

Realistic or Historical Narrative?
The Question of Historicity in the Context of
Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

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Introduction

There are an enormous number of questions that clamor for attention in regards to interpreting Scripture. Life was once relatively simple in the land of hermeneutics. One determined the most accurate text based on our best knowledge of Hebrew and Greek MSS, mastered their statements in those languages (and perhaps translated them into another language), applied a quantifiable number of hermeneutical principles or rules to the statements of the text, and drew conclusions as to the meaning of the text.

But ‘Hermeneutica’ is now a highly developed, crowded suburb and there are many new voices crying for attention and demanding their share of the subdivision of meaning. Many are demanding that the town be renamed; ‘Hermeneutica’ is blasé, for now we must do “biblical criticism.” And so “Criticalia” is the politically correct name proposed for the bustling suburb. There are also many new street names proposed: Literary Lane, Source Street, Aesthetic Avenue, Form Freeway, Rhetorical Road, Redaction Ridge, Structural Street, Narrative Boulevard, Canonical Court, Discourse Drive, and Deconstruction Alley. (There is even a historical marker in front of the cathedral [now a museum of textual and authorial antiquities] in Pre-Critical Park.) Some of these designations are new names for existing streets. Others describe the freeways that are being constructed (often right through the middle of some of the nicer homes in the area!) in an attempt to facilitate the transportation of meaning from the *Textile* factories to the homes of the residents. (Some observers, however, have noted that meaning is more often transported the other direction these days—the “cottage readers” creating the meaning and hauling it to the *Textile* mills where it is woven into the raw materials at hand.) Many new offices are opening in Criticalia—quite a few of which are designed to cope with the existential angst of human existence in such a pressured society. There are now D.S.P.s (Doctors of Psychological Criticism) and L.S.C.W.s (Licensed Sociological Criticism Workers), as well as numerous day care centers to handle the domestic needs of those too busy doing feminist criticism to care for their own children.

But enough allegorizing. What has happened in biblical studies in recent centuries? Why the proliferation of disciplines necessary to understand the Bible? Numerous books have been written to answer such questions. This brief paper will not attempt to resolve the larger issues, but will content itself with considering one narrow topic in this churning hermeneutical milieu. Specifically, what are some of the implications of a literary or narrative approach to biblical interpretation—“the most radical challenge to traditional hermeneutical models which has yet arisen”?¹

¹Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 473.

What Is Literary Criticism?

When we talk about literary criticism (or narrative criticism) we are concerned with studying the *form* of a text as opposed to its content,² and that text only in its final form. That is, *how* something is said rather than *what* is said or how it came to be in the form in which we find it. This form is not monolithic, but is comprised of multiple categories: genre (the broadest level of literary form), literary features (plot, character, point of view, etc.), macro-structure/discourse markers, figures of speech, syntax (sentence/clause type, direct/indirect discourse, etc.), and even grammatical elements (e.g., verbal aspect). Some of these are very traditional categories, others are newcomers.

As with many new approaches to the text, there are often abuses that need to be corrected. Literary criticism is no exception. Vanhoozer suggests that the literary approach is repeating many of the same mistakes that were made by the earlier “biblical theology movement”³ which provoked James Barr’s “trumpet blast”⁴ and as a result,

a similar trumpet blast—this time against the tendency to mishandle the *literary* phenomena of Scripture—needs to be sounded. The new battleground is no longer biblical words, but larger units of discourse: sentences, paragraphs, entire books. The crucial questions of meaning and truth are now located on the textual level—thus the need for a semantics of biblical *literature* rather than biblical *language*.

... Ironically, the “New Biblical Theology” (for lack of a better epithet) is in danger of repeating the linguistic sins of its forefathers, only this time on the literary rather than the lexical level.⁵

This need can be seen in that questions of history are generally “bracketed” in literary criticism. Depending on the critic, this may be simply an *ahistorical* approach,⁶ or it may be *antihistorical*. That is, it may simply declare questions of historicity to be irrelevant, or it may assume that the text is, at least in part (if not the whole) not true to fact if tested against the actual historical events which it describes. All of these elements could profitably be considered, but the various constraints with which I must work (not the least of which is the time that is allotted to such an endeavor) necessitate that I be very selective in

²The form/content distinction is actually a theoretical distinction that is difficult and often impossible to make, but it will serve initially to surface the focus of literary approaches to the text.

³The “biblical theology movement” is not a reference to the discipline of biblical theology (parallel with systematic theology), but refers to a particular historical approach to the text which elevates the meaning of individual words (apart from their context) to an unjustified semantic plateau. For a summary and evaluation, see the discussions in the following few notes.

⁴This was Moisés Silva’s assessment of Barr’s work: “A trumpet blast against the monstrous regiment of shoddy linguistics” (*Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 18). The reference is to James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961).

⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge, 53–104 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 53–54. This article by Vanhoozer is a major contribution to the discussion, as is his more recent volume, *Is There a Meaning in This Text: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998)—though this later volume addresses a wider topic than literary criticism.

