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INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

> As for the events of King David's reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer. (1 Chron. 29:29)
>
> The Levites . . . instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. (Neh. 8:7–8)
>
> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man [or woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

A fabulously rich world of discovery awaits the readers of the OT's historical narratives. It is here that many of the Bible's most famous characters reside: Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Samuel, David, Esther. It is here that many of the Bible's most famous events are found: the arrival in the "Promised Land," the sun standing still, Samson killing the Philistines or David killing Goliath. It is here that God's gracious promises to His people are given, affirmed, and reaffirmed: God's covenant with Abraham, His promises to David, His faithfulness to His loyal remnants in Israel.

Readers with historical interests will naturally gravitate to the OT historical narratives for information about life in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East. Readers who delight in well-told tales will also enjoy these historical narratives, since they are richly endowed with complex and appealing literary characteristics.

This book is an invitation to *read* the OT historical narratives. It is intended to kindle an interest in the OT's historical books for those who have never read them seriously and to serve as a guide to their contents and messages. It also is intended to serve as a teacher of a method of reading and studying. As the contents and messages of the individual books are elucidated in the following chapters, the hope is that readers with little experience in close and careful reading of the Bible will learn to pay equal attention to microscopic details and macroscopic structures. It is in the details, as well as in the large-scale sweeps, that we learn about the messages of the biblical books and, ultimately, about God.

This book is most emphatically *not* intended to serve as a substitute for reading the historical narrative books themselves. If readers of this book believe that it will neatly summarize for them the biblical books so that they won't have to read for themselves—with a sort of "Masterplots" or "Cliffs Notes" mentality—they will be disappointed and will have cheated themselves. This book pales into nothingness alongside the grandeur and importance of the biblical books under consideration. *They* are the proper focus of study. The present book merely intends to whet the appetite for, and point the way into, the biblical books.

The biblical quotations at the beginning of this chapter point to the importance of reading, writing, and interpreting. The OT's historical books came together in many and various ways, and they stand ready for our serious scrutiny—our serious reading—as history and literature of the utmost importance. They stand ready to be read, ultimately, as life-giving and sacred *Scriptures*.

This chapter introduces the literary and historical genre of "historical narrative." It begins at the most general level, considering it as prose, then moves on to consider it first as history and then as literature.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AS PROSE: CONTRAST WITH POETRY

Definitions

A glance at any page of Psalms or Proverbs, followed by a perusal of almost any page in any of the historical books, will immediately reveal some differences in form: most modern English Bibles print Psalms and Proverbs as poetry, with relatively short, parallel lines whose text leaves wide margins; the historical books are printed as prose narratives, with full paragraphs whose text extends from margin to margin.

What is prose? In its broadest sense, it is any expression that is not poetry, which is defined as having a regular rhythmic pattern.[1] Historical narrative is a type of literature written in prose, not poetry. Not all writings in prose are historical narrative, but all historical narratives are in prose form.[2]

Among prose forms the distinctive of historical narrative is that it attempts to give an account of past events.[3] In its broadest sense, historical narrative may have any number of purposes,[4] but in the Bible, it tells its story for the purposes of edification and instruction (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

A more careful perusal of the historical books will reveal that they are not composed entirely of historical narrative written in prose form. One finds many other literary types embedded in them, such as poems, lists of various kinds—genealogies, census lists, materials lists, and so forth—proverbs, songs, and many others. Yet, the overall structure

1. C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, s.v. "Prose"; Northrop Frye, "Verse and Prose," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 885; M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, s.v. "Prose."

2. The presence of poetic "narratives," such as found in some "historical psalms"—Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136—does not obviate this conclusion. The historical psalms, while telling a story of God's involvement in the past, nevertheless do so within a poetic—not a prose—framework.

3. In the field of literary study, it is one of four types of composition that are generally distinguished: argumentation, description, and exposition are the others. See Holman, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v. "Narration."

4. Holman, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v. "Narration"; Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, s.v. "Narrative."

found in the historical books reveals their intent to be *historical narratives*, that is, accounts of past events with the purpose of edification and instruction.[5] A helpful way to begin a study of historical narrative is to study it as prose in contrast to poetry. This can be done both in terms of form and of content.

Form

Many formal features help us distinguish between poetry and prose.

Line length. Fundamental to poetry is a constriction of the length of the lines: they cannot be infinitely long, nor, in most poetry, can the line length vary radically from line to line. That is the most basic distinction between prose and poetry. Many theorists speak of the presence or absence of meter, although that is not as prominent in Hebrew poetry as it is in poetry of other languages.

In Hebrew poetry, the average line length is three to four words, each having one beat (in a metrical system), consisting of eight to nine syllables. Thus, Psalm 1:1 reads as follows (author's translation):

> Happy (is) the-man who
> does-not-walk in-the-counsel of-wicked-ones,
> and-in-the-way of-sinners does-not-stand,
> and-in-the-seat of-scoffers does-not-sit.

The units connected by the dashes represent one metrical unit in Hebrew (in most cases, one word); thus, each line after the introductory phrase consists of three metrical units. The syllable count for these three lines in the MT is 9, 10, 9.[6]

Contrast this with the following verse from a prose text:

> At once the royal secretaries were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in

5. See also John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 25.

6. A reconstruction of the language as it was probably pronounced during the time when the text was written yields a count of 8, 9, 9.

> the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language. (Est. 8:9)

This verse—the longest in the Bible—is one long, extended sentence in Hebrew, which has been broken up in the NIV into three English sentences. The immediate point here is that the length of the sense units are in no way restricted in this prose passage.

Parallelism of members. A second feature of poetry—one that has long been considered the defining characteristic of Hebrew poetry—is called "parallelism of members" (i.e., equivalencies of parallel words, thoughts, or sense units). This can be seen easily in Psalm 1:1, where the second, third, and fourth lines of the verse all have a verb of bodily motion (walking, standing, sitting), a prepositional phrase with "in," and a word for God's enemies (wicked ones, sinners, scoffers). By contrast, the prose passage in Esther 8:9 has nothing like this.

To be sure, Hebrew prose often is characterized by repetition, such as we see in Joshua 3:6: "And Joshua said unto the priests, 'Lift up the ark of the covenant and pass before the people.' So they lifted up the ark of the covenant and walked before the people."[7] However, in such cases—which are legion in the OT historical books—repetition is not parallelism; it is usually exact repetition of words, not the parallels of near-synonyms found in poetry. Furthermore, none of the other features of poetry is found in such prose narrative texts.

Literary devices. A third feature of Hebrew poetry is that it tends to use more literary devices than does prose. Poetry makes frequent use of such devices as alphabetic acrostics, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, paranomasia, chiasms, and more.[8]

Psalm 1:1 features alliteration/assonance in the first three words: *'ašhrê ha'îš 'ăšher*. We also see a chiastic arrangement in the parallel elements in the second through fourth lines:

A – B – C
B' – C' – A'
B" – C" – A"

7. Author's translation, rendered in a rather wooden fashion to bring out the repetitions between the halves of the verse better; NIV's translation obscures these exact repetitions.

8. For catalogues and explanations of poetic devices, see C. H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, 31–38.

Again, no such patterns are discernible in the prose text of Esther 8:9. Hebrew prose does make rich use of literary and rhetorical devices, but they are of different types, and they are not usually packed as "densely" into prose narratives as they are into poetic texts.

Content

Selectivity. Because of the constrictions associated with short line lengths, poets tend to be more highly selective with their words than writers of prose narratives. A glance at two parallel passages, Exodus 14 and 15, confirms this. Exodus 14 is the prose account of the Israelites' coming to and crossing the Red Sea, whereas Exodus 15 contains a hymnic reflection on the same events. Exodus 14 goes to some lengths to emphasize the fact that the Israelites crossed on dry ground (see vv. 16, 21, 22, 29). However, upon close inspection, we find that dry ground is never once mentioned in the poetic text that tells of this event. The poem in 15:1–18 is much more selective in its details—it is almost "impressionistic" in terms of the way it retells the story. The reason for this, of course, is that the poem is not concerned at all to give a coherent account of how Israel crossed the Red Sea; the details of the story are only incidental to the purpose of the poetic text, which is to glorify God for His great deliverance.[9]

Figurative language. As a generalization, figurative language finds a home more readily in poetic expression than in prose. Poetry—in any language—is more often the conveyor of deep emotions, and it breaks more easily into figurative expression. Compare the following two texts that describe situations of great distress:

> David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. (2 Sam. 12:16)

> Save me, O God,
> for the waters have come up to my neck.
> I sink in the miry depths,
> where there is no foothold.

9. We will make the point below that narrative texts also are selective. However, when the two are compared, especially in parallel passages such as Exodus 14 and 15, or Judges 4 and 5, the point made here holds: poetry is more selective than prose.

> I have come into deep waters;
> the floods engulf me.
>
> Psalm 69:1–2 [MT 2–3]

The prose passage is straightforward, telling of David's activity of mourning. The poetic text is emotive and impressionistic, conveying the psalmist's great emotion. However, we do not literally imagine the psalmist standing—or worse, treading water!—in floodwaters up to his neck, pen and parchment in hand, composing this psalm. Because of the nature of poetry, we instinctively understand the language in the psalm to be figurative.

