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THE HISTORIAN, THE BELIEVER, AND THE OT:
A STUDY IN THE SUPPOSED CONFLICT
OF FAITH AND REASON

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The historian must not try to know what is truth if he values his honesty, for if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts.

—Henry Adams

The study of Israel's past concerns not only the historian but also the believer. The relationship of the Christian historian to the modern historical-critical process, however, especially in regard to the study of the OT, has generally been unclear. Few problems have been more traumatic for the Christian than the imposition of historical methods on the study of the Bible.¹ This is one of the most serious tests that Christianity has had concerning the nature of Biblical authority.² Many have seen the historical method as incompatible with Christian faith. Christianity has normally been based on supernatural metaphysics, while the historical method has been founded on a rational assessment of the probability of an event, not on doctrinal canons.³ The historical method is now taken for granted in many circles, and it would be difficult for the secular historian to return to a precritical age.

What, then, are the parameters of "reason and faith" for the Christian historian? In other words, in the context of Biblical studies how have Christians attempted to reconcile the historical-critical method and their faith? The Christian historian does not have to make an excuse for an interpretation that is colored by his faith. He cannot be entirely separated from his faith. He is not truly autonomous, like the nineteenth-century historian tried to be. How can a Christian or Marxist historian, out of supposed objectivity, be forbidden to interject his own theological convictions into his work? There is no such thing as pure objectivity.⁴

The goal of the Christian historian is to understand the cultural milieu of the Bible, not to defend its theological truth. We can defend the historical character of its narratives, though. But historical character and theological

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¹ Cf. V. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

² E. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 16.

³ E. Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: J. Mohr, 1913) 729-753.

⁴ D. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 5-8.

interpretation are not the same. The historian may concur that God acted in history, and faith can affirm this. But it cannot be a datum point for his research. The historian attempts to undertake a critique of the narratives for their historical value and to understand the context and motives of the writers. If one only agrees with the Biblical record he is a purveyor of tradition but not an historian.

The following will be a discussion of the history of the struggle between the traditional historical and textual interpretations of the Bible on the one hand and historical (and higher) criticism on the other, occasionally misunderstood as the conflict between reason and faith. I will conclude with a discussion of how the modern historian views the OT in regard to three relationships: myth and history, revelation and history, and Biblical faith and history.

I. THE CONFLICT OF "FAITH AND REASON" IN REGARD TO THE OT AND HISTORY

1. *General comments.* E. Troeltsch, an early-twentieth-century scholar, felt that once the historical method was applied to the study of Scripture it would alter the entire structure of belief and therefore the nature of theological understanding.⁵ The historical method has required nothing less than a transfer of the medieval intellectual ideal of belief to the modern idea of historical knowledge.⁶ Is it possible for the historian who happens to be a Christian to adhere to both the traditional doctrines of Christianity and the dogmas of the historical method? Much of Protestant Christianity has appeared to be a series of salvage operations, attempting to reconcile the idea of historical-critical inquiry with the apparent demands of the Christian faith.⁷ But can the Bible be subjected to the same methods that are used by historians when dealing with other ancient writings? There is a danger that by attempting to refute the historical-critical method one may accept the criteria used by that method. Those who do this cannot then make an appeal to faith. They must stand upon their own rational arguments. But those who espouse the historical-critical method have also based their arguments on presuppositions—that is, on a type of "faith."

Our civilization is based on a variety of ancient derivatives, two of the most important being Hebrew and Greek models. The Greeks and Hebrews, however, had different ways of perceiving reality. For instance, the Greeks invented rational thinking (probably from a precursor in India), while the Hebrews, although not unfamiliar with reason, made many of their conclusions based on *a priori* assumptions. A Hebrew thinker would not debate the nature and existence of God, whereas the Greek philosophers delighted in such a prospect. Our hybrid civilization has never fully

⁵ Troeltsch, *Schriften* 730.

⁶ Harvey, *Historian* 39.

⁷ *Ibid.* 246.

come to terms with our mixed heritage. In the medieval period the Hebrew "faith" model appeared to have been preeminent, although Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas and others were very Greek in their thinking processes. Only in the past few centuries has the Greek rational-critical model of thought taken precedence. As Christians we have not been immune to these concerns, since our Scriptures are a mixture of Greek and Hebrew thought.

2. *The medieval period.* In order to understand the modern Christian's concern with coming to terms with his faith and the historical processes we can briefly survey the history of this problem from the medieval period to the nineteenth century, when historical criticism became a primary intellectual pursuit.

Similar in many ways to the modern Christian, early Christian thinkers sensed a need to reconcile the beliefs of their newfound faith with their pagan past, which included the rational ideas of Plato and Aristotle. Augustine, who lived when Rome was falling and Christianity was beginning to dominate the west, set the mood in this respect for the entire medieval period. He was not only a Latin cleric but was also influenced by neo-Platonism.⁸ He did, however, accept the priority of faith over reason.⁹ Thus in the medieval period the use of Greek reasoning became subordinate to God's revelation as written in Scripture.¹⁰ Augustine was also one of the first to coordinate narratives of secular history with the sequences of Biblical history.¹¹

Augustine's view of the supremacy of Scripture was not challenged for over half a millennium, not until the advent of the Muslim scholar Avicenna.¹² Although not primarily concerned with the Christian Scriptures, his method of thought would soon be used by Latin scholars. Avicenna attempted to reconcile the works of the classical scholar Aristotle with the Qur'^{ān}. He treated all questions with critical reasoning, independent of the Islamic Scriptures, and ultimately perceived a natural analysis of inspiration for them. For Avicenna, however, to accept a literal interpretation of the Qur'^{ān} in every case would be an affront to the intellect.¹³

⁸ E. Portale, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1960) 95-105.