⁶“One of the arguable merits of literary criticism is its a-historical orientation (not nonhistorical). This is not an assumption held by all literary critics, either overtly or inadvertently.... It is fair to say, however, that the majority of literary critics are not concerned to place historical questions ... at the forefront of their discussions. They are content to describe and elucidate the literary dimensions of the text, and to draw the boundaries of interpretation around this portrait, without feeling compelled to ask the further question of how this picture may gibe with historical reality” (Stanley Porter, “Literary Approaches to the New Testament: From Formalism to Deconstruction and Back,” in *Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. S. Porter and D. Tombs, 77–128, JSNTSup 120 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 113–14.

my comments. I have therefore decided to focus on one specific literary approach to the study of the text and particularly on a crucial question which that approach raises: narrative criticism and historicity.⁷

Narrative criticism (which also goes by the names poetics, narrative theology, aesthetics, and aesthetic theology⁸) is an interpretive approach to narrative texts which focuses on the literary form or shape of the text in its final form as the indicator of meaning (often to the exclusion of other concerns).⁹ Henry provides a helpful summary of this general approach to the text, noting that it is, in part, a reaction against historical criticism.

The Bible should be taken as it stands and not partitioned and reconstructed in search of some primitive version of which we have only a prejudiced late redaction. The church has transmitted the Bible in its present canonical form, which Christians should value as the authoritative text. Instead of seeking clues to the essential meaning of Scripture in extraneous pre-biblical sources or in our internal experience, we should allow Scripture to illumine all history and experience. Scripture has its own integrity apart from the question whether we can demonstrate the historical factuality of events to which it refers. The authority of the biblical text is independent of confirmation or disconfirmation by historical critics.

Champions of narrative hermeneutics emphasize that the techniques of literary analysis are more appropriate than those of historical criticism for understanding the Bible. Questions of precanonical sources and of historical investigation and factuality do not illumine textual meaning as significantly, they stress, as do the shape and function of the biblical literature. The text would be as meaningful as is Shakespeare's "Macbeth" independently of the question whether Macbeth is a real historical person. The linguistic authority of Scripture "brackets" historical questions by focusing simply on the text and its articles of faith.¹⁰

I welcome any approach to biblical interpretation which emphasizes what the text actually says rather than those which use the text as a pretext,¹¹ as a pool of data from which truth is to be sifted by determining its original form and the history of its composition (i.e., historical criticism), as grist for the deconstruction mill,¹² or as a validation for theological abstractions that are not particularly related to the text.¹³ But does narrative theology deserve such kudos?

⁷My focus must be, of necessity, more theoretical than applied exegesis, else I would not be able to adequately set forth the issues involved. Had I a week in which to lecture, the form and shape of this discussion would be considerably different.

⁸Aesthetic theology is the designation by Kevin Vanhoozer of a larger circle of hermeneutical approaches to the text which also includes the "new criticism," structuralism, and post-structuralism—all of which are characterized by viewing the text as an art object to be treated in isolation from its original author and setting. He discusses the philosophical backdrop for this approach in the thought of Kant, German idealism, romanticism, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Barthes, and White ("A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of 'Aesthetic' Theology," *TrinJ* 8 ns (1987), 25–56). There are other related terms and sub-disciplines within the realm of literary criticism (e.g., rhetorical criticism). A number of these are discussed in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley Porter, NT Tools and Studies, 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

⁹ Vanhoozer, "Lamp in the Labyrinth," 25.

¹⁰Carl F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *TrinJ* 8 ns (1987): 4.

¹¹That is, a pretext for saying what the speaker desires to say—the Slough of Despond of far too many attempts at preaching—including numerous "sermons" that are too close to home for comfort.

¹²The deconstructionist "uses" the text as the raw material from which to grind his own meaning.

¹³I have no quarrel with theological constructs which clearly arise out of the text and which are driven by and anchored solidly in the biblical text. Such synthesis is a necessary effort lest the text be left lying in disarray as atomized fragments that are never correlated in any meaningful, coherent fashion. That is, I have no argument with the concept of systematic theology so long as the basis for the system is biblical revelation and not human wisdom. The legitimate source for systematics is not "all the truth about God and His universe from any and every source" (L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947], 5—a grandiose attempt for which no mortal is sufficient anyway!), nor culture, experience, reason, or tradition (cf. A. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*

How Does Literary Criticism Treat the Text?

There is methodological diversity in any discipline and poetics is no exception. There are, however, some common threads that warrant exploration, particularly as it relates to the relationship of the method to the question of historicity. Carson highlights this concern.