The stage. The stage on which events unfold in prose is usually limited to earthly events on an earthly stage.[10] Poetry reaches into the heavenlies more often. Compare the following two texts:

> On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the Canaanite king, until they destroyed him. (Judg. 4:23–24)

> O Lord, when you went out from Seir,
> when you marched from the land of Edom,
> the earth shook, the heavens poured,
> the clouds poured down water.
> The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai,
> before the Lord, the God of Israel. . . .
> From the heavens the stars fought,
> from their courses they fought against Sisera.
>
> Judges 5:4–5, 20

The prose text is more "prosaic," i.e., more straightforward, and it tells of the Israelites' victory in a matter-of-fact manner. The poetic text reflects upon that victory and speaks of God's involvement from the heavenly perspective.

10. A major exception is the prologue to Job (chaps. 1–2), which tells of God's and Satan's conversations about Job.

Time frame. Prose narrative is usually written from a past time perspective. Indeed, as we have noted, that is its nature: it attempts to give an account of the past for the purposes of instruction. Poetry is not so limited. It ranges from past to present to future time frames. In the books of the prophets, for example, the large majority of prophetic texts that tell of God's future intentions and activities are written in poetic, not prose, form.

Conclusion

Poetry differs from prose narrative in both form and content.[11] That does not mean that poetry and prose cannot be found together, however. A number of major poems are found in the historical books: in Judges 5; 1 Samuel 2; 2 Samuel 1; 2 Samuel 22; 2 Samuel 23; 2 Kings 19; and 1 Chronicles 16. Norman Gottwald has observed that only seven OT books contain no poetry: Leviticus, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, and Malachi.[12] Conversely, only nine OT books contain no prose: Psalms,[13] Proverbs, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Thus, at least twenty-three OT books combine the two. Actually, one-half to two-thirds of the OT is prose, but not all prose is historical narrative. (For example, outside the historical books, we find large bodies of laws that are prose.) Nevertheless, the historical narrative component of the OT is a large and important part of that portion of Scripture.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AS HISTORY

The term *history* has at least three general uses in English. First, it can refer to the "facts," i.e., the events, the happenings of history. Second, it can refer to the *record* or *account* of the facts. Third, it can refer to the *study* of the facts or, more precisely, the study of the accounts of the facts. In the discussion below, we will consider all three categories, but we will focus primarily on the second category (the record of the

11. We could also attempt to distinguish the two in terms of purpose—i.e., prose narrative intends to inform as part of its task, whereas, say, hymns intend to praise and glorify God—but this is a more difficult endeavor, since, ultimately, all Scripture intends to instruct us (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

12. Norman Gottwald, "Poetry, Hebrew," *IDB* 3, 829.

13. But we do find brief prose snippets in the historical titles to fourteen psalms (e.g., at Psalms 3, 18, or 51).

facts), and we will consider how the Bible's historical books fit into general discussions of "history" in this sense.

Definitions

Historians have offered many and various definitions of history as they have reflected upon the historian's task. Indeed, many do not even attempt a definition, or do so with only minimal precision or clarity.[14] Following are four representative definitions that define the second meaning of history:

> [History is] the science which first investigates and then records, in their causal relations and development, such past human activities as are (a) definite in time and space, (b) social in nature, and (c) socially significant.[15]

> [History is] the story of experiences of men living in civilized societies.[16]

> History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of the past.[17]

> History is the undertaking of rendering an account of a particular, significant, and coherent sequence of past human events.[18]

Almost every definition here speaks of history as a societal endeavor —one that records (mainly or only) those events that are *socially*

14. M. Eisenberg cheerfully acknowledges this fact, and he refuses to define it himself, noting the many conflicting definitions in the process. See his section entitled "A Nondefinition," in Michael T. Eisenberg, *Puzzles of the Past: An Introduction to Thinking about History*, 3–5.

15. Gilbert J. Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method* (New York: Fordham Univ., 1946), 10. Garraghan exegetes this definition on pp. 7–10.

16. Gustaaf Johannes Renier, *History: Its Purpose and Method* (1950; Macon, Ga.: Mercer Univ., 1982), 38. He unpacks this definition on pp. 33–39.

17. Johan Huizinga, "A Definition of the Concept of History," in R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton, eds., *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1936), 1–10 (quote from p. 9). The citation here of this oft-quoted definition comes from K. L. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 26.

18. Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History*, 6.

significant. In this sense not every event that ever occurred anywhere belongs in a "history" (even though they certainly did happen). A "history" records events that are significant to the author and to the group for or about which he or she is writing.

The fourth definition limits the genre significantly as well, since *any* account of the past is not "history" (such as an accounts book or a list). Rather, only that account is "history" that attempts to impose some coherence on the past. This limitation, though not expressed in the same way, is assumed in the first three definitions as well.

An important element in understanding "history" in the sense here is its *intent*. Written histories intend to be accurate, true accounts of the past, as well as coherent ones. As Baruch Halpern states, "Histories purport to be true, or probable, representations of events and relationships in the past."[19] Meir Sternberg makes the point even more strongly. In distinguishing between history and fiction, he argues that the truth claims of the two are different.[20] Both indeed have truth "value," but only history "claims" to be historically accurate. This does not mean that, if a single historical error is found in a work, it is then automatically relegated to "fiction" as a literary category. Many historians are proven wrong in one or more of their facts, but their works are still "histories." Rather, it means that we must treat histories on their own terms, in terms of what they claim to do, what their intent is.

At the same time, histories are selective: "Historiography cannot—and should not—be infinitely detailed. All history is at best an abridgement—better or worse—of an originally fuller reality. . . . History is always the study of one thing, or several things, and the exclusion of many others."[21]

History as "The Facts"

The first use of "history" refers to the events, the happenings of history. This is "what people have done and suffered," i.e., the "historical process"[22] or "past actuality."[23]

19. Ibid., 6–8; the quote is from p. 6.

20. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 24–26.

21. Halpern, *The First Historians*, 7.

22. David W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View*, 1.

23. Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method*, 3.

We should remember several things about such happenings of history. First, events are always out of reach, except at the moment of occurrence. Our access to such events is through records or accounts of them. Second, evidence for such events is always limited, i.e., it is not unlimited. Absence of evidence does not prove that the event did not happen; it merely means that no record or evidence of the event is available at hand. Third, such evidence as does exist must be interpreted in order to understand it.

History as the Record of the Facts

The second use of "history" refers to the writing of history, or "historiography."[24] This is sometimes called by the Greek term *historia*, which has to do with inquiry; its original use simply meant "inquiry, investigation, research," but it later came to refer to the record or narration of the results of such an inquiry.[25] Herodotus, who is called "the father of history" by the Roman statesman Cicero (and modern historians would agree), introduced his own work by this term: as an "inquiry" (*historia*).

That history writing is a record or representation of the events, not the events themselves, can be illustrated by a picture of an apple. Regardless of how realistically a picture presents the apple, it is not an apple; it cannot be eaten. Rather, it is a representation of an apple. So it is with historical events and history writing. What we study are the records of the events. In speaking of this type of history, we should remember that *any* record of the past is not "history." Checkbooks contain records of the past, but they are not the consciously written, coherent accounts of past, societally significant events.

We have evidence that several biblical writers wrote with a degree of historical self-consciousness. In the NT, we see this in the cases of the gospels of Luke (and the book of Acts) and John. Luke stated that

24. "Historiography" can also refer to the third use of the term *history* (the study of the records of the facts) and thus some confusion occasionally exists. Here, we will primarily use the term to refer to the record of the facts (i.e., to the history writing itself).

25. Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method*, 3. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (s.v. *historia*) defines it as "inquiry" and a "written account of one's inquiries, narrative, history."

> many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4)

John acknowledged that his own record of Jesus' life was incomplete:

> Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

> Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:25)

In the OT, the numerous references in the books of Kings and Chronicles to extrabiblical sources used by the authors to compose their works attest to this. Those were sources to which the public had some sort of access, since the writers asked a rhetorical question such as, "And the deeds of [king's name], are they not written in the Books of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel?"[26] In the book of Ezra, numerous official letters and decrees are recorded in the language in which they were written (Aramaic), presumably verbatim.

Much history writing is separated by "a great gulf fixed"[27] from the people about whom it is concerned because of the historical distance between the historian and the events he writes about. That is certainly true with much of the OT's historical materials. The presumption is often that such materials will necessarily be less accurate than those produced close to the time of the events they describe. Because of this, many evangelicals have been concerned to narrow the gap between their

26. See chapters 6 and 8 on these sources in 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles.

27. Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 2.

estimates of the dates of the events in particular books and the date of composition of those books.[28]

However, we should note that historical distance between events and writing does not, in and of itself, necessitate the conclusion that the writing will be less than accurate. On the one hand, records or traditions could easily have preserved earlier events for access in later times. On the other hand, the divine author of Scripture could have directly revealed to the human authors the necessary information—otherwise unknown and unrecorded—for certain portions of their works. Many who affirm Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch have little problem with the historical distance between Moses and all the events in Genesis. By the same reasoning, there is no *necessary* compulsion to argue for early authorship of the (anonymous) works found in the historical corpus.