⁹ Cf. Augustine *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum* 2.5; *De Trinitate* 8.5; 9.1, 18. Cf. R. Cushman, "Faith and Reason," in R. Battenhouse, *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (New York: Oxford, 1955) 287-289; Portale, *Guide* 114-125; E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1965) 27-43.

¹⁰ Cf. Augustine *De Civitate Dei*; R. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1970) 1-21.

¹¹ Jerome put reason into practice by speculating that Ezra may have edited the Pentateuch (*PL* 23.199).

¹² Ibn Sina (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā*; cf. *La Métaphysique du Shifā* (Montreal: Université de Montreal, 1952); S. Afnan, *Avicenna: His Life and Works* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958) 168-200.

¹³ Afnan, *Avicenna* 183.

Another Islamic scholar who dealt with issues of interpretation was Averroës.¹⁴ He concluded that in order for the Qur^ʿān to conform to reason it had to be taken symbolically. In fact the doctrines of religion could be harmonized with science and philosophy. This was also later stated by the Jewish scholar Maimonides. He wrote *Guide for the Perplexed*, a philosophical expository work on the Bible, because the "perplexed had to be satisfied so that they could devote themselves peacefully to the acquisition of ideas without being disturbed by the thought that they had rejected the principles in the Torah."¹⁵ His audience were those who wanted to adhere to the Scriptures but were embarrassed by contradictions between science and the Bible. He believed that reason was implanted in humankind by God and could not be contrary to revelation.¹⁶ Where apparent contradictions occurred, it was because one took a text literally when it should have been taken allegorically.¹⁷ Reason thus took the form of allegorical interpretation in order to save Scripture from becoming insignificant. Religion and science served to complement each other and were not in tension. The Bible was a complex book with an outer and inner meaning, and those who were capable could discern its "double truth."¹⁸

In the Christian world Anselm continued in the Augustinian tradition, holding that rational analysis was essential in understanding the Christian faith. He helped initiate the scholasticism of the late medieval period. But for Anselm, as for Augustine, faith was a prerequisite for the employment of reason ("I believe in order that I may understand").¹⁹ The right use of reason could never contradict Scripture.²⁰ Anselm's students, however, desired intellectual artillery in the war against the Muslims, and he thus inaugurated rational scholastic philosophy in defense of the Christian faith. The Scriptures were rationally defended against heretics and skeptics.²¹

But soon the rational process was used to critique traditional dogmas. Following the lead of Avicenna was the Latin scholar Peter Abelard. Although proposing to use the resources of philosophy for the defense of Christianity he seemingly questioned many of the dogmas of the Christian faith, showing where the Church fathers were in contradiction with each other.²² In his *Sic et Non* he quoted Scriptural, patristic and canonical au-

¹⁴ Ibn Rushd (Averroës), *Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl*; cf. G. Hourani, *Averroës on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (London: Luzac, 1961).

¹⁵ Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963); J. Minton, *The World of Moses Maimonides* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957) 113–116.

¹⁶ Maimonides, *Guide* 1.53; cf. A. Herschel, *Maimonides: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982) 13.

¹⁷ F. Bratton, *Maimonides: Medieval Modernist* (Boston: Beacon, 1967) 86–88.

¹⁸ Minton, *World* 121.

¹⁹ *St. Anselm's Prosligion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979).

²⁰ J. Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1972) 44.

²¹ Anselm, *Monologion*; cf. *Anselm of Canterbury* (Toronto: Edwin Mellin, 1974).

²² P. Abelard; cf. *Sic et Non: A Critical Edition* (ed. B. Boyer and R. McKeon; Chicago: University of Chicago).

thorities and then listed apparent conflicting citations from other Church authorities, adding no commentary of his own. He presupposed, however, that conflicting authorities were an impossibility and that there were no true conflicts but only ambiguities fostered by a misunderstanding of the use of the words used and their context and by the careless copying of existing texts.²³ But he did not compare supposedly conflicting Scriptural authorities. For Abelard, faith could not be in opposition to things created by God and investigated by philosophy.²⁴ In a way, Abelard anticipated some of Descartes' ideas by five centuries. He held that the key to reason was systematic doubt. When reason was applied to faith it begot the questioning of all dogmas. The truths of Scripture had to agree with the findings of reason. Since the language of the Bible was for uneducated people it had to be interpreted by reason. Abelard's student, Peter Lombard, attempted to resolve the apparent contradictions found by Abelard by holding to the Church's authority versus the claims of individual reason.²⁵

Thomas Aquinas was the next to attempt a harmonization between the Biblical text and classical philosophical thought.²⁶ For him only the mysteries of the faith were exempt from rational analysis—for example, the Trinity, incarnation, redemption, and last judgment. Many of the ancient texts of Aristotle were being studied during this period. Although Aquinas attempted to weaken the onslaught of Aristotelian inquiries on the Bible he incorporated this logic into the study of Scripture, using reason as an instrument for the defense of the Church.²⁷ The mystery of God could be expressed with human laws and studied objectively. Aquinas began his inquiry with faith but then proceeded with reason. But one would be foolish to reject God's revelation because it did not contain human reason. Faith and reason were not considered to be in contradiction.²⁸

3. *The Renaissance/Reformation.* The medieval thinkers were neither true textual critics nor critical historians. The critique of textual sources did not begin until the Renaissance, especially with the arrival of Byzantine manuscripts into Italy from Constantinople after its conquest by the Turks in 1453. Lorenzo Valla was commissioned by the king of Naples to show that the *Donation of Constantine*, a document used by the Church to justify the acquisition of certain territories, was a forgery.²⁹ He accomplished this by examining the language used in the text and comparing it

²³ Cf. L. Grane, *Peter Abelard: Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964) 88.