One common feature of rhetorical criticism is the removal of the external referent in the interpretive process *and* (in the hands of most interpreters) *in the final assessment of the text's relation to external reality*. The result seems to be a two-tiered approach to history and even to truth itself—one in the external world and one in the 'story,' with few obvious relations between the two. What that will do to the 'scandal of particularity' inherent in the revelation of a self-incarnating God can only be imagined.¹⁴

Consider the explanations of the following representatives of this approach to the text.¹⁵

Robert Alter is one of the most influential of the narrative critics. He is not a biblical scholar, but a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at Berkeley. His attempts at reading the Bible in serious, rigorous terms as literature have focused on the genres of narrative and poetry.¹⁶ He acknowledges that a narrative approach neglects historical elements, both the ancient near eastern background and the history of the text's composition.¹⁷ The fact that one particular discipline *neglects* some aspects of the text is not necessarily bad; there are many specialized areas of study and none can do everything. So long as the user recognizes this fact and compensates with the work of other specialists, harm need not be done. The question, however, is whether or not historicity is not just neglected, but whether it is denigrated.

Not all narrative approaches automatically denigrate this historicity. Alter devotes an entire chapter to "narrative specification and the power of the literal." There *are*, says Alter, textual details that are not simply literary devices, but which are intended to be understood in their historical sense. As a matter of fact, "every narrative that purports to be historical presents its details first of all because they 'really' happened." The route of the exodus is described as it is because that is the route that the writer believed that they did, in fact, take. Likewise the minor detail of the lowing of the cattle as they returned the ark to Beth-Shemesh is an incidental note related because that is what happened. "The life of the narrative inheres in the potency of the literal."¹⁸

Before one becomes too confident in Alter's hermeneutic, however, it should be noted that he also points to similar "literal" details as essential for the literary success of Kafka's novel *The Castle*. The bridge on which K. stands when he first arrives in the village is a *wooden* bridge—not because there is some mystical symbolism intended (and Kafka uses a great deal of symbolism), but simply because all such bridges in Central Europe were made of wood in the era of this story. "It is a datum of the *sensus*

[Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 66–97), but is the sum total of biblical revelation—the fruit of biblical theology organized and systematized into a unified, harmonious whole.

¹⁴D. A. Carson, "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge, 5–48 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 32. His reference to rhetorical criticism, in his context, refers to literary criticism in general, not just to one specific sub-discipline. See the similar comments of Dennis Stamps: narrative criticism "concentrates on ... the text as an end in itself. In this sense, the text is not primarily a source to recover the events and persons associated with the original writing and reception of the text, but an event in itself. The focus is on the experience of the text as a communication event within a specified context" ("Rhetorical and Narratological Criticism," in *Handbook to Exegesis*, ed. Porter, 229).

¹⁵In the following section I have tried to select some of the major, "mainline" representatives of a literary approach to the text. Each of these scholars have had substantive impact on the theory of literary criticism.

¹⁶Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

¹⁷*World of Biblical Literature*, 28.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 90, 101–06, 106.

quasi historicus of the novel—it is ‘in fact’ what K. stands on the evening he arrives at the village, before he walks on to find a place at the inn.”¹⁹ It seems, therefore, that Alter’s “literal” and “historical” need not refer to real, space-time events that actually happened. Perhaps they did—but realistic elements of a novel can be described in the same way.

In his earlier work on narrative, Alter says quite plainly that the Bible’s “sacred history” is not “bound to documentable facts.” The best description of biblical narrative is “prose fiction,” or more precisely, “*historicized* prose fiction.” The patriarchal narratives, e.g., are “composite fictions based on national traditions.”²⁰ So much for history in Alter’s approach to narrative criticism.²¹

Why then, are Alter and others like him, so interested in a literary study of the Bible? Alter considers this issue at some length. His comments are insightful. He suggests that the increasing emphasis on a literary study of the Bible since the 1970s has resulted in a shift in how we think about the Bible, how we teach it, and how we study it. “What is at stake is a pursuit in the Bible of a different order of truth...., it is a turning from the truth of history to the truth of realism, that is, to what may not be a factual account of events but is coherently history-like.” In one sense, this undercuts the authority of the Bible as it has traditionally been considered, but on the other hand, the new literary approach provides a new sort of authority for the Bible: an existential authority of shared experience in the continuity of the human predicament. The Bible is allowed to speak, not necessarily as a revealed, transcendental authority, but as a “religious” voice of fellow humans who have experienced the power of religion and faith. (That Dostoevski and Milton also evoke this same shared existential pathos is not surprising given this view of authority.)²²

Personally, Alter is willing to concede greater authority to Scripture (i.e., to the OT; he is Jewish) because he recognizes that these Scriptures have a traditional, canonical role in Judaism. For him, it has a double authority: literary and theological. Jacob, e.g., can be viewed both as a “fictional construct ... with a suasive force of verisimilitude” and also as the “eponymous founder of Israel.” The Jacob narrative therefore has an “urgency not entirely shared by more secular fictions. The authority of the fictional imagination, as it speaks from the canonical text, assumes a cultural and a spiritual force.”²³

