questions become, on the micro-level, how is this event related causally to that one? And, on the macro-level, what end is served by narrating the story in this way (rather than some other)? To raise the importance of telos, however, is to recognize the inherently subjective—and, for the theologically minded, the inherently theological—nature of the narrative representation of historical events.

Thus far, then, we have begun to sketch a view of historiography that runs against the grain of the historical-critical paradigm. History writing is always more and less than the past—more because historiography locates events in a web of significance that gives them an importance they do not inherently possess, and less because historiography is by its nature selective in its choices of what to recount. David Lowenthal summarizes these concerns with three telling observations. No historical account can recover the totality of the past as it really was on account of its virtual infinity. No historical account can recover the past as it was because the past is comprised of events and situations, not accounts. And no historical account can escape the subjectivity inherent in the choices of what and how to remember.²⁵ The work of the historian is never simply “retrieval.”

I set out to sketch four considerations that, together, undermine the ongoing history-theology dichotomy. The third recognizes that the Gospels and Acts are cultural products—that is, they are narratives that speak both out of and over against the worlds within which they were written. They participate in, legitimate, perpetuate, and criticize the worlds within which they were generated. As Stephen Greenblatt has observed, texts exist in a relationship of constraint and mobility with their cultural contexts, as authors assemble and shape the forces of their worlds in fresh ways that both draw on and point beyond those cultural elements.²⁶ This means that narratives such as the Gospels and Acts perform like structures for the accumulation, transformation, representation, and communication of the social energies and practices integral to their worlds (“constraint”) but also that these narratives have the capacity to break their worlds’ social boundaries in order to reinterpret accepted conventions, to critique social norms, and to visualize an alternative universe (“mobility”). Indeed, narratives have ongoing significance in part because of their capacity to speak beyond the limitations of their own historical particularity. Yet, as “cultural products,” the fullness of their voice is shaped by that very particularity. Taking seriously this aspect of the “historicity” of Acts, for example, allows us a sharper image of how Luke might have pursued the task of shaping the

25. David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 214–18.

26. See Stephen Greenblatt, “Culture,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 225–32.

identity of a people through shaping his narrative at the same time that it militates against our impulses toward domesticating this narrative by locating it within our own cultural commitments, as though they embodied and authorized our cherished dispositions.

If the first two considerations counter the segregation of history and theology posited by historical criticism 1 and 2, this third consideration demonstrates the importance of historical criticism 3 for the enterprise of theological interpretation. By reminding us of the text's own status as a cultural product, historical criticism 3 protects the text from our tendencies to recruit its words and phrases to our own ends. And from the standpoint of pragmatics, that area of linguistics that studies how context contributes to meaning, historical criticism 3 reminds us that entire patterns of behavior and well-known social scripts can be signaled by a few words in the text; in other words, historical criticism 3 reminds us that texts are more than words on the page. From this vantage point, then, a fulsome grasp of the socio-religio-cultural complex within which Acts was produced is informative—not so that we might trap Acts within its historical world and not because Acts (or any other text) gives us uninterpreted access to that world but so that we can see how Acts embraces and undermines its world as it invites its audience to discern and participate in God's restorative agenda.

The fourth consideration is that the Gospels and Acts, as with narratives more generally, have intended effects. Narrative is not just "story" but also "action"—as James Phelan puts it, "the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose."²⁷ Of course, in making this claim, I am departing perspectives on historical study and history writing deeply (if often unconsciously) indebted to a philosophy of history motivated by a desire to emulate the investigative commitments and techniques of the natural sciences. And I am recognizing that history writing is not an exercise in the objective retrieval of the past, that history writing invariably serves present agenda such as validation of a people or institution (especially through tracing continuity with the past), identity-formation, and pedagogy.²⁸

In short, history writing is not for us an add-on to the theological task, nor is theology an add-on to the work of historiography. Though one might wish to speak heuristically of Luke's or Matthew's theological agenda or historical interests or literary artistry, these are not "parts" of a Lukan or Matthean enterprise. A narrative like Mark's is not molecular, divisible into three parts history, two parts theology, and one part literary artistry. It simply is a theologically determined narrative representation of historical events.

27. James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 8.

28. Lowenthal, *Foreign Country*.

CONCLUSION

What we find in Scripture, then, is the theologically potent narrative representation of historical events. It is not an unbiased presentation. It is not a scientific account of what really happened. This is not because of Matthew's or Mark's failure as a historian but rather because all history-writing is partial—incomplete and perspectival.

Of course, someone might want to write a new history of Jesus of Nazareth or of the early church. Were someone to undertake this task, however, I hope that she or he would recognize the nature of the task. Reading Mark's Gospel as a "narrative representation of historical events" is simply a different enterprise than reading Mark from the standpoint of historical criticism 1 and the related assumptions of the historical-critical paradigm. Historical criticism 1 might view Mark as a source for its work of querying what actually happened during the period of Jesus' public ministry. Reading Mark in this way is not "scientific," however, but only the first step in the production of another partial narrative. And it is yet another illustration of the inherently anti-textual agenda of historical criticisms 1 and 2. One can follow the rubrics of historical criticism 1 as a historian of early Christianity or one can read the book of Acts as formative, theological narrative, but one cannot do both at the same time. One can follow the instincts of those committed to the historical-critical paradigm, but the end result of such an inquiry would not be a theological reading of Acts but rather the substitution of one's own account for the one the church has received and that it regards as Christian Scripture.



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