²⁴ Abelard, *Historia Calamitatum* 3.

²⁵ *Libri Sententiarum: Commentary of the Latin Text IV* (ed. R. de Mediavilla; Frankfurt: Minerva, 1963).

²⁶ T. Aquinas; cf. *The Summa Theologica: A Concise Translation* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1989).

²⁷ Cf. E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956) 15–25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹ L. Valla, *The Treatise of Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine (De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini Donazione)*; New Haven: Yale, 1922).

with early medieval Latin. This was a landmark in the rise of internal literary criticism as well as in historical criticism.³⁰ He also applied his linguistic learning to Jerome's Latin translation of the Scriptures, revealing many errors.³¹ But like his predecessors he did not question the veracity of the Biblical text itself, a prospect that would not come for two centuries.

Erasmus followed Valla's lead and applied textual criticism to Scripture itself.³² His work marked the application of humanistic learning to the study of early Christian literature and the Bible. This was the beginning of modern Biblical criticism, which in some cases in the nineteenth century would restrict the Bible to human authorship and fallibility.³³ Erasmus noticed that some verses in the NT did not exist in the best manuscripts (e.g. Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11) and marked the verses as spurious. Like Maimonides he attempted a harmony between revelation and reason, using an allegorical interpretation of Scripture when it was not rational to hold to a literal reading.³⁴ He thus used reason as a criterion for the interpretation of the Scriptures. Martin Luther took advantage of the new scholastic humanism and used reason to attack the established Church in Rome.³⁵ His work appealed to history to investigate the improprieties of the papacy.³⁶

The medieval mind considered the details of human actions in history as relatively unimportant. People were interested in discerning divine attributes, not historical facts.³⁷ But the modern study of history, which would be used to scrutinize Scripture, had its roots during the Italian Renaissance. One such historian was Nicolo Machiavelli, who emancipated the study of political science (and history) from theology.³⁸ No longer would divine intervention be the primary factor in history. The study of human affairs became paramount.³⁹ History was no longer considered linear but was refashioned in the Greek spiral model of recurring historical patterns.⁴⁰ The French bishop Bossuet later countered by stating that his-

³⁰ Ibid. 3.

³¹ L. Valla, *In Latinam Novi Testamenti Interpretationem ex Collatione grecorum Exemplarium Adnotationes*; cf. *Collatio Novi Testamenti* (ed. A. Perosa; Florence: Sansoni, 1970).

³² For Erasmus' connection to Valla cf. J. Sowards, *Desiderius Erasmus* (Boston: Twayne, 1975) 70; for Erasmus' work cf. *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: The Gospels (Facsimile of the Final Latin Text). Novum Instrumentum Omne, Diligente de Erasmo Rot, Recognitum et Emendatum*; ed. A. Reeve (London: Duckworth, 1986). Cardinal Ximenes published an edition of the NT two years earlier, but it was not made available to the public until 1522.

³³ Cf. R. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Scribner's, 1969) 133-135.

³⁴ Ibid. 142-144.

³⁵ M. Luther, *Table Talk* 353; cf. *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (ed. T. Kelper; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

³⁶ R. L. Shinn, *Christianity and the Problem of History* (New York: Scribner, 1953) 73-74; J. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale, 1963) 29-42.

³⁷ Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946) 55-56.

³⁸ N. Machiavelli, *History of Florence* (New York: Washington Square, 1970); also cf. S. Ruffo-Fiore, *Niccolo Machiavelli* (Boston: Twayne, 1982) 99.

³⁹ Some have seen Machiavelli's work as a landmark in the development of modern historiography; cf. E. Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1925) 67.

⁴⁰ Ruffo-Fiore, *Machiavelli* 99-100.

tory was not subject to reason and was static and theological. It was an act of the divine plan.⁴¹ But even Bossuet was not immune from the new secularism. Although he was probably the last major thinker to model history on the Augustinian pattern, Bossuet saw God as not working directly in history but through men's minds.⁴²

4. *The scientific revolution/Enlightenment.* With the advent of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century the western world began to free itself from Biblical and clerical authority.⁴³ Although not directly related to either the critical study of history or Scripture, the French philosopher Rene Descartes helped to foster the increase of secularization in the study of history. He began by systematically doubting all belief systems before his own time, especially those not based on reason.⁴⁴ The idea of historical Pyrrhonism (historical narratives are not trustworthy accounts of the past) can be indirectly traced to Descartes. As with Aquinas, the mysteries of the faith were outside the domain of inquiry for Descartes. By means of reason humanity would find the truths necessary for mundane welfare, just as revelation gave eternal truths. God's revelation and human reason were separate areas in which to study.⁴⁵ But Pascal saw it as unwise to rest religion entirely upon science and thus did not accept this line of skepticism.⁴⁶

Not long thereafter the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes adopted Cartesian skepticism and entered into a study of the higher criticism of the Bible by questioning the authorship of Genesis by Moses.⁴⁷ John Locke tried to reconcile his faith with the emphasis on science by stating that Christianity was the "most reasonable" of religions. Other dogmas could be put aside, but the Scriptures were in agreement with reason.⁴⁸ Revelation would not conflict with reason. Reason was now used to document a confessional claim of faith.