Adele Berlin’s discussion is more narrowly focused than Alter’s. Her concern is with poetics, defined, not as a hermeneutical endeavor, but as the study of “the building blocks of literature and the rules by which they are assembled.... a grammar, as it were, of literature.” As such, she stresses that narrative is a form of *representation*. Abraham, e.g., is not a real person as he appears in Genesis, but only a literary representation of him. Berlin’s analogy is a painting of an apple—it is not the real fruit, only an artistic representation of the real fruit. This is not a judgment regarding the existence of an historical Abraham or of apples. All well and good. Berlin’s point is technically correct; only an idiot would disagree. But then we move on one step further on the path of literary representation. Literary figures are not only representations of reality, but they do not always correspond in every detail to reality. “When we read narrative, especially biblical narrative, we are constantly tempted to mistake mimesis for reality—to take as real that which is only a representation of reality.”²⁴ If Professor Berlin means only that the literary depiction is not a complete description of the reality, or that it is a selective representation, then

¹⁹Ibid., 92.

²⁰*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 24.

²¹I am aware of the use of the term *fiction* to refer to literary artistry rather than as a genre designation (cf. V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, 5 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 61–63), but that does not appear to be the way that Alter is using the term.

²²Ibid., 201–05.

²³Ibid., 209.

²⁴Adele Berlin, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 15, 13–14.

there would be no quibble. But this is not what she intends for the biblical text can include fictions, impossible acts, and incredible numbers—all presented realistically in narrative representation.²⁵

Sternberg's massive and influential literary study, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, is also worth examining. His argument is that "if the Bible is a work of literature, therefore, nobody can evade the consequences. As reader, for example, the historian must take into account that every item of reality given in the text may have been stylized by conventions and for purposes alien to historical science." If I understand Sternberg correctly (and I am not confident that I have fully grasped the meaning of his opaque, turgid prose), then he views the Bible as a unique literary genre in which the inspiration claimed necessitates our viewing it as authoritative despite the fact that it contains factual errors and would otherwise be discounted as credible and reliable history. Rather it holds a unique authority whose literary art we may examine literarily and historiographically, but which would otherwise be discredited "as the poetic license of invention without paying the price in truth claim." Indeed, the ideological approach of the Bible "transmutes even invention into the stuff of history"—it "obliterates the line dividing fact from fancy."²⁶

I will make only brief note here of Northrup Frye's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*.²⁷ Even a casual browsing of Frye's work suggests that he relegates many biblical events to the status of myth or metaphor. The creation and flood accounts are myth. The accounts of Jephthah's vow and Elisha's ax head are legend or folklore. Samson's killing 1,000 Philistines is an etiological event. None of these represent any historical event. The exodus and the Abraham story are "historical reminiscences" that may contain a "kernel of history," but no more than that. In regards to Jonah, there was "no great fish outside the Book of Jonah." In other words, the fish is just a literary device. As a matter of fact, to read events such as those noted here as historical references to actual events is "externalized legalism." It is an instance of Paul's "'natural man's' comprehension" of the text (1 Cor. 2:14). "A 'literal' projection into the external world of an image that might be acceptable as a poetic metaphor" is to be guilty of idolatry (Jer. 2:27). All this is justified by viewing the Bible as essentially a "macro-genre" (my designation) of *kerygma*, the linguistic vehicle of which is myth.²⁸ Frye's comments, though considerably overstated, do have a kernel of truth in that it is invalid to read metaphorical language as nonmetaphorical. But the question is, how does one determine this? An evangelical approach to the text will, I am convinced, conclude that Frye has employed the hermeneutics of metaphor as a means of evacuating the historical particularity of the text.

The last of the major studies in narrative criticism that will be examined here is Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei's work is primarily a history of 18th and 19th century hermeneutics

²⁵Ibid., 15, 139. This is not to suggest that there is no value in Berlin's work. She provides many insightful suggestions on how narrative functions and how a number of specific narratives are to be understood.

²⁶Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 16, 34; cf. the entire section, "Fiction and History," 23–35. There may be more qualification needed in regard to Sternberg. He is more careful and nuanced than some other writers (see esp. 41–57 in this regard), but even so I believe that he is willing to separate an external referential reality from literary art. He has many valid things to say about how a literary artist may fashion and shape his text for ideological and aesthetic purposes, but the underlying problem remains.

²⁷New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. One reason for the brief mention is that I have not had time to read the entire book carefully. The items noted above were gleaned from leafing through the book and I may (unintentionally) misrepresent them. I have tried to read the context of these statement which caught my eye, but realize the risk I take in including such statements prematurely. If nothing else, I suggest that such statements deserve additional consideration in the context of Frye's hermeneutic—something I plan to do in a later version of this paper.