MODERN HISTORICAL STUDY OF BIBLICAL HISTORY

Rationales for Historical Study

Apologia. Strictly speaking, the modern study of biblical history is not a concern in this book, for it is not a "history" of Israel. Rather, it is an introduction to the biblical books that record that history. The focus is upon the books themselves, not upon the history (i.e., the events or happenings) behind the books. However, we devote a section here to studying the way modern historians approach biblical history for several reasons:

1. Many books called "histories" of Israel are written today, and we should be aware of how they do this and what their aims are.

2. The "historicity" of the Bible, as far as it can be ascertained by modern historians, is an important concern.

3. To some degree, understanding the way modern historians approach their task can give some insight into the way the biblical writers—especially writers of the historical narratives—executed their task. The discussions below attempt to keep separate a consideration of the work of modern historians and that of the biblical writers.

28. See, e.g., C. F. Keil, *The Book of Joshua*, 15–19; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 671–73.

Modern historical study of the Bible. Many modern scholars consider themselves "biblical historians," or historians of Israel's history. For them, the events of Israel's history are indeed their focus. Representative works by nonevangelical scholars include the following: Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*; John Bright, *A History of Israel*; John Hayes and Maxwell Miller, *Israelite and Judaean History*; Miller and Hayes, *A History of Israel and Judah*; and Alberto Soggin, *A History of Ancient Israel*. Evangelical histories include Leon Wood's *Survey of Israel's History* and Eugene Merrill's *Kingdom of Priests*. All these works, to a greater or lesser degree, use the Bible as one source among several by which to reconstruct Israel's history. Some works (such as Gösta Ahlström's *History of Ancient Palestine*) view reconstructing Israel's history as only one component of a much larger endeavor—that of understanding the history of Palestine or the ancient Near East in a comprehensive way. In none of these is the Bible itself—in the last analysis—the focus of study; the focus is the events of Israel's history.

That is an entirely legitimate pursuit for at least two reasons. First, humans have a natural curiosity to pursue knowledge in all fields, and this is one legitimate field. The history of Israel is as legitimate a focus of study as the history of Imperial Rome or Victorian England. Second, since the study of Israel's history does indeed bring us much closer to the Scriptures than does the study of, say, Victorian England, it is legitimate to study Israel's history in order to arrive at conclusions concerning the Bible's reliability. More often than not, the study of Israel's history from this perspective points to the reliability of the Bible's accounts. Though we must admit that, in many cases, it does not do this, we must also acknowledge that the historical method does not deal with absolute certainties, only with probabilities (see below).

Many scholars would add a third reason for the study of Israel's history: namely, that it is essential to understanding the Bible itself. That is, without knowledge of extrabiblical materials that illuminate Israel's history, we cannot fully—or, in some cases, at all—understand many texts in Scripture. A certain modern arrogance sometimes creeps in here, however. It can be seen in approaches that would claim, for instance, that the writer of Genesis intentionally wrote his work against the backdrop of such extrabiblical works as the *Gilgamesh Epic* (which tells of a great flood, in many ways reminiscent of Noah's flood) or the various ancient creation epics. This would suggest that the secrets to Genesis

lay unavailable to students of the Bible for centuries, only to be revealed in the modern day, when these epics were discovered.

Certainly extrabiblical discoveries have shed light on biblical texts and concepts. However, it is one thing to say this and another to say that they have uncovered secrets in the Bible previously unknown. What more properly should be said is that extrabiblical discoveries may highlight in bolder relief truths, assumptions, or patterns that already reside in the biblical texts. An example of this would be the modern discovery that portions of biblical covenants—mainly in the Pentateuch—resemble the structures of Hittite covenant treaties of the late second millennium B.C.[29] The study of biblical covenants far antedated this modern discovery, and the relationships described within the biblical covenants already were known (i.e., covenants between equals, covenants between overlords and vassals). However, the Hittite discoveries have helped to highlight aspects of biblical covenants already present in the biblical texts.

These discoveries have also served the purpose of shedding light on matters of the Bible's reliability. That the Hittite treaties date to the late second millennium B.C. and the Pentateuchal covenants resemble them so closely suggests that the Pentateuch was written during the same time period. It would be one piece of evidence pointing to—though certainly not by itself proving—Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. However, knowledge of these covenants is not essential to understanding the *meaning* of the Pentateuch.

The Importance of Historicity

The modern focus on the events, or happenings, of history is important in the Bible's case because the Bible makes numerous claims—explicitly and implicitly—concerning the factuality of the events it records. At the most fundamental level, at the central core of Christian beliefs, is the fact that Christ did indeed die for the sins of humanity and then rose from the grave in a great victory over death. This forms the ground and basis of our faith. Paul makes that point forcefully in 1 Corinthians 15 as he discusses the resurrection (see esp. vv. 12–19).

29. See George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," 50–76; Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*; John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context*, 95–109.

Beyond this, in portions such as the Gospels and the historical books, most of what is recorded purports to be true.[30] That is illustrated by the explicit claims from Luke and John (noted above), as well as the way in which the authors of Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah used their sources. It is also illustrated by the implicit claims of the historical materials in the Bible: they present themselves as historical, and they are treated as historical elsewhere in the Scriptures.

If, in the last analysis, God is the "author" of Scripture, then He who knows all things would have "written" an accurate record of those things. Thus, what the Scriptures claim to be true is indeed true.[31] We can often discover information that will confirm to us this reliability through the study of the events of history. Our trust in the Bible's reliability can be supported via this type of study.

The Bible's message is given, to a large extent, through historical writings, and not, say, abstract philosophical treatises. It is through historical writings about historical events that we learn much about God and His purposes for humans. As noted, the intent of these historical writings is to provide an accurate account of the history of God's people, and their message is undermined if their historical accuracy is compromised. Citing Will Herberg, Walter Kaiser makes this point well:

> Will Herberg says that Biblical faith is also historical, not because it *has* history, or deals *with* historical events (there's nothing particularly novel in that), but it is historical in a much more profound sense because *it is itself* history. The message that Biblical faith proclaims, the judgments it pronounces, the salvation it promises, the teaching it communicates; these are all defined historically and are understood as historical realities. This does not make it offensive to us, since it helps to humanize it, to bring it down to our level where we can understand it and where we can (as we say today) "identify" with it. To de-historicize history or to de-historicize Biblical faith is like trying to paraphrase poetry. You ruin it. You just take all that is good and meaningful out of it. It is no longer poetry.[32]

30. Exceptions include such literary forms as Jesus' parables or Jotham's fable (Judges 9).

31. See Gordon Wenham, "History and the Old Testament," 13–75, esp. pp. 22–34; V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, chap. 3: "History and Truth: Is Historicity Important?"; and several essays in James K. Hoffmeier, ed., *Faith, Tradition, and History.*

32. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching*, 73.

The questions of whether the Bible accurately records the events of history, on the one hand, and whether and how God revealed Himself directly through the events of history, on the other, are two separate questions. We have just argued that the answer to the first question is that the Bible does indeed accurately record the events it portrays.

The answer to the second question is that God did reveal Himself directly through events of history but that this mode of revelation was somewhat limited, even to those living through or observing these events. The introduction of the book of Hebrews may provide an insight into this: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (1:1–2). This seems to suggest that God's modes of revelation were not limited only to writings. However, it also suggests that the prophets and God's Son were necessary mediators of nonwritten revelatory modes. (The NIV's rendering ["*through* the prophets" and "*by* his Son"] somewhat obscures the parallels between the revelation via the prophets and God's Son, since the prepositions in both cases are the same: *en* ["by, through"].)

Many have argued that God's revelation was *primarily* through historical events.[33] However, this overstates the case, and it does not properly account for the need for interpretation of such events (not to mention its deemphasis of the Bible's claims to be the Word of God). God's revelation in historical events may be compared to His revelation in nature: both communicate something of God, but both are incomplete without written revelation. When Psalm 19:1 states, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands," we understand that these natural elements reveal something about God to us. In an analogous way, historical events also can reveal something about God. However, in both cases, the revelatory information is limited.

With reference to historical events, we can take an example such as Exodus 19, where the thunder and lightning, as well as the earth's shaking and the thick cloud that the people experienced at the foot of Mount Sinai, were clearly a communication of God's presence and power. However, these events needed to be interpreted by Moses to the people in order for them to have any clear comprehension of this revelation. Or,

33. A classic statement of this position is G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital.*

to take another example, the stopping up of the waters of the Jordan River in Joshua 3 was also an example of God's "speaking" through a historical event. However, it was interpreted by Joshua to the people so that its meaning was very clear, and they were to interpret it to their children in years to come (Joshua 4).

The Scriptures that record and interpret the God-directed events are not merely *testimonies* to God's revelatory activities. They themselves are revelation. When Paul states that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), he uses the words *pasa graphe* ("all that is written [is God-breathed]"). He is stating that the written words themselves are God's revelation, not merely witnesses to some "true" (or "truer") revelation in the events of history. This is contrary to the assertions of many (e.g., G. Ernest Wright), who assert that the "Word of God" is present in Scripture but that the Scripture itself is not the "Word."

We must emphasize here that, even given that God's workings in history were revelatory in some limited way, we today only have access to these workings through the mediation of the written Scriptures.[34] This was true even in biblical times among those who experienced them firsthand: even then, these events were always interpreted. How much more is this true today. We only know of most of the events in Scripture through the Scriptures themselves. Even when we can gain independent knowledge of them, the vehicles of that knowledge are not "God-breathed"; only the Scriptures that interpret these events are God's revelation to us. Thus, the Scriptures themselves are the proper focus of our study, not the hypothetical re-creations of the events behind these Scriptures. The events themselves were never sufficient—in any time—to communicate God's revelation fully, and today they are accessible only through the written interpretations, the Scriptures.