⁴¹ J. B. Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986).

⁴² J. Brumfitt, *Voltaire: Historian* (London: Oxford, 1958) 31.

⁴³ Cf. the discussions by K. Scholder, *Ursprunge und Probleme der Bibelkritik im 17 Jahrhundert* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1966); A. Richardson, *The Bible in the Age of Science* (London: SCM, 1961).

⁴⁴ R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); cf. L. Pearl, *Descartes* (Boston: Twayne, 1977) 55-76.

⁴⁵ Cf. A. Balz, *Descartes and the Modern Mind* (Hamden: Archon, 1967) 9-25.

⁴⁶ Pascal felt that science was presumptuous since it was based upon reason, which was ultimately based upon the senses, which are deceptive (*Pensées sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets* 1.1; cf. *Pensées* [New York: Dutton, 1958]). For differences in thought between Pascal and Descartes cf. E. Mortimer, *Blaise Pascal: The Life and Work of a Realist* (Westport: Greenwood, 1959) 196-202.

⁴⁷ T. Hobbes, *The Leviathan, or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical, and Civil*, chaps. 31, 33; cf. *Leviathan* (ed. M. Oakeshott; Oxford: Blackwell, 1946). For Hobbes' skeptical ideas of Scripture cf. C. Hinnant, *Thomas Hobbes* (Boston: Twayne, 1977) 127-128.

⁴⁸ J. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (ed. I. Ramsey; Stanford: Stanford University, 1958); also cf. comments by K. Squadrito, *John Locke* (Boston: Twayne, 1979) 65-75.

The Scriptures, however, were not directly attacked as potentially fallible until the Jewish philosopher Spinoza in 1670. Biblical criticism was inaugurated by his *Treatise on Theology and Politics*.⁴⁹ The Bible was not totally rejected, as Spinoza was impressed by its ethical content. For Spinoza it was rich in grandeur and nobility, but it was a human book full of contradictions and repetitions:

We may be absolutely certain that every event which is truly described in Scripture necessarily happened—like everything else—according to natural law; and if anything is there set down which can be proved in set terms to contravene the order of nature, or not to be deducible therefrom, we must believe it to have been foisted into the sacred writings by irreligious hands, for whatsoever is contrary to nature is contrary to reason, and whatsoever is contrary to reason is absurd.⁵⁰

Reason was now used as a sole criterion to understand the Bible. In fact Spinoza's goal was to set forth a freedom of thought (not allowed by the Church) that showed the fallibility of Scripture. He noted the difficulties in the understanding of the Hebrew text. Since the vowels were not graphically represented, guesswork was used in the translation of texts. Richard Simon attempted to refute Spinoza (and the Protestants) by applying historical criticism to the OT.⁵¹ He did admit, much to the dismay of the Church, that many of the books in the OT were written by a group of writers and editors but that they were also inspired. He began to attack the Protestants, since they accepted the Scriptures as their highest authority.⁵² The present copies of Scripture were held to be corrupted, and so they could not be used as authority. Moreover, since verbal inspiration left the Protestants helpless against textual criticism, the Church allowed Simon to continue. The Catholic Church could survive this since it could "re-interpret" contradictions. Simon also believed that the Catholic Church could be sustained by tradition, without any Biblical corpus on which to fall back. Leibniz saw that if this line of inquiry were to continue it could destroy Protestant Christianity.⁵³

Related developments were occurring in the study of history. Vico felt that no area was exempt from historical criticism, including the Scriptures and Church tradition.⁵⁴ He denied that Providence had a direct, transcendent power beyond sacred history. Man became the center of the historical process. Vico also began to stray from the Hebrew linear view of

⁴⁹ B. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* (New York: Dover, 1990); also cf. discussion by H. Allison, *Benedict de Spinoza* (Boston: Twayne, 1975) 188–208.

⁵⁰ *Treatise* 6. The discovery in this time of other sacred writings and customs led Spinoza and others to look at many of the strange customs in the Bible as highly irrational and derived from many of these "ignorant and pagan" cultures.

⁵¹ R. Simon, *A Critical History of the Old Testament* (London: Walter Davis).

⁵² See the discussion in R. Popkin, "Skepticism and the Study of History," in *David Hume: Philosophical Historian* (ed. R. Popkin and D. Norton; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) xxi–xxv.

⁵³ G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956) 1.148.

⁵⁴ G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1948).

history to a more spiral view, similar to the Greek model.⁵⁵ He purposely avoided the study of the Bible because he did not want to discuss the problem of divine intervention in history.⁵⁶ Vico was also the first in the modern world to understand history as a legitimate discipline, separate from theology. What Machiavelli did primarily for political science Vico did for history.

Voltaire reacted against Bossuet's universal history and applied Newton's law of physics to historical study.⁵⁷ He reinterpreted history in non-theological terms. Providence became irrelevant. Natural causes were now the clue to scientific history. Voltaire put the relative importance to world history of Jewish (or Biblical) history in perspective, giving it less notice.⁵⁸ This was echoed by Hume, who also believed that history could be used to apply empirical investigation to humanity and to establish psychological laws similar to those discovered by Newton. Humanity and nature were in essence the same for Hume.⁵⁹

Other Enlightenment thinkers attempted to put historical thinking in perspective. Kant propagated the principle that the study of history should be kept separate from issues of faith.⁶⁰ Human thought was confined within a horizon of finiteness, and the historical thinker could not penetrate beyond the range of temporal existence.⁶¹ Hegel, a younger German contemporary of Kant, propounded the modern theory of historical "progressivism" (or evolution), which would soon be applied to other disciplines, including Biblical studies.⁶²

5. *Nineteenth-century Biblical criticism.* Some of the first to study the Bible from an historical-critical method were J. Eichhorn, considered to be the founder of OT criticism,⁶³ and H. Ewald, who wrote the first recognizable secular history of Israel.⁶⁴ Julius Wellhausen, who became more

⁵⁵ Cf. P. Burke, *Vico* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1985) 54-68.