²⁸Frye, *The Great Code*, 39, 61, 29–30. It is interesting to note Frye's dogmatic opposition to Bultmann's efforts to "demythologize" any part of the Bible since that, in Frye's view, would obliterate it (30).

rather than a positive argument for his own approach to narrative. He does include, however, sufficient information to indicate his own conclusions. For Frei, the story is the meaning; the meaning emerges from the story form²⁹—but there is no necessary connection between the story and “ostensible history.” This narrative is “realistic or history-like” but not necessarily historical. The accounts of miracles that are found in narrative, e.g., are realistic and history-like, but not therefore historical in the sense that they are factually true. To assume that this realistic, history-like quality of the Bible is relevant to the question of historicity is a logical confusion. (At a technical level, it is true that the two are distinct categories, but in biblical literature, they are definitely related issues.)³⁰ Barton’s summary of Frei is apropos.

In Frei’s book we have a non-referential theory of biblical narrative texts, which is closely akin to the New Critical theory of literature in general as non-referential. Again, we may say that biblical narratives have subject matter (the events they describe) but are not exactly *about* this subject matter, in the sense that we read them to discover more facts about it: narratives, like poems, simply exist, and if they are ‘about’ anything, it is ‘narrativity’.³¹

How Important Is Historicity?

It is important to recognize that, as Thiselton points out,

Literary theory, for good or ill, brings into biblical studies an intimidating and complicated network of assumptions and methods which were not in origin designed to take account of the particular nature of *biblical* texts. These carry with them their own agenda of deeply philosophical questions about the status of language, the nature of texts, and relations between language, the world, and theories of knowledge.³²

One of the most troubling of these philosophical assumptions relates to what Thiselton has described as the relationship between language and the world—i.e., historicity. The extent to which narrative theology de-emphasizes or rejects historicity has been illustrated above. Just how serious is this in terms of Christian faith? There is a deliberate disassociation of text and event in many literary approaches.³³ The statements of the text do not necessarily have any organic connection with an historical, space-time event.³⁴ Cooper acknowledges this as clearly as any of the literary critics.

Authorial intention, even if it were recoverable—which it is not—would be trivial for literary interpretation. And the historicity of the events described in the Bible is irrelevant; indeed, the idea that either the meaning of the Bible or its truth depends on its historical accuracy is probably the silliest manifestation of historical criticism.

²⁹“The theme has meaning only to the extent that it is instantiated and hence narrated; and this meaning through instantiation is not *illustrated* ... but *constituted* through the mutual, specific determination of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web” (Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* [New York: Yale Univ. Press, 1974], 280).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10, 14; cf. 1–16.

³¹John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 163. For critiques of Frei, see Barton’s discussion (160–67) and Vanhoozer, “Semantics of Biblical Literature,” 72.

³²Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 471.

³³A major discussion of text and event came to my attention after this paper was written: John Sailhammer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 36–85.

³⁴This criticism does not at all mean that there is no literary artistry involved in reliable historiography. All history writing includes selectivity, perspective, and aesthetic choices (i.e., language, style, detail, etc.). Rather it points to the necessity of valid, trustworthy historiography to submit to the constraints of the external subject matter. It is this referential constraint that is either missing or ignored in much of the literature of narrative criticism. On these matters, see Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 68–76.

The literary critic redefines history and historical knowledge in terms of *literary* history—as distinct from the events supposedly narrated by the text and the extrinsic factors that purportedly led to its creation.³⁵

What does such a move mean in terms of Christian faith? Can Colin Brown’s assessment be justified?

Through the ages Christianity has presented itself as a historical religion. It is based on claims about what God has done in history.... [It is] rooted and grounded in history. History is the foundation and center of Christian faith, but many modern Christians appear to be unconcerned with history in their pursuit of more tangible objectives; and skeptics and opponents have long tried to undermine the historical foundations of the Christian faith. If Christianity can in practice be cut loose from its supposed historical foundations, what is its value? Perhaps, after all, it is a body of comforting myths that enable us to come to terms with the harsh realities of life and a set of beliefs that can be brought out from time to time to reinforce attitudes.³⁶

Is history (and historical verification) essential, optional, or unnecessary? We may begin to answer that question by saying that on a presuppositional basis, it is not necessary to validate the historicity of the text in order to accept either the authority or factuality of the Bible.³⁷ But that is quite different from saying that *history* is other than essential. Scripture employs narrative genre deliberately, but it does so in such a way that the historical basis (event) for the narrational depiction (text) is absolutely essential. The revelation value of the Bible depends on its history value. “Christians are people who have a faith and trust in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ. Their faith and trust also have an inherent historical com-

³⁵Alan Cooper, “On Reading the Bible Critically and Otherwise,” ch. 3 of *The Future of Biblical Studies*, ed. R. Friedman and H. Williamson, 61–80, SBL Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 65–66. This is certainly not an unusual concept. J. Collins, e.g., asserts that biblical narratives’ value “for theology lies in their functions as myth or story rather than in their historical accuracy” (“Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, ed. W. Propp, B. Halpern, and D. Freedman, 1–17, Biblical and Judaic Studies, v. 1 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 11).

³⁶Colin Brown, *History and Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 9–10. Cf. also Long’s judgment: “The problem with some modern literary approaches to the Bible is that they tend to dismiss historical questions as either uninteresting or illegitimate. But to bracket out forever or to banish historical questions is to do an injustice to the biblical literature” (*Art of Biblical History*, 153).