34. This latter point is the thrust of John Sailhamer's important essay, "Exegesis of the Old Testament as a Text," 279–96, and his comments in *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 1522. He states that "given the theological priority of an inspired text (2Ti 3:16), one must see in the text of Scripture itself the locus of God's revelation today. Thus, on the question of God's revelation in history, the sense of *history* in a text-oriented approach would be that of the record of past events. . . . Even the formula 'revelation in history' then concerns the meaning of a text" (*The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 17). However, he acknowledges the theoretical possibility of nonwritten modes of revelation in the past when he says, "There is no reason to discount the fact that God has made known his will *in other ways at other times*" (*The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 17; italics added).

Modern Historians of Biblical History and the Problem of Evidence

The fact that modern historians may have very little to work with involves the problem of evidence.[35] As we have noted with reference to the events of biblical history, the past is always mediated to us.[36] We cannot recover or repeat it in the same way mathematicians can recalculate an equation or scientists can rerun an experiment. It is mediated to us via the evidence. Often the evidence is spotty, and there are large gaps in our knowledge of the past.[37]

In reconstructing Israel's history (using the Bible along with nonbiblical sources, both written and nonwritten), the evidence must be evaluated. Mute evidence, recovered via archaeological methods, must be interpreted and evaluated. So too with written records: they can be so tendentious as to be useless, or they may even be forgeries. For example, almost no historian uses the apocryphal *Additions to Esther* (which were written much later than the events in Esther and which have different purposes from the canonical book) to reconstruct history in Esther's day or employ the *Psalms of Joshua* (which come from the late intertestamental period) to reconstruct history in Joshua's day.

Because of this, the attitude of "inquiry" in reconstructing history is important.[38] A curiosity for sources and facts, and for explicating these, is essential for a modern historian. The great historians—especially the outstanding ones in early periods, or in periods when the prevailing mood of their day was not conducive to such inquiry—are almost universally praised for having had an insatiable curiosity (e.g., Herodotus and Thucydides among the Greeks, or Augustine and Eusebius among the early Christians), despite whatever flaws modern historians might otherwise point out in their methods.

35. Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 3–5.

36. This point is known by all historians. See, e.g., Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method*, 4–5; Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Random House, 1961), 24.

37. Carr (*What Is History?* 12) states, "History has been called an enormous jig-saw with a lot of missing parts."

38. Whether the extreme skepticism evidenced by many historians is altogether healthy is another question, one whose answer is usually no. (See further below.)

In the last analysis, modern historians deal with probabilities, not absolute certainties. They must of necessity rely on sources and assume that these possess a certain reliability. Otherwise, they must sift and sort and come to their own conclusions nevertheless.

This dependence upon probabilities is important, since history cannot be repeated and even its patterns are not capable of repetition. Indeed, the historian is interested precisely in unique events, not just repetitive patterns. R. J. Shafer notes that "both historians and social scientists are interested in regularities, tendencies, or repetitive elements in social behavior, but the former are also concerned with the unique event and person for their own sakes, and the latter are more uniformly dedicated to identifying 'laws' of human conduct."[39]

Because historians do deal with the unique so often, the extreme skepticism about the possibility of any historical knowledge that has been found among so many historians should be tempered somewhat.[40] Paul Schubert, a Yale historian, notes that early in the twentieth century W. Dilthey insisted that, despite the limitations on knowledge, "one thing is still possible and necessary: true and adequate understanding of past history."[41]

Modern Historians of Biblical History and the Problem of the Historian

In modern historical study, the problems are not only of historical distance (chronologically) between events and the writing about them, nor of spotty or suspect evidence. Another problem is the modern historian him- or herself[42] because all history writing is of necessity "perspectival," even "subjective," in the sense that it owes its shape to its author's activity in selecting and communicating material. There is the inevitable picking and choosing among sources of information and a selectivity in what is reported.

That is true even when there is no historical distance between the historian and the events or people he or she is writing about or when

39. R. J. Shafer, *A Guide to Historical Method*, 5.

40. In biblical studies, scholars such as Alberto Soggin, John Van Seters, Thomas Thompson, Keith Whitelam, Robert Coote, to name but a few, display such a skepticism, at least for some—if not almost all—periods in Israel's history.

41. Paul Schubert, "The Twentieth-Century West and the Ancient Near East," 320.

42. Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 5–8; Shafer, *A Guide to Historical Method*, 4, 12.

the source material is abundant. That is certainly true today. Each of the recent presidents of the U.S. has his own presidential library, with millions of documents. Yet, those who write about Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter, for example, are inevitably selective as to what they will write, and they will inevitably take a certain slant.

Historians in the past two or three centuries have been proud to speak of history as a "science" (especially in the last century). There are established rules of evidence, research, documentation, and so on.[43] However, all historians are products of their own time and inclinations, and to pretend otherwise is merely to deny or hide one's "biases." As David Bebbington states, "Value-neutrality is impossible. The unconscious assumptions of the historian's own age are inescapable. The historian himself is part of the historical process, powerfully influenced by his time and place."[44] This is not necessarily bad, however:

> If a historian's personal attitudes do not necessarily harm his history, it is equally true that they can enhance it. Great history is commonly a consequence of a historian's pursuit of evidence to vindicate his previously formed beliefs. [Edmund] Gibbon, for instance, wrote his masterpiece, [*History of*] *The Decline and Fall* [*of the Roman Empire* (1776–88)], because he conceived himself to be a champion of civilization and rationalism who could point out that Rome succumbed to "the triumph of barbarism and religion." A pure love of scholarship is rare. Deeply held convictions are needed to drive people to major historical achievements.[45]

The modern historian should at least attempt to understand the values in the period under study, not just his or her own values. Ferdinand Lot, a French historian at the turn of the twentieth century, made a similar point. When one writes a synthesis of history, Lot stressed that

> qualities other than the erudite skills come into play. There must be sympathy with the subjects under study, for without it there can be no

43. Two works that introduce the historical method in biblical studies are Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, and J. Maxwell Miller, *The Old Testament and the Historian*.

44. Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 6.

45. Ibid., 7.

> imaginative insight into the past. Ideally, a historian must display capacities akin to those of a poet or an artist.
>
> Such a quality was, by and large, lacking in the work of the historians of the Enlightenment, who had been unable to achieve imaginative insight into civilizations very different from their own. The greatest shortcoming of Gibbon was his temperamental inability to appreciate religion.[46]

The modern writer's purpose in writing a history, then, is important, and it is usually inseparable from his or her own background, experience, philosophies, and so on. The purpose may be reportorial, proclamative, didactic, nationalistic, hortatory, or polemical. Thus, in evaluating such modern histories of Israel as were mentioned above (see "Modern Historical Study of Biblical History" under the subhead "Rationales for Historical Study"), the writers' purposes and presuppositions must be evaluated as well. Their inclinations to believe or disbelieve the Scriptural accounts vary, and these inclinations must be understood by the reader.

We may apply this same insight into our evaluation of biblical writers. That is, our evaluations of them must include a sensitivity to their own purposes as expressed in their works and to their own biographies and experiences, insofar as these may be identified as essential parts of their works' purposes. Thus, in the chapters that follow, close attention will be paid to listening to these works on their own terms—their own stated (or visible) purposes, methods, and emphases.[47]

Historie and Geshichte

The German terms *Historie* and *Geschichte*[48] are sometimes encountered in discussions of biblical history, and a distinction is made

46. Fryde et al., "The Study of History," 634.

47. See also in this regard, Halpern, *The First Historians*, 6–13; Sailhamer, "Exegesis of the Old Testament as a Text," 279–96; and the remarks below on "Implied Reader."

48. For brief introductions to these concepts, see R. T. France, "The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus," 103; Alan Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane*, 154–56; also Will Herberg, in his *Faith Enacted as History*, 133–34. In more detail, see W. L. Craig, "The Nature of History," 139–47 (dealing with NT scholars' development of the terms). Martin Kahler introduced the distinctions in biblical studies: Kahler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus*, 63.

between the two. *Historie* is said to be "a bare account of what actually happened."[49] It is concerned with past facticity, with what is public and verifiable according to the canons of modern historical study. *Geschichte* is "an account of past events in terms of their contemporary significance."[50] It goes beyond or ignores (even denies) the element of facticity. In the case of the OT, it deals with what Israel *believed* happened, not what actually may have happened.

Bound up with this is the notion introduced by von Ranke of history *"wie es eigentlich gewesen"* (popularly understood as "as it actually was," i.e., some sort of "objective" knowledge of the past). This is related to the notion discussed above of the possibility of "objective" or nonperspectival history. However, von Ranke's phrase has been mistranslated: *eigentlich* should be understood as "essentially," referring to the "essence" of what is historical, as penetrated by the mind of the historian.[51]

Alan Richardson helpfully points out that *Historie* ("the merely historical," or "mere facts") cannot stand on its own. As noted, there is no abstract, "objective," or uninterpreted history. "In the last resort . . . , nothing can be *historisch* without being in some way *geschichtlich*; no 'facts' can be 'mere facts', and every 'fact' that can be discovered is worth discovering because all history is somehow significant."[52] Seen in this light, then, the radical distinction often made between the two in biblical studies, and the disparagement of *Geschichte* that often comes with it, is not well taken. And, as already noted, the absence of evidence for an event—or the impossibility of repeating it—does not prove that it did not occur.