⁵⁶ Vico, *New Science* par. 165.

⁵⁷ F. Voltaire, *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations, from the Reign of Charlemagne to the Age of Louis XIII* (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1782); *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Vision, 1965). Some have considered Voltaire to be the first "modern" historian (I. Wade, *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire* [Princeton: Princeton University, 1969] 93-109).

⁵⁸ Cf. the discussion of Voltaire's *Universal History* by P. Richter and I. Ricardo, *Voltaire* (Boston: Twayne, 1980) 88-93.

⁵⁹ D. Hume, "An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding," in *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (ed. L. Selby-Bigge; Oxford: Oxford University, 1962) 83; also cf. Bebbington, *Patterns* 75-78.

⁶⁰ I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Chicago: Open Court, 1960 [1934]).

⁶¹ On the concept that history was incapable of bridging the gap between the natural and sacred worlds cf. W. Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975) 269-272.

⁶² G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956 [1856]). On Hegel's historical views cf. G. Kelly, *Idealism, Politics, and History: Sources of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969) 289-354.

⁶³ J. Eichhorn, *Introduction to the Study of the Old Testament* (London: 1888).

⁶⁴ H. Ewald, *The History of Israel* (London: Longmans, Green, 1876-86).

influential than either Eichhorn or Ewald, adopted many of Hegel's historical theories.⁶⁵ For the first time the Hegelian dialectic was incorporated into the study of Scriptural history. Hebrew history, especially religious history, had evolved from early primitive stages. Scripture must have been edited at a later date, since many of the sophisticated ideas in the early sections did not fit the Hegelian plan of history. But Wellhausen was primarily a philologist and demanded absolute proof from his historical sources, which is acceptable in linguistics but not in historical studies.⁶⁶ He became frustrated at the lack of empirical proof one could find in determining the historicity of the OT.

6. *The modern historian.* With this admittedly brief and wide-ranging historical survey it can be stated that the development of the scientific historical method of inquiry in the nineteenth century (when "history" gained status as a separate discipline in the universities) was in many ways an advance in the history of human thought, a revolution in the consciousness of the human mind.⁶⁷ The modern historian would now demand impartiality, truthfulness and objectivity. The desire to know empirical truth was attached to the new method and became one of its highest ethical aspirations. But this brings us to our problem concerning faith and history. As has been noted, the scientific historical method is based on something that is finite and natural, while an important historical source, the Bible, is based on supernatural metaphysics. Can it be subject to the same historical criticism? The Christian must first realize that the historical method is totally ingrained in the consciousness of western civilization.⁶⁸ The rise of the historical-critical method can be correlated to the general modern concern with scientific critical inquiry and the decline of religious authority.⁶⁹

The modern historian has some unique characteristics. He claims to be autonomous and relies on no authority other than his own.⁷⁰ He is responsible for making his own arguments and insists on the right to think for himself, free of outside authority.⁷¹ This line of reasoning is understandable considering the hold that the Church once had on the minds of individuals in the medieval period. The critical historian is a reaction to this. He must also hold to the rules of rational assessment, however, and base all of his conclusions on the same. Like Descartes he adheres to methodological skepticism. He thus is quite self-sufficient and therefore often con-

⁶⁵ J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1883).

⁶⁶ Wellhausen was influenced by the Roman historian B. Niebuhr, who used historical criticism to separate the poetry and falsehood of the late accounts of Roman origins from the actual historical truth (*Römische Geschichte* [Berlin: G. Reimer, 1811-12]).

⁶⁷ Cf. E. Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* (Tübingen: J. Mohr, 1902) 1.

⁶⁸ Troeltsch, *Schriften* 729.

⁶⁹ E. Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 6-32.

⁷⁰ Collingwood, *Idea* 236.

⁷¹ This was first stated by Kant for academic disciplines in *Critique of Pure Reason and other Writings in Moral Philosophy* (ed. L. Beck; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1949) 286-292.

cludes that he does not need God. The historian's new morality celebrates the skeptical method as well as a desire to know the "truth" (or, better, facts).⁷² This "will to truth" is actually something that was taught to the historian by the Christian faith—a faith, however, that has been rejected by many who have learned it. But because of the nature of the subject the historian is not capable of attaining the complete "truth" about history. He does not have direct access to the past and thus cannot recover a complete record of what happened. The historian's own judgment also enters into his interpretation of the past. But incontrovertible "facts" (or historical truth) probably cannot be discovered by the historian, although factual ideas, along with the subjective ideas of the writer, do enter into what an historian writes.⁷³ There is, however, a danger of *hybris*, as the modern historian has often made himself both judge and jury.

Formerly the historian's task was to harmonize or chronicle his sources. But now he is critical, and all historical claims must be judged by rational experience. Thus the historical-critical method presupposes that all historical phenomena are subject to analogous experience in terms of other similar phenomena. The Bible has become a human book. The question as to whether miracles happened is not within the historian's competence to discuss. But the Bible claims many overt acts by God.⁷⁴ Because of this, modern historians have failed to transcend history, a prospect even Kant claimed to be impossible. They have only been able to prove that modern man is a creature with something less than absolute truth. The Christian historian, however, must have a view of faith that humbles the intellect and the critical spirit.