³⁷This is not the place to argue a presuppositional thesis. Suffice it to say that the alternative to accepting the Bible as one’s *pou sto* is to start from human reason as an adequate epistemological base. This is not a fideistic approach, since it does seek understanding (fideism does not), but argues that faith is necessary to understand properly. It also accepts and encourages verification—but from within a faith perspective (some might term this “critical realism”). For a discussion of these epistemological matters, see Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, ed. R. Booth (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996); idem., *Van Til’s Apologetic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998); John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994); Ronald Nash, *Faith & Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); Richard Pratt, *Every Thought Captive* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979); and Stephen R. Spencer, “Fideism and Presuppositionalism,” *GTJ* 8 (1987): 89–100. As for the specific issue of the historicity of the biblical record, note Long’s contention that “it simply cannot be denied that the historicity of certain events is vitally necessary to true Christian faith. But, of course, simply to acknowledge this necessity in no way proves that the relevant events took place. Moreover, even could the bare events be conclusively demonstrated, this would still fall short of proof that they have been accurately interpreted by the biblical writers. In the end, one’s acceptance of the biblical construal of events will very much depend on one’s confidence in the biblical testimony.... Faith does not require that the factuality of the biblical events be proven (such proof is, at any rate, seldom possible). On the other hand, should it be conclusively shown that the core events of redemptive history did not happen, not only would the veracity of the Bible be seriously undermined, but the fall of historicity would inevitably bring down Christian faith with it” (Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 98–99).

ponent. From its inception, Christianity has been a religion with a past. Without that past, Christians could have no grounded hope for the future.”³⁸

Part of the reason for such a statement may be seen in the function of the prophetic word. The fulfillment (event) of a prophecy (text) serves to verify the historical veracity of the message (oral or written). This is explicit in Scripture: Deut. 18:20–22 commands the death penalty for those who profess to proclaim a message in God’s name but which is unfulfilled/false. If a prophet’s word is discredited (and his life forfeit) for lack of fulfillment, likewise the historian who proclaims as fact that which is not, in fact, justified by them is also discredited. Historical narrative explicitly appeals to history to verify what it teaches: names, places, events, dates, etc. are cited (more in some narratives than others; Kings is the classic example). If these references are not trustworthy, it casts grave doubt over the theology being propounded in narrative fashion. “Theological . . . validity is tied up with historical veracity.”³⁹

The relationship between historical event and divine interpretation of those events also argues for the essential inseparability of text and event. Events, in themselves, are not revelatory because they are not self-interpreting; they are mute, ambiguous affairs. An event can only be understood as a revelatory act of God if there is an explanatory word forthcoming from God. There are no “brute facts”—only interpreted facts, and human interpretation of such things is notoriously unreliable; only God can provide an infallible interpretation of the event—and that requires his verbal communication. Even if an event is regarded as an act of God, the true significance of that event is unknown apart from verbal revelation. So, although event without text is worthless, the reverse is also true: text without event—without historical referent is meaningless.⁴⁰

The New Testament also provides evidence of serious historical intentions. Although space does not allow their development here, consider the historical implications of the following passages. Luke’s preface clearly emphasizes the importance of the historical events that underlie the gospel narratives: “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 also 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). Likewise John’s gospel concludes on an historical note: “This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. 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 21:24–25). Paul’s delineation of the gospel also rests on an essential historical basis (1 Cor. 15:3–8), as does his faith in the resurrection (15:12–20). Peter explicitly avows that the apostles “did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16), and John reminds his readers that his testimony is based on tangible, historical events of which he and the other apostles had been eye witnesses: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1).

³⁸Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 153.

³⁹John Goldingay, “‘That You May Know That Yahweh Is God’: A Study in the Relationship Between Theology and Historical Truth in the Old Testament,” *TynB* 23 (1972): 58, 64, 80–81. There is an extensive motif in Kings of word/fulfillment that validated the prophetic message. See. e.g., 1 Kings 11:11–12:15; 18:20–40; and 22:28–36; cf. also 2:24, 27; 8:26, 56 (cf. *ibid.*, 68–69).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 62–63, 68. This is not to say that every text has an historical referent for not all texts refer to events, but all which do refer to events must have a referent if the text presents them as historical. Genre is relevant here also: parables, e.g., do not have specific, historical referents—but they do not profess to have such.

If there is no historical reality (event) behind the narrative portrait (text), then it would seem quite foolish to gather from this narrative any sort of truth or benefit, for there is no solid foundation—only a psychological crutch upon which to lean—a crutch which, like the (seemingly) firmly anchored peg of Isaiah 22:25, will one day be sheared off.⁴¹ Yet this is just the sort of value which much narrative criticism finds in the text: a subjective, existential authority with no substantive basis. “The string between the kite of interpretation and the ground of events is cut, not so that the kite can fly free, but so that it can get lost.”⁴²

What Are Other Potential Weaknesses of Literary Criticism?