Historical Method: The Study of the Facts

The sources for history writing: written sources. Written materials usually form the most important source for historians as they construct

49. France, "The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus," 103.

50. Ibid. However, Gilbert Garraghan (*A Guide to Historical Method*, 3) points out that, etymologically, *Geschichte* comes from *geschehen* ("to happen") and that it originally meant "'things that have happened': history as past actuality." Thus, etymologically, at least, this distinction is not valid.

51. See Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 32–33 (esp. n. 35); Carr, *What Is History?* 5–7, 26; Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 107–8.

52. Alan Richardson, *History: Sacred and Profane*, 155; see also n. 1 there.

their histories. These come in two categories: (1) casual (or official) history, and (2) deliberative (or literary) history.

Casual history consists of the "raw material" of history, of the records produced at all levels of society, from the individual to the international. Today, this consists of many types of records: checkbooks; appointment calendars; business receipts; courthouse records of births, marriages, and deaths; governmental rules, regulations, and laws; international treaties; and so forth. They consist of information presented in statement form, impersonal, with minimal analysis (usually none).

In the ancient Near East, the raw materials include gravestone inscriptions, administrative and economic documents of the great empires, petty receipts, letters, and more. Modern biblical scholars use these alongside the Bible in attempting to reconstruct Israel's history.

We can also identify the raw materials of history writing in the Bible itself. These include songs, poems, genealogies, census lists, lists of clean and unclean animals, king lists, and many more. Often, the Bible's sources are named explicitly, such as "The Book of the Wars of the Lord" (Num. 21:14).[53]

Deliberative history represents true historiography: it is analytical, interpretive, written history. It is the product of selection by an author, with specific purposes in mind, creatively arranging the final product. (In the Bible's case, we would affirm that it is by inspiration, as well as by "creativity.") Deliberative history is built upon casual history. It uses the raw data as building blocks for its construct, which is the final written history.

In the Bible, we see much of this type of history writing. In the OT it includes most of the Pentateuch and all of the books covered in the present work. In the NT it certainly includes Luke-Acts, and also the other three gospels.

The sources for history writing: material remains. Material remains are the objects and artifacts left behind by people and societies. These represent mute evidence and usually come into play after written sources are analyzed. For modern historians of Israelite history, the material remains are recovered archaeologically. These have included pottery, building remains, bones and tomb remains, tools and weapons, and jewelry. Archaeology is becoming increasingly sophisticated, and

53. See chapters 6 and 8 for extended discussion of the many sources behind the books of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles.

now such things as pollen, teeth, and even feces are studied for information about ancient diets; on Egyptian mummies, DNA studies are carried out, and even "autopsies" performed.[54]

There is no clear evidence that the biblical historians engaged in study of material remains while writing their histories. The erection of memorial stones may, however, be an example of this (e.g., Gen. 31:45–53; Joshua 4).

The sources for history writing: tradition. Many things are passed down orally or as customs in a society. The former are such things as genealogies, nursery rhymes, place names, folk tales, and so on. The latter are the rituals and customs of a society.

In modern times, historians and anthropologists can study these firsthand in many societies. However, for societies such as ancient Israel, which are long-since dead, the only way to recover these is if they have been committed to writing at some point; if so, the materials in this category would be studied as the "casual" history mentioned above. One way around this problem is taken up by emerging sociological and anthropological approaches to studies of ancient societies, and these are increasingly common in biblical studies.[55] These include the assumption that traditions and customs are long-lived at the grassroots level, and thus, by studying modern-day peasant or nomadic life in the lands of the Bible, we can get a fairly good picture of what life was like in biblical times. There is some justification for this, but it must be done with caution.

In the Bible, tradition and customs undoubtedly were part of the biblical writers' building blocks. Many were written down (casual history) and many undoubtedly came to them as oral tradition, as customs, or even by direct revelation from God. Many etiologies, for example, could very well have been oral tradition passed down. However, today, we only have access to these via the final written compositions now existing as the Scriptures. (See chapter 3 for an explanation of etiology.)

54. See H. Darrell Lance, *The Old Testament and the Archaeologist.*

55. See Robert R. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament*; Norman K. Gottwald, ABD 6, s.v. "Sociology (Ancient Israel)."

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE AS LITERATURE

Historical Narrative as Story

As already mentioned, historical narrative attempts to give an account of past events, and it is selective in doing so. In this sense, it tells a *story*. It is literature. Here are two popular definitions of *story*:

> The telling of a happening or connected series of happenings, whether true or fictitious; account; narration.[56]

> Any account, written, oral or in the mind, true or imaginary, of actions in a time sequence.[57]

Note that the idea of "fiction" or "fictitiousness" or, more specifically, the idea that a story speaks of something that did not happen is *not* an integral part of either definition. Leland Ryken states that "taken as a whole, the Bible tells a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The Bible is above all a series of events, with interspersed passages that explain the meaning of those events."[58]

These definitions of *story* are close to Halpern's definition of *history*.[59] Both assume some coherence and some ordering. Indeed, both English words—"story" and "history"—come from Greek and Latin *historia*. However, "history" is more limited than "story" in that it does assume some correspondence with facts or events. "Story" *might* have such a connection; "history" *must* have such a connection (or at least that must be its intent).

Characteristics of Historical Narrative

We can characterize historical narrative in any number of ways. Tremper Longman identifies six "functions" of biblical literature in general—and these would all apply to historical narratives more narrowly: it is

56. *Webster's New World Dictionary*, s.v. "story" (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980).

57. Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, s.v. "Story."

58. Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 31.

59. "History is the undertaking of rendering an account of a particular, significant, and coherent sequence of past human events" (Halpern, *The First Historians*, 6).

historical, theological, doxological, didactic, aesthetic, entertainment.[60] Leland Ryken characterizes biblical literature with a long list: it "images" reality (preferring the concrete to the abstract); it is artistic, unified, experiential, interpretational, universal or comprehensive (i.e., it uses "master images" or "archetypes"); it is anthological, religious, revelatory, values-laden, realistic, romantic, response-evoking, and concise (selective).[61] Here we will highlight some of the most important of these.

Historical. A primary characteristic of historical narrative is its historical nature, i.e., its intent is to tell of past events. We have discussed this at some length already.

Artistic. Historical narrative is a work of art, with careful attention paid to how it is crafted. A writer not only asks, "*What* do I want to say?" but also, "*How* do I want to say it?" "What kind of artifact do I wish to make?"[62] The sections in the historical books that pay the most attention to the artistic forms of communication include the books of Ruth and Esther, as well as large portions of the stories about David and Elijah and Elisha.

The presence of artistic touches does not mean, of necessity, that a text is historically inaccurate. The assumption that literary artistry and historical accuracy are mutually exclusive has led Robert Alter, for example, to classify biblical narrative as "prose fiction."[63] Alter understands prose fiction as "a mode of writing we understand to be the arbitrary invention of the writer, whatever the correspondences such a work may exhibit with quotidian or even historical reality."[64] Despite his stated agnosticism with regard to the historical accuracy of this "prose fiction," Alter more often than not assumes that the events recounted did not occur as they are stated to have occurred. Furthermore, his assumption that this "prose fiction" is an "arbitrary

60. Tremper Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, 68–71.

61. This list is culled from Ryken's introductory essay in *The Literature of the Bible*, 13–30, and the introductory and first chapters of *Words of Delight*, esp. pp. 14–43. The latter work is a thorough revision and expansion of the former, but the former includes some items of value omitted in the latter.

62. Ryken, *Literature of the Bible*, 13.

63. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 23–26.

64. Ibid., 23.

invention" of a writer is unnecessarily pessimistic. His position at this point has been legitimately criticized by several scholars.[65]

Entertaining. Closely related to the artistic nature of historical narrative is its value as entertainment. The Bible's stories have captivated audiences for centuries, and they have entertained children and adults alike with their stories of heroism, love, treachery, deceit, miraculous intervention, and so on. Who reads the book of Ruth and does not come away with a deeply satisfied feeling? Or who reads the story of Ehud in Judges 3 and does not come away laughing (and perhaps somewhat revolted) at the characterizations of King Eglon?

Anthological. The Bible—including its historical narratives—is a vast, diversified collection of works from many different authors. As such, we encounter a wide range of styles, and a wide teaching. This last point is particularly important to remember. In general, almost no given text will contain the Bible's entire range of teaching on the topic it addresses. Scripture must be checked with Scripture. In the case of historical narrative especially, since its teaching is usually done indirectly, we must check the teachings of individual narratives with teachings elsewhere. Thus, the harsh measures taken in Ezra and Nehemiah against foreigners must be placed against the implicit teachings of Ruth, in which a foreigner is a central character, or Jonah, in which foreigners are called to repent. Furthermore, *implicit* teachings in narratives must be measured against explicit teachings in expository sections of Scripture. Ryken states that "the paradoxes of human life are held in tension in what can be called the most balanced book ever written."[66]

Selective. The Bible's historical narrative, like all literature and all history writing, is of necessity selective. That point was made in connection with history writing (p. 31). Furthermore, the Bible's selectivity is relatively sparse. In spite of the length of many of its narratives, these narratives have an economy of expression such that the smallest details become significant. Note in the next chapter, for example, the subtle interplay between Joshua's being called "Moses' aide" when he becomes Israel's leader (Josh. 1:1)—in contrast to Moses' being called "the servant of the Lord"—and Joshua's being called "the servant of the Lord" at the end of his ministry (Josh. 24:29). This makes a subtle

65. E.g., Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 23–35; V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (chap. 2, "History and Fiction: What Is History?").

66. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 29.

point about Joshua's having "grown into the job" that God had for him and his having achieved, in some measure at least, a stature as a "second Moses."

Unified. Despite its diversity and selectivity, the Bible possesses a remarkable degree of unity. It has a unity of purpose (to teach, rebuke, correct, and train us: 2 Tim. 3:16) and a unity of subject matter: God. Historical narratives are unified as well. Despite the complexities of the underlying sources of, say, Judges, 1 & 2 Chronicles, or Ezra-Nehemiah, each of these works speaks with a remarkable singleness of vision as it presents its message. And, when the historical books are brought together, they ultimately speak of God Himself and of His kingdom.

Realistic. The Bible's stories are nothing if not realistic. There are certainly elements of some stories that allow them to be identified as "type scenes" in which certain "types" that display fixed conventions are recognizable.[67] One such type scene is the encounter with a future betrothed at a well; we meet Rebekah (Isaac's future wife) in Genesis 24, Rachel (Jacob's future wife) in Genesis 29, and Zipporah (Moses' future wife) in Exodus 2. In the historical books, a type scene encountered at least twice is the annunciation of a birth of a son to a barren woman, a son who will become a hero (see Samson's parents in Judges 13 and Hannah, Samuel's mother, in 1 Samuel 1).

However, in treating such patterned texts, we must be sensitive to the details of the patterns and how they may diverge from the norm. Usually, there is enough realistic detail to enable us to read the texts as realistic portrayals of events and not merely as schematic representations of them. Furthermore, many texts are extremely detailed, and they are unique; they do not fit patterns. Certainly the passage telling of Ehud's killing of Eglon is realistic: "And Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into [Eglon's] belly. The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out" (Judg. 3:21–22 NASB).

Thus, we can see that the historical narratives attempt to mirror the reality of the world in accurate ways. This has been called a"representational" approach to the world,[68] and it is the thrust of

67. See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47–62; p. 51 lists the most common type scenes.

68. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 82–105.

Erich Auerbach's influential work *Mimesis*. Auerbach attempts to show how literature "mimes," or "mimics," reality, how it reflects reality like a mirror.[69]

Romantic. Ryken points out that, in addition to being realistic, the Bible's stories are "literary romances," that is, stories that highlight and delight in the extraordinary and the miraculous.[70] They are full of mysteries, God and the gods, heroes and villains, surprises and happy endings. Who can read the book of Ruth and not be moved by the beauty of the story, with its dramatic and satisfying plot and its appealing characters? Or who can read the Elijah stories and not be impressed with his virtue, Ahab's and Jezebel's wickedness, and God's providential interventions in the affairs of humans?

Revelatory. The Bible is not just human words about God; it is God's words to humans. The biblical authors consistently show themselves to be conscious of analyzing history or human nature from God's perspective and even to be "the agents by which supernatural truth is communicated to [humans]."[71] This is less obvious in the historical narratives than in many other portions and genres of Scripture. Even here, however, the human authors consistently evaluate historical events from God's perspective. The repetitive evaluations of each king's reign in the books of Kings and Chronicles, for example, show these books' authors reflecting God's perspectives on this. People were judged for not doing things God's way. Accordingly, Erich Auerbach's statement is appropriate: "The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims."[72]

Response-evoking. The Bible in its entirety—including its historical narratives—is not something that is morally neutral; it cannot be taken or left, according to one's whims. It demands a response. On the literary level, it calls for both naive and sophisticated responses.[73] Children can delight in the stories of David killing Goliath or of Elijah being fed by birds. Literate adults will be much more attuned to larger

69. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.*

70. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 37–39.

71. Ryken, *Literature of the Bible*, 18.

72. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14.

73. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 39–41.

themes in these stories, how the stories are told, and how they fit into the larger schemes of the authors of the books.

The Bible also demands a spiritual response. It demands commitment, and it changes lives. It is not enough merely to appreciate it on a literary level, although that can be done legitimately and with much profit. It lays a claim upon people and forces them to respond. In this sense, it is "rhetorical," that is, it attempts to convince and persuade.[74] The historical narratives do that more indirectly than, say, epistolary works, but, nevertheless, the authors of the historical narratives clearly had certain purposes in mind that were to encourage, warn, and persuade people of their right and wrong attitudes and courses of action. What Amos Wilder aptly says of the gospels applies equally to the historical narratives of the OT: "It is as though God says to men one by one: 'Look me in the eye.'"[75]

Theological. Above all, we must remember that the Bible is a "theological" work, i.e., it deals with God. In the end, God is the subject and the hero of the Bible.[76] Even in works that emphasize human individuals, such as 1 & 2 Samuel, which highlight David, these individuals are important only as they are instruments in God's plan. We will note in several chapters to follow that David is much more important as a theological symbol—as one whom God chose and blessed and as one who was attuned to God—than he ever was as a "historical" figure—one who was, say, a great military leader, administrator, and musician.

In the end, God's dealings with humans in the historical narratives reveal to us much about Himself. We are more than entertained; we are taught. C. S. Lewis once said that the Bible is "not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach."[77]

74. George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 6–7.

75. Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 54, quoted in Ryken, *Literature of the Bible*, 21.

76. See Gerhard Hasel, "The Problem of the Center in the OT Debate," 65–82; C. Hassell Bullock, "An Old Testament Center: A Re-evaluation and Proposition."

77. C. S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 33, quoted in Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 30.

Elements of Historical Narrative

The three primary elements of narratives and stories that are usually discussed are plot, character, and setting. We will call these *internal elements* (elements within the story). However, in understanding these, we must also consider the presence of a storyteller (author) and an audience (reader), and the story's being told from a particular point of view. We will call these *external elements* (elements that are not as readily visible in the story).[78] We will deal with the latter first.

External elements: author. To the uninitiated reader, this concept is simple enough: the author is the person who wrote the story. However, literary critics speak of an author, an implied author, and a narrator in a text.

The *author* is the person who actually wrote the story. The *implied author* is the textual manifestation of that (living and breathing) author. That is, the author may have much more to say about any given topic than he or she expresses in a given text. However, for the purposes of reading the text, we are limited to what was written. This limited portion of an author's total sum of knowledge, that which is expressed in the text at hand, is the implied author.

This distinction is helpful in clarifying what the focus of interpretation should be. Interpretation is not an exercise in mind reading, getting behind the words and into the mind of the author and guessing what he or she *might* say on a certain topic. Rather, it is an exercise in interpreting a given, written text, and what an author actually says in that text.

78. Brief introductions to these by biblical scholars may be found in Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, 83–100; Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral,* 154–64. In more depth, see Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*. Among literary critics at large, the following are good introductions: Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*; René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*; S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*.

The *narrator* is the one who tells the story.[79] In the Bible, the narrator almost always is the same as the implied author. Elsewhere, however, authors often create narrators to tell the story, such as Herman Melville's Ishmael in *Moby Dick* or Mark Twain's Huck Finn in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

Narrators can tell their story in third-person narratives or in first-person narratives. If narratives are cast in the first-person ("I"/"we"), the perspective of the narrator is usually more limited. For example, in the book of Nehemiah, the implied author and the narrator are Nehemiah, and the character tells of the events from his own perspective. As such, his knowledge is sometimes limited. He has to wait to be told of problems, for example, rather than knowing about them independently (e.g., Neh. 5:6–8).

A third-person narrator is more detached, and therefore usually is omniscient and omnipresent. In this regard, we cannot see any distinction between the narrator and God in biblical narratives; the human and divine viewpoints are fused.[80] Most historical narratives in the Bible have this type of narrator, who can tell us what characters are thinking. An example of this is when we are told that Agag, the Amalekite king, came to Samuel "confidently, thinking, 'Surely the bitterness of death is past'" (1 Sam. 15:32), whereupon Samuel fell upon him and killed him. Also, this omniscient and omnipresent narrator can tell us of the details of conversation when no one was present except for the protagonists. Examples of this are found everywhere in historical narratives; one is when Elijah fled from Ahab and Jezebel—his private conversations with the angel of the Lord are recorded verbatim (1 Kings 19).

External elements: reader. The reader can be distinguished in three ways as well. There is a reader, an implied reader, and a narratee.[81]

79. Scholes and Kellogg (*The Nature of Narrative*, 4) assert that fundamental to a definition of narrative is not only the presence of a story but also of a storyteller (i.e., narrator). A drama is an example of a story without a storyteller, in which the characters themselves act out the story's "imitations" of life.

80. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 84–128; Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 155–57.

81. We are not here speaking of the questions—very popular in literary critical and biblical circles today—surrounding a "reader-response" theory of interpretation, in which the reader participates in determining the meaning of a text. For recent discussion and evaluation, see Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 377–80; John Goldingay, "How far do readers make sense? Interpreting biblical narrative," 5–10.