II. MYTH AND HISTORY

1. *Toward a definition of myth.* There have been numerous modern misconceptions of the term myth. The original etymology of *mythos* in Greek denoted "plot," "narrative," the sequential ordering of events. Narrative was invented to explain the ultimate cause of reality.⁷⁵ A myth is a literary form that emphasizes religious or devotional truth rather than an objective fact. It is a process used to interpret revelation, the communication of truth about God to rational creatures by means other than objective facts. It expresses man's understanding of reality, an interpretation by which we can better understand the world.⁷⁶ In fact the expression of faith must be done in a transcendent form, like myth or poetry (which was a form of communication used in the Bible). These modes are expressions of inaccessible and unknown truth, which is, however, capable of being stated in signals. Myth as well as poetry attempts to formulate transcendental

⁷² Harvey, *Historian* 103.

⁷³ Bebbington, *Patterns* 10–12.

⁷⁴ J. Miller, *The Old Testament and the Historian* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 18.

⁷⁵ R. MacKenzie, *Faith and History in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1963) 61.

⁷⁶ B. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, SBT 26 (1960) 83.

reality. The human level of perception can be heightened by such forms. The question, however, is whether the Bible used myth as a literary genre to convey revelation. But myth, by definition, is a product of humanity's imagination, not revelation. The writer of myth did not attempt to describe the concrete existence of the reality with which the myth was concerned.

2. *History and myth.* History and myth are not complete opposites. History is not completely historical, and myth is not completely mythical. History can be defined as a mythical way in which to perceive the world, a way to express the divine eternal nature from the standpoint of human transience.⁷⁷ Neither was an independent literary type in the ancient world.⁷⁸ Often it appears that legendary and historical narratives seem to have been interspersed without the slightest indication that the religious value of the stories was in any way proportionate to the degree of the actuality of events. The early Hebrew and Christian could probably understand the difference between the two forms, and so could the people around them. For example, the Assyrians often referred to their past but rarely to their mythical past. They treated elements of mundane history differently than myth. There was supernatural causation in the Bible, but few unnatural events.

3. *The OT and myth.* What does this mean to the historian who is a Christian? The problem in the OT is not simply whether the writers employed the use of myth but that they interspersed the text with much more history than the cultures around them.⁷⁹ Different literary genres appear to have mixed indiscriminately, as there does not seem to have been any separation between theology and history.⁸⁰ Were the Hebrews able to distinguish myth from history? Although they lacked precise categories for both, they probably would have understood the difference. History would be something that demanded the acknowledgment of eyewitnesses, while myth would not. The Hebrews in essence wrote neither myth nor history (in the modern secular sense of the word) but something in between. The categories of myth and history are not adequate to describe the Biblical category. It had a unique character of its own.⁸¹ We are thus victims of our own categorization, and applying these to the Bible does not add to our understanding.

⁷⁷ Cf. W. Stevenson, *History as Myth: The Import for Contemporary Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1969) 9-32; also cf. discussion by E. Hammershaimb, "History and Cult in the Old Testament," in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (ed. H. Goedicke; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971) 269-282.

⁷⁸ J. McKenzie, "Myth and the Old Testament," *CBQ* 21 (1959) 268.

⁷⁹ MacKenzie, *Faith* 62.

⁸⁰ J. Roberts, "Myth vs. History," *CBQ* 38 (1976) 3; also cf. R. Friedman, who views historical and literary genres as interdependent in the OT ("The Prophet and the Historian: The Acquisition of Historical Information from Literary Sources," in *The Poet and the Historian: Essays in Literary and Historical Biblical Criticism*, HSS 26 [1983] 1-12).

⁸¹ Childs, *Myth* 17.

Were the Hebrews confused because they lacked specific categories for myth, poetry, and history? The aims and intentions of the Israelite historians were quite different from those of their modern counterparts. There was no intent to separate divine action perceived by faith from what actually happened. The events were caused by God. The Hebrews did not write modern scientific history. Rather, they wrote a series of theological reflections of Israel and its history, tempered by God's revelation. The Hebrews assumed that supernatural and miraculous forces were significant factors to take into account when interpreting history. The modern historian often ignores these forces, and his historical method presupposes that all historical phenomena are subject to analogous experience. The Biblical writers used theological and metaphysical arguments rather than objective analysis and so wrote sacred history instead of secular history.

The goal of the Hebrews was to know God's way in the world, since his wisdom was considered different than man's wisdom.⁸² The writers of the Pauline and Petrine epistles, like the Greek philosophers, disdained the use of the term *mythos*.⁸³ Myth was the product of man's religious imagination, not the consequence of revelation. Myth emanated from man, not God. The Biblical authors wrote from God's perspective, a perspective where such myth had no place.

III. REVELATION AND HISTORY: DIVINE WILL VERSUS NATURAL CAUSATION

Modern historians also have been unable to reconcile the Hebrew idea of emphasizing divine factors in history with modern historical criticism. Many think of divine will and natural causation in exclusive terms. They cannot exist together. But to seek a divine origin for an event because of the inability of our present understanding to provide a satisfactory natural explanation is a fallacy.⁸⁴ This is a determination to be made from the other side of omniscience. To see a divine effect does not mean the termination of natural causes. Explanations of an event in natural and unnatural terms are not exclusive but compatible. In the ancient Near East, as well as in Israel, kings imputed victory to the gods without denying that human agents took part.⁸⁵ Divine causation in Scripture was not usually those events that interrupted the sequence of natural causes but those that usually exhibited how God was at work in them. But one needs to find a balance in order to understand how to interpret an event historically.

God has concealed and revealed himself in history, so said Luther. Except for revelation, God's workings are not verifiable. They are only suggested. Both divine revelation—that is, that which is disclosed by God to man—and natural causation must be emphasized.⁸⁶ If we only see

⁸² 1 Cor 1:18; 2:5, 16.

⁸³ 1 Tim 1:4; 4:6-7; 2 Tim 4:4; Titus 1:13-14; 2 Pet 1:16.

⁸⁴ G. Ramsey, *The Quest for the Historical Israel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 111.

⁸⁵ Isa 7:18-19; 8:7-8; 10:7-11.

⁸⁶ B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and Israel* (Lund: Gleerup, 1967) 98.

revelation, there is no place for faith. If we see only concealment, there can be no theological interpretation and no meaning to history. The medieval person viewed history as a chain of miraculous events. All ordinary life receded to the background. But we need to understand how ordinary humanity lived in time and space. A theological interpretation used too often can appear as a *deus ex machina*. The redemptive aspect of history is transcendent and is not an aspect of secular history. History implies dynamic movement while revelation implies static permanent truth.

IV. BIBLICAL FAITH AND HISTORY

Revelation is a form of communication used by God, while the human response to (or belief in) that revelation is Biblical faith.⁸⁷ The object of faith, whether Christian or otherwise, is not necessarily validated or demonstrated by empirical research. Those who believe that faith can be demonstrated in this way have failed to carry out the implications of the historical-critical method.⁸⁸ But the theological claims of Scripture are not to be demonstrated simply by the historical method, a method that the Scriptural claims transcend. Even if we believe that Jesus rose from the dead, the meaning (but not the evidence) behind the resurrection lies beyond the grasp of the historian. Biblical faith is based not solely on the historicity of the events described but on revelation. Faith only to a certain extent can bring forth objective facts to support theological claims. The problem occurs when one attempts to interpret those facts, since objective facts cannot transcend the mundane. Facts, however, can point more clearly to a particular interpretation. Yet both revelation and its theological interpretation transcend our present reality.

The person who believes that faith can simply be authenticated by history or archeology must be careful not to put his trust wholly in science rather than Scripture, a procedure that may show a misguided faith. Certainly our beliefs can gain support from archeological discoveries, but such finds cannot be the basis of faith. If they could be so used they would be aids to theology. If Homer's characters in the *Iliad* are proved to have existed, should I then worship Zeus? The assertion that history confirms the Bible implies that its theological truth has been rightly understood. Scriptural truth—that is, the truth of its theological claims—can neither be ultimately confirmed nor denied by the historical-critical method. Though the Bible is subject to human verification it does not need our acceptance to be true in reality.

Modern evangelical Christians, however, have become defensive in regard to Scripture. The use of negative terminology—for example, inerrant, infallible, and the like—shows their defensive posture. The Bible does not need to be tempered by the use of human reason whenever it is in danger

⁸⁷ In basic terms, historians have a belief system (or faith) that is as complicated as the Christian's. The differences are only of degree, not genre.

⁸⁸ Ramsey, *Quest* 111.

of being proven false. It is based on revelation. Historical research, on the other hand, suggests but does not demonstrate its object conclusively.⁸⁹ History deals with probabilities, while faith deals with certainty. Any attempt to demonstrate the theological truth of the Bible by the historical process proceeds on the false assumption that historical truth and revelation are the same, which is not necessarily true. Can the content of faith be mediated through an historically false story as well as a true one?⁹⁰ One cannot take for granted that if the historical record is accurate then so is its spiritual teaching. It is a fundamental error in interpretation to conceive of redemptive history as merely a series of verifiable historical data to which a religious interpretation has been added.⁹¹ An assertion cannot be used to justify itself. Faith cannot be used to wholly justify faith.⁹² The interpretation of an event as an act of God depends on the perspective of the interpreter. It cannot, however, be established only by the historical method.⁹³ That is not to say that only those things that can be established by the historical method could have actually happened. History cannot deny the possibility of the supernatural. But articles of faith (which are in the theological realm) cannot be considered proven by historical fact, although the truth of Biblical historical assertions can be. The central Biblical character of divine activity is not accessible to absolute historical verification. Confessional faith does not guarantee the historicity of the event. Unfortunately it has been more effective in our culture to deal with the articles of faith as historical facts rather than doctrines.⁹⁴ Although faith and the historical process complement each other, a true critical historian cannot confuse what he believes by faith and the evidence posed by the modern historical process. In sum, the truth of the historical claims of the Bible can be supported by the historical method, while the Bible's theological truths cannot entirely be. All theology of course cannot simply be reduced to interpretation or viewpoint. The theological truth of the singular essence of the Trinity has little relation to an historical event, while the exodus from Egypt has an express relationship to both theology and history. Theologians, however, should not write pure history.

What happens when archeology and history seem to contradict the Scriptural text? From the human side there are certainly apparent contradictions. In fact, proof of a fabrication in the Biblical text would certainly go far to undermine faith. Of course the archeologist knows of many supposed former "fabrications" that later were found to have historical validity. The historian may be tempted to produce an artificial harmony between the historicity of the text and his faith. Shall the evangelical alter

⁸⁹ J. MacQuarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (New York: Harper, 1966) 70-71.