There are a number of additional concerns raised by narrative criticism. I can focus on only one additional issue here.⁴³ I am concerned that some practitioners’ ingenuity and creativity in the application of literary structure and criticism outstrips the author’s intention.⁴⁴ Non-evangelical literary critics, of course, have little concern for the author’s intention (see the quote from Cooper above), but evangelicals should know better. The avant-garde philosophies today which impact hermeneutics (deconstructionism, reader response, post modernity) focus on the text as an object of study in isolation from its original author and setting. As a result, their discovery (or better: creation) of meaning totally ignores the author. If the author is ignored, one of the few options left for making any use of the text is to focus on literary structure, whether a deliberate authorial creation or whether a reader-created/imposed structure.

The complexity found in some texts by the literary critics seems to go well beyond what I would expect of such literature. These proposals are often propounded without any evidence that the biblical

⁴¹“If this picture does not correspond to historical reality, then the fact that it illumines our experience and our relationship to that upon which we are absolutely dependent is neither here nor there except as a psychological prop” (ibid., 87). Or, as Henry puts it: “The notion that the narrative simply as narrative adequately nurtures faith independently of all objective historical concerns sponsors a split in the relationships of faith to reason and to history that would in principle encourage skepticism and cloud historical referents in obscurity” (“Narrative Theology,” 11).

⁴²Goldingay, “That You May Know,” 88–89. It is interesting, and perhaps a bit perplexing, that Goldingay (whose argument I have followed in its general outline in the several paragraphs above) would substitute the authority of Christ for the historical critical method for his ground of certainty: “it is from this Jesus ... that we received the Old Testament, it has his authority.... Faith is a humble bowing before the personal God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—and this God, through Christ, declares Himself the author of the biblical tradition and of the events which the tradition relates.... As a result of this act of faith ... a certainty about the validity of the Old Testament tradition is gained which can survive without the support of the historical method” (ibid., 91–92). But this conclusion merely pushes the problem back one step! How is it that we know that Jesus has validated the facticity and authority of the Old Testament? Only thorough the textual record of the New Testament! The same problem of narrative validation is present there as in the Old Testament. The only satisfactory resolution is to accept the Bible as one’s epistemological *pou sto*. Long addresses a similar issue in his evaluation of George Ramsey’s *Quest for the Historical Israel*. It is the resurrected Jesus who save us, not the truth of historical events, he says. “But this evokes a further question. On what basis do we believe that Christ was raised? Surely an important part of the answer ... is that we do so on the basis of trust in the scriptural testimony to that event. It is our confidence in the truth value (i.e., the trustworthiness) of Scripture that enables us to accept the otherwise astonishing truth claim that Christ was raised from the dead” (Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 116).

⁴³Other issues that deserve attention include (but surely are not limited to) the issue of multiple meanings, the role of the reader, and the imposition of modern literary concepts on ancient literature. On these issues (some addressed positively, some negatively), see Mark Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). My assessment of most of these areas would be much more negative than Powell’s.

⁴⁴Carson makes a related point: “Although literary tools offer to interpreters of Scripture a variety of devices to bring out the meaning of the text, they have sometimes become ponderous ways of saying the obvious, or (which is worse) refined ways of distorting the obvious” (“Recent Developments,” 32).

author intended such structure. The mere fact that certain features of the text can be identified is assumed to establish their legitimacy. It is true that human rationality (predicated on the innate ability of the laws of logic which are part of what constitutes humanity as the image of God) naturally structures any communication to some degree. That is true of every language even at the sentence level,⁴⁵ and, I suspect, at the discourse level as well. Such statements are not a learned or deliberate artistry on the part of the author. Much of it is simply part of our God-given nature and ability to communicate rationally.⁴⁶

But if this structure is part of our language, I wonder if we do not sometimes ascribe conscious authorial significance to unconscious elements in a writer's work, elements that are there just because "that's the way we say it"? If it is not intentional, then I doubt that it is semantic, but rather incidental. It is very true that there are some definite, discernible patterns in the language that generate a literary structure. But is that structure a deliberate choice by the author, or is it simply part of the way that any writer would say the same thing? Although there may be a range of options within any given language, the choice is often *unconscious* on the part of the writer. If that is so, then there ought to be some degree of caution in using such literary features as hermeneutical keys to a text. That may well be true, e.g., of verbal aspect in Greek. Aspectual usage may well tell us how an author views his subject and perhaps where we are to place the emphasis in an individual sentence, perhaps even in a pericope, but I would hesitate to use such explicit literary features to interpret the message of a New Testament book.