The *reader* is the actual person who reads the work. With reference to the Bible, we can speak of contemporary readers (ourselves) and ancient readers (the original readers).

The *implied reader* is the reader addressed by the author of the work. This is the reader the author has in mind when he or she is writing the work (whether this person actually read the work or not). In the modern day, it is helpful to keep alive the distinction between the reader (we ourselves) and the implied reader, since the biblical texts were not addressed in the first instance to us. Our task is to place ourselves into the world and the minds of the implied readers as much as possible.[82] The implied reader is usually assumed by the author to be engaged and intelligent, and so the competent author anticipates questions that the reader might have and supplies all necessary information.[83] Information may also be withheld, but the author's assumption is that the reader will elicit the meaning even from this.[84]

The *narratee* is the person or group addressed specifically by the narrator.[85] Often, the narratee is not identified or is the same person as the implied reader. However, occasionally in the Bible we see them separated. For example, Theophilus is the narratee of Luke's gospel, whereas the implied reader is anyone who is searching for truth about Jesus. In the OT Solomon's son is the narratee of Proverbs 1–9, whereas the implied reader is anyone of the faithful in Israel. However, in OT narratives we do not find any meaningful distinctions between implied reader and narratee.

External elements: point of view. The place the narrator chooses to stand from which to tell the story is important and can contribute to our understanding and appreciation of it. Five different points of view have been identified in narratives.[86]

82. Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 83; Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral,* 162–63; John Goldingay, "How far do readers make sense?" 5.

83. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 10–11.

84. See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114–30; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186–229.

85. Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, 86–87.

86. See briefly, Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, 87–88; Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 156–57; in more depth, see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 43–83.

First, from a *psychological* perspective, an "omniscient narrator"[87] can tell us of the internal thoughts and feelings of the characters. We have mentioned above the example of the narrator's insight into King Agag's thought processes (1 Sam. 15:32). Similar is the account of Samson's thoughts when he awoke with his head shaven: "He awoke from his sleep and thought, 'I'll go out as before and shake myself free'" (Judg. 16:20a–b). The narrator shows us his omniscience even more with his next comment: "But [Samson] did not know that the Lord had left him" (16:20c). Here we see clearly that the narrator's perspective is different from Samson's and that his knowledge is far greater.

Second, from an *evaluative* or *ideological* perspective, narrators will occasionally insert themselves into the text itself with a direct comment on the action or situation. Examples of this include the repeated comment woven into the narratives at the end of the book of Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25 NASB); in the first and last references, a further comment is added: "Every man did what was right in his own eyes." Another example is the evaluative aside about David and his son Adonijah: "[David] had never interfered with him by asking, 'Why do you behave as you do?'" (1 Kings 1:6). We should note, however, that this viewpoint is one that is taken relatively rarely by biblical narrators.[88] More commonly, their evaluative viewpoint comes out in the ways they portray their characters, how selective they are with information they convey or withhold, and so on.

Third, from a *spatial* perspective, biblical narrators can be anywhere. In the story of David and Bathsheba, for example, the narrator is present with the army at Rabbah ("They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah," 2 Sam. 11:1), with David on the rooftop ("From the roof he saw a woman bathing," 11:2), and with Bathsheba cleansing herself ("She had purified herself from her uncleanness," 11:4). In the book of Esther, the narrator moves freely back and forth—and in quick succession—between private conversations between Esther and Mordecai, Haman and his wife and friends, the king and his attendants (Esther 2–6).

87. See, among many others, Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 17–23; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 58–185, and "Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics: From Reading to Counter-Reading," 463–88.

88. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 84–85.

Fourth, from a *temporal* perspective, narrators can tell the story in strict chronological order with a limited temporal perspective, or they can tell of events from a less time-bound perspective. We have already noted the limitations in perspective inherent in such first-person narratives as the book of Nehemiah. The book of Esther unfolds in a very sequential fashion as well, which adds to its suspense. On the other hand, the book of Judges (2:6–10) opens with a flashback in time (see chapter 3 for more on this), and the story of Rahab and the two Israelite spies includes a temporal flashback in its unfolding (Josh. 2:16–21). An example of where the narrator inserts a future-oriented reference is in the comment in Judges 14:4 concerning Samson's parents: "His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel."

Fifth, from a *phraseological* perspective, the narrator can use linguistic symbols to indicate whose point of view is being taken at any one time.[89] An example of this is the narrator's switching briefly from his own viewpoint to Eli's in his account of Hannah's presence at the sanctuary at Shiloh: "Eli thought she was drunk" (1 Sam. 1:13). Another example shows the quick shift from the narrator's omniscient, omnipresent stance to the characters' more limited viewpoint in 19:16: "When the messengers entered [David's bedroom], behold, the household idol was on the bed with the quilt of goat's hair at its head" (NASB). The word "behold" signals a shift in perspective from the narrator's omniscient viewpoint to the characters' more limited perspective: this "behold" captures some of their surprise at what they noticed when they entered the room.

Internal elements: plot. Within the confines of narrative itself, plot, character, and setting are important. Loosely speaking, plot is equivalent to action unfolding in a sequence. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg state that plot is "the dynamic, sequential element in narrative literature. Insofar as character, or any other element in narrative, becomes dynamic, it is a part of the plot."[90]

All plots depend on conflict and resolution of conflict. Stories will build toward a climax where the conflict is resolved. On the highest level in the Bible, there is a continuing conflict between good and evil,

89. See especially Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 59–73.

90. Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 207.

obedience and disobedience, God and the forces of evil. On the lowest levels are also conflicts between human characters, between value systems, between nations, between humans and God. Very often, the plot layers conflict upon conflict. At one level, the story of David's rise in 1 Samuel 16–31 is a conflict between Saul and David as individuals. However, it is far more than that. For one thing, it is a conflict between Saul and God. It is also a conflict between David's natural human impulses and his "sanctified" self: the natural human reaction would be for him to kill Saul, yet he does not, knowing God's greater purposes. It is also a conflict over models of kingship: What form was the monarchy going to take? It can even be read for its implications regarding a conflict between the tribe of Judah (David's) and the tribe of Benjamin (Saul's): several hints at the end of the book of Judges prepare us for this. (See chapter 5 under "The Place of 1 & 2 Samuel in the Canon.")

Internal elements: character. Characters are what give life to a plot. A story's action cannot proceed without characters. A widely recognized feature of the Bible's characters is its realistic portrayal of them. They are interesting and multidimensional, not "flat, static, and quite opaque," as is the case in most "primitive" stories.[91] A unique feature of the Bible's narrative portrayals of its characters is its transparency. Not only are many of its characters interesting and multidimensional, but they are portrayed with all their flaws as well. No major character in the OT is shown only in a positive light—not Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Samson, Samuel, David, nor a host of others. The OT narratives present them all as complex, full-bodied, and fully human characters.

We can even go so far as to say that only in narrative (as opposed to other literary genres) can we truly see into the inward lives of characters. As Scholes and Kellogg point out, "The most essential element in characterization is this inward life. The less of it we have, the more other narrative elements such as plot, commentary, description, allusion, and rhetoric must contribute to the work."[92] It is a distinctive of biblical narratives that this window into the inner life of characters is expressed to a large degree through dialogue.[93] That is, the words of the characters that the authors choose to pass on to us, and the way in which they are said, reveal much about the inner beings of the narratives' characters.

91. Ibid., 164.

92. Ibid., 171.

93. See especially Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63–87.

Adele Berlin speaks of three types of characters: (1) full-fledged (what other scholars call "round"), (2) types (what other scholars call "flat"), and (3) agents. Full-fledged characters are the main protagonists in any given story; they are portrayed in their many dimensions. Types are revealed in terms of a single trait or quality. Agents serve merely as props to move a story along; they have no inherent qualities as characters.

Examples of these three varieties of characters can be found everywhere in the OT narratives. In the narratives of David and his wives, Bathsheba functions as a "full-fledged character" in the story of David's old age and the succession to his throne (1 Kings 1–2). She is very much involved in the action, she speaks and reveals her feelings, and she makes her influence felt. In the story of David's adultery, however (2 Samuel 11–12), Bathsheba is much more a "prop" for the telling of David's sins, and thus Berlin characterizes her here as an "agent."[94] In the story of another one of David's wives, Abigail, we only see her positive qualities as a model of a godly woman and wife. As such, the author is portraying her as a "type."

The biblical writers' artful characterizations in no way compel the conclusion that these characters did not exist, that they are merely literary creations.[95] The writers merely chose those things about each character that they wanted to highlight for the purposes of their stories. This can especially be seen in the characterization of Bathsheba just noted: in one episode she is portrayed as an agent and in another as a full-fledged character. Most assuredly, Abigail was more complex than she is shown in 1 Samuel 25—she certainly sinned at some points in her life (as Paul affirms in Rom. 3:23!). But the author's interest in that chapter is only in her many positive qualities as they were displayed in her encounter with David.

Internal elements: setting. The setting of a story is the stage upon which the events unfold or the backdrop against which they occur. It is an essential part of a narrative, but it often is neglected in favor of study of plot and character. Settings can be of different types; among the most important are geographical, temporal, social, and historical settings.[96]

94. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 25–27.

95. See also Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, 88–89.

96. Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 54–62; Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 160–61.