⁹⁰ Harvey, *Historian* 280.

⁹¹ Childs, *Myth* 86.

⁹² J. Collins, "The Historical Character of the Old Testament in Recent Biblical Theology," *CBQ* 41 (1979) 188-189.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 191.

⁹⁴ R. Pfeiffer, "Facts and Faith in Biblical History," *JBL* 70 (1951) 10.

the historical findings in order to satisfy his instinct of theological self-preservation? The problem, however, is with our lack of understanding, not with the text itself. The text is mute about potential problems. The absence of findings cannot suffice to invalidate or validate the text, but it is unwise to dismiss the text for lack of historical or archeological support. Faith in the context of history has risks. We dare to affirm something bigger than our own world.⁹⁵

But was not Israel's faith founded on history and God's mighty acts? As Christian we believe this, but only through revelation do we ultimately know of God's mighty acts. Finite humans can make no determination of understanding divine wisdom. For them God is *deus absconditus*, a hidden god, not to be comprehended in the finite patterns of history but only through a faith response. For this reason finite humanity must have a point of view about God and history.⁹⁶ We cannot know God's mind unless he reveals it. Bayle once said, "The mysteries of the Gospel are supernatural in order, and cannot be subject to natural light." Faith is based on the authority of Scripture. It is confessional.

To repeat, the precepts of faith cannot be grasped by the historical method.⁹⁷ Those who believe that the Christian faith can be established completely on the basis of the historical-critical method have misunderstood both faith and the historical process. Faith stands in curious relation to fact.⁹⁸ History can never solve its quest by pointing to God. Our faith, however, can be content with no other answer.⁹⁹

V. SUMMARY

For the Christian there is without doubt a struggle between his faith and the modern historical-critical method. When the two systems collide shall we, like Aquinas and Descartes, make an appeal to faith? Or shall we say, as the nineteenth-century German historian von Ranke once said, "I am first an historian, and second a Christian"?

As has been noted, scholars in the past few centuries have brought a critical skepticism to the study of the Biblical text. This, as one historian has stated, is a "negative fundamentalism," a preoccupation with objective facts, a peculiarly western idea.¹⁰⁰ They have propagated the idea that one could only accept as true those historical facts that could be empirically proven. The ancient and medieval historians took most traditions at face value. But the modern historian is obliged to make an attempt to understand the philosophical and theological presuppositions of the writer and to determine the genre of written expression.

⁹⁵ P. Lapp, *Biblical Archaeology and History* (Cleveland: World, 1969) 53.

⁹⁶ Collingwood, *Idea* 108.

⁹⁷ R. de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) 56-57.

⁹⁸ Shinn, *Christianity* 18.

⁹⁹ M. Dibelius, *Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949) 10.

¹⁰⁰ B. Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988) 3.

Thus the historian must be prepared to face the implications of all the archaic evidence, whether it conflicts with his predetermined opinion (which is not necessarily doctrine) or not. If it conflicts, then he must be prepared to reinterpret his belief in some way or form. In order to apply the methods of historical criticism one must remember that in history there is neither "Jew" nor "Greek," even if there are "Jewish" and "Greek" historians. All of them come to history with presuppositions. In some ways the Christian must be careful not to be too close to the events that are being described in order to be able to achieve the required level of historical objectivity.

If this is true, can a critical Biblical history be written by a believer? It is possible if done by historians who have become sensitive to the issues discussed here. The historical-critical method can be used on the Bible, since it claims to have historical truth. To refuse to use the method in the face of this claim would make impossible intellectual demands on faith and would stress a separation of history and the Bible.¹⁰¹ Historical inquiry does not need to be destructive. It is not only a belief system but also a method. Faith and the historical method have different means of determining truth and reality, which leads the Christian into intellectual dualism.¹⁰²

The relevance of the Bible is the entire social framework of antiquity, of which the Bible is but a portion. One must complement it with all available information coming from archeology, ethnography and other disciplines. The Bible cannot be used as a straitjacket to coerce the research designs of any excavation or historian's data. The OT must be judged on its own aims and intentions, not just by the ideals of modern historiographic research.¹⁰³

The design of the historian (Christian or otherwise) must respond to the proper nature of the data. Each historian must know that his interpretation is only one view of a reality that cannot be fully recovered. There certainly is a variation in the quality of these interpretations. An historian can simply recover some of the conditions of life in antiquity. Many Biblical histories have been unproductive because they have not had this interest. Rather, they have desired to prove and defend the historical and theological nature of the Bible, a goal that appeals to our religious sentiments. The true difference, however, between a secular historian and a Christian historian should be the Christian's quality of concern and sense of reverence for the subject at hand. A Christian who has faith and also studies history should be one who has been humbled by his lack of knowledge and ability to recapture the past. The Christian (as well as secular) historian must admit that there are historical quirks and "scandals" (that

¹⁰¹ Krentz, *Historical-Critical* 63.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 68.

¹⁰³ Halpern (*The First Historians*) contends that the writer of 1-2 Kings was a first-rate historian, as critical of his sources as was any of the classical historians. Like other texts coming from the ancient Near East, the OT must be taken as historiographic in nature, a document in which the Hebrew people were attempting to render account of themselves.

which escapes his powers of observation and understanding) that open up the possibility of supernatural causation. No Christian can ultimately ignore the challenges of the modern critical-historical method any more than Augustine could avoid meeting the arguments of the classical pagan world.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ I would like to thank F. Roberts and B. Morley for their helpful comments. Any mistakes are my own responsibility.