An emphasis on literary structure and literary devices often leads to some fascinating literary observations—but that does not necessarily translate to significant or valid theological observations or meaningful/helpful understanding of the text. In other words, after reading some such discussions, one is tempted to ask, "So what? How did that help me understand the text?" The explanation was intriguing enough, but what did it accomplish? I would be the last to argue on a pragmatic basis (such an anti-intellectualism is abhorrent to me), but there is a valid concern regarding the value of a method. Some methods may be valid in that they address legitimate questions, but which may not rank very high on the scale of methodological relevance.⁴⁷

Allow me to turn to Mark's gospel to illustrate some of the concerns that I have expressed above. Consider the volume *Mark As Story*, which is a literary analysis of the gospel of Mark—perhaps the first major study of a New Testament book under the aegis of narrative criticism.⁴⁸ Although the possibility is

⁴⁵The subject-verb-object *structure* is normal for English, but that is not necessarily a universal pattern. All languages have grammatical structure at the sentence level.

⁴⁶I *have* read a few pieces that seem to go out of their way to complicate communication, and some of these pieces are supposed to be literary works—modern poetry often strikes me that way, as do some student papers!

⁴⁷E.g., diachronic word studies, popularized by those who know little Greek, are (or at least can be) valid studies, but the value of such efforts in determining the meaning of a word in the New Testament is minuscule (my own Th.M. thesis—which I do not advertise or promote, and would recall if I could—is a classic case in point!). Validity is not the question. How a word was used and what it meant in classical Greek is a valid study and may even be interesting. But its value is very low in New Testament studies. Although perhaps slightly over-stated, this is the concern of A. Alonso-Schökel: "If one insists on analyzing forms rigorously, the object of study becomes formal, irrelevant for the meaning. The rigorous study of form leads to a sterile formalism" ("Hermeneutical Problems of a Literary Study of the Bible," *VTSupp* 28 (1974): 1.

⁴⁸David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999). This volume also raises the issue of historicity. In the first edition of the book (1982) the authors assert that "one can read and interpret Mark's gospel as a story independent from the real people and events upon which it is based" (3). Yes, one *can* do that, but *should* we do that? Is our goal simply to understand the literary artistry of an author? Or is it to learn what actually happened as understood and interpreted by God—expressed through the (literary work of the) human author? Interestingly, the statement just cited is toned down and qualified in the second edition: "When we approach Mark as a work that creates a story world, we see that the statements in Mark's narrative refer to the people, places, and events *as portrayed in the story*. . . . Although Jesus,

acknowledged that some literary devices and structure may be unconscious and not deliberate, the book is based on the assumption that “for me, and for many of Mark’s two millennia of readers, it [the literary artistry in Mark’s gospel] is the surest validation of and signal toward the origin of his blazing immediacy—he reports, not invents, the good news: a thing has happened and in sight of human eyes.”⁴⁹ As one example of their approach, consider their explanation of Mark 2–3.

The five conflicts between Jesus and the authorities in Galilee show a concentric relationship of A, B, C, B', and A'. Paired episodes A and A' along with B and B', form an outer and an inner ring around the central episode, C.

- A The healing of the paralytic
- B Eating with toll collectors and sinners
- C Fasting
- B' Eating by picking grain on the sabbath
- A' The healing of the man with the withered hand

Episode A (the healing of the paralytic) and episode A' (the healing of the man with the withered hand) reflect each other in structure, content, and theme: Both occur indoors, involve a healing, and include the same characters (Jesus, the authorities, and the person healed); both healings are delayed while the narrator reveals unspoken accusations against Jesus; and both accusations involve serious legal penalties. Furthermore, in both episodes Jesus responds to the unspoken accusations with rhetorical questions.

Episodes B (eating with the tax collectors and sinners) and B' (picking grain on the sabbath) are also related: both are concerned with eating, and both have to do with uncleanness (from tax collectors in B and from violation of the sabbath in B'). The form of both episodes includes an action, the authorities' objection, and Jesus' explanation of the action. Both involve the same characters (Jesus, the disciples, and the authorities). In both cases, Jesus answers with a proverb followed by a statement of his purpose and authority.

These four episodes (A, B, B', A' form an inner and an outer ring around episode C in which Jesus teaches about fasting (in contrast to the eating theme of B and B'). By contrast with other episodes, the setting in episode C is indefinite and the questioners are not identified. Nor are the questioners hostile. As a result, this central episode focuses on Jesus' response rather than on conflicts or actions. Jesus' response in this central episode illuminates all five episodes of the concentric pattern. His reference to the bridegroom being “taken away” points to the possible consequences of opposition by the authorities in A and A'—the death penalty for blasphemy or for flagrant violation the sabbath. His warning against putting new wine in old wineskins shows how the authorities use old categories of law and tradition (in all five episodes) to judge the newness that Jesus represents. And the result will be the destruction of both the wine and the wineskins.

Thematically, the whole series contrasts Jesus' authority with that of the Jewish leaders. Jesus has authority to pardon sins (A) and he eats with sinners (B). He is special like a bridegroom (C). He has authority over the sabbath (B') and he heals on the sabbath (A'). By contrast, the Jewish leaders have authority only to accuse, and they fail to get an indictment.

These five conflict episodes create a circular progression. One clash is followed by a second, then a third that clarifies