Geographical setting is perhaps the most obvious. Events in the OT's historical narratives take place in any number of places, including the desert, mountaintops, fields, cities, palaces, houses, caves. The OT writers did not have as much leeway as modern writers of fiction to create their settings—after all, they were writing "history"—but it is interesting to note the role that certain settings play in certain narratives. For example, the encounter with God on a mountaintop is an important setting: Moses met with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19, 32–34), and Elijah also met God at the very same site (1 Kings 19). In both episodes, God's appearance was accompanied by thunder, fire, and earthquake. It is interesting to note that it was precisely these two OT characters who appeared with Jesus on another mountain, the "mountain of transfiguration," accompanied by a flash of light and a cloud (Luke 9 and parallels).

Temporal settings are significant. The same three characters—Moses, Elijah, and Jesus—each spent forty days in wilderness settings alone. Dates also are significant. When Ezra read the law, it was done on the first day of the seventh month (Neh. 8:2). This was a month in which several significant festivals took place, including the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles, and in which several other significant events took place throughout Israel's history. (See chapter 9 under "Importance of Scripture" for details.)

Social settings can reveal significant information about characters or plot development. King David's taking in of the crippled and outcast Mephibosheth—Saul's son—said much about David's largesse of spirit (2 Samuel 9). Queen Esther's rise in fortunes from an obscure Jew to the queen of an empire with unrestricted access to the king reveals much of God's providential care in that story.

Historical settings also are important, both in terms of background to the events in the biblical books and in terms of background to the composition of these books. The events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, for example, reveal the relatively benign nature of Persian rule—a fact that is known from extrabiblical sources as well. The freedom given to God's people in both books would have been inconceivable against the backdrop of the harsh Assyrian rule or even the relatively more lenient Babylonian rule. On the other hand, the historical backdrop of the postexilic era for the composition of 1 & 2 Chronicles gives us an interpretive handle for understanding the Chronicler's purpose, method, and message.

The Stylistics of Historical Narrative

There is a host of stylistic (or "literary") devices used by the authors of the biblical narratives to unfold their plots, build their characters, and lay out their settings. More often we read catalogues of the poetic devices used in Hebrew poetry,[97] but Hebrew narratives do not lack for such devices, either. Prominent among these devices are repetition, dialogue, omission, irony, and many others, including stylistics on the linguistic levels of words, sounds, and rhythms.[98]

Repetition. Repetition is perhaps the most widespread and widely recognized stylistic feature of biblical narratives. We find seemingly endless catalogues of repeated actions, in which characters state that they or others intend to (or should) do something and then the narrator states that they did indeed do it. We noted above the example from Joshua 3:6: "And Joshua said unto the priests, 'Lift up the ark of the covenant and pass before the people.' So they lifted up the ark of the covenant and walked before the people." This is far from mindless repetition, however. The narrator's reports that certain actions were performed—reports that echo the statements of intention word for word—function as assurances to the reader that the actions were indeed accomplished. Meir Sternberg notes another function of repetition: "In repetition, one of the members invariably comes from the omniscient narrator himself, so as to establish an objective reference point for making sense of the characters' fallible versions."[99]

Repetition can be of statements, as just noted, or of entire scenes—type scenes, such as the encounter with God in the wilderness or on a mountain[100]—or of key words.[101] One function of key-word repetitions is to link texts together. For example, the Hebrew root *NKR* ("to recognize") performs such a linking function in Genesis 37 and 38 (two texts usually seen as very disparate). In Genesis 37:32–33 Joseph's brothers tell their father to "recognize" Joseph's bloody cloak that they had

97. Several of these were noted near the beginning of the chapter under "Form."

98. See Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 200–218; Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, 95–100.

99. Sternberg, "Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics," 464.

100. See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47–62.

101. Ibid., 88–113; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 212–15.

brought back, and he indeed "recognized" it. In the next chapter, Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar entrapped him into doing his duty to her by commanding him to "recognize" the seal, cord, and staff she had taken from him, and he too "recognized" them (38:25–26).[102] Another function of key-word repetitions is to emphasize or highlight certain features of characters, plot, setting, theology, and so on. For example, in 1 Kings 4, the twelvefold repetition of the small word "all" reinforces the point in that chapter about Solomon's universal appeal and his all-encompassing sovereignty in Israel.

Dialogue. Hebrew narratives depend heavily upon dialogue to reveal things about the characters and even to advance the action in the plot.[103] For example, we learn much about Samson's self-absorbed personality in Judges 14–16, not by means of the narrator's explicit comments but rather from his own words—in his conversations with his parents, his wife, his wedding guests, the men of Judah, and his Philistine lover Delilah. Dialogue highlights contrasts between characters. Alter notes "Esau's inarticulate outbursts over against Jacob's calculating legalisms in the selling of the birthright" in Genesis 25 or "Joseph's long-winded statement of morally aghast refusal over against the two-word sexual bluntness of Potiphar's wife" in Genesis 39.[104]

Omission. Often the information a narrator does not give us is as significant as what he does. Omissions or gaps function in several ways, one of which is to pique our interest.[105] For example, chapter 10 mentions the importance of the absence of any reference to God in the book of Esther as having a crucial role in communicating that book's theology.

Irony. Irony is a literary device that expresses contrasts for literary effect or impact. It usually involves surprise or the unexpected. The OT's narratives are full of ironic twists and reversals.[106] For example, the book of Genesis is replete with ironic reversals, with younger sons being favored over older ones (Jacob over Esau, Ephraim over Manasseh, Judah and Joseph over their older brothers) or Jacob's unloved wife Leah

102. See Alter's masterful development of the many connections between Genesis 37 and 38 in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 3–11.

103. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63–87; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 64–72.

104. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 72.

105. Ibid., 114–30; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186–229.

106. See the full-length treatment of irony by Edwin Good in *Irony in the Old Testament*.

being rewarded over his beloved Rachel (by becoming the mother of Levi and Judah, ancestors of the two most favored tribes in later times). The ironic reversal-of-fortunes motif is also obvious in the book of Esther. For example, Haman is hung on the gallows he had erected for Mordecai, and—previous to this—he is forced to honor Mordecai in ways he had expected Mordecai to honor him. Also, the Jews strike down their enemies on the very day their enemies had expected to strike them down.

CONCLUSION: READING HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

We have noted the wonderful varieties of historical narratives in the OT, and we have considered them as prose, as history, and as literature. It is helpful here to keep in mind the concept of "genre fluidity" spoken of by many scholars.[107] Any given narrative text will fit into several genres and can be studied from that perspective.[108] Take, for example, the account of Deborah's and Barak's victory over the Canaanites in Judges 4. On the most general level, it is a prose text; more specifically, it is a historical account of events in the life of Israel; even more specifically, it is an account of a military victory. It shares many characteristics with prose texts of all types, as well as many characteristics with historical accounts. It also shares many characteristics with literary stories, even fictional stories (plot and character development, point of view, selectivity).

In conclusion, we would echo the chapter's opening invitation that the OT's historical narratives be *read*. Biblical scholarship has too often dissected, atomized, and analyzed biblical narratives until what is left is a dismembered corpse, not a living organism. The painstaking work of analyzing texts at the lowest levels of analysis—morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, sentences—is essential to proper interpretation. Also crucial, for different reasons, is analysis of various critical questions associated with these texts. However, the interpretive task is not complete until narrative texts—or any texts, for that matter—are analyzed as coherent wholes at the higher levels of sentences, paragraphs, episodes, books, and beyond. When these higher levels are analyzed—when the texts are *read* and not just "studied" or "dissected"—then we

107. Longman, *Literary Approaches in Biblical Interpretation*, 78–80.

108. Ryken (*Words of Delight*, 14, 16) also notes the fact that literary categories are not "watertight," with no overlapping.

will capture much of their vitality and their meaning. We will be able to see the contours of the forest as well as details of the trees.

In the chapters that follow, attention is paid to most of the standard critical questions that readers expect to find in an introduction. As noted in the discussion about the importance of historicity, many such critical questions are of the utmost importance in the endeavor of affirming and defending the coherence and reliability of the Scriptures. Many standard critical questions, especially ones concerning historical and cultural contexts that range beyond the pages of the Bible, are also of immense interest to modern students of the Bible. As such, these are addressed below.

However, attention in the following chapters also is consistently paid to the messages of the books, to their themes and theologies, to their purposes.[109] These are elucidated from careful attention to the books as "texts," and attention is paid to them at all levels, from the lowest to the highest. We cannot build a theology of anything biblical unless it is rooted in the words and sentences—as well as the structures and patterns—of actual texts.

Ultimately, that is the best reason for reading the Bible: to discover its revelation of God to us, to learn of His gracious plan of redemption, and to discern how to live. We cannot do so fully, however, without learning *how* to read. This book is intended to point to *the* Book and to whet readers' appetites for that Book. And, in the end, that Book itself is merely a guide and pointer to someone infinitely more important: the God revealed in its pages.

109. We should proclaim in advance a certain diffidence in attempting to ascertain the purposes of the biblical authors, especially when trying to boil them down to statements of one or a few main purposes. The statements of books' purposes in the chapters to follow are built upon analyses of the books' messages and circumstances, but in many cases certain alternative statements of purpose could undoubtedly have equal or greater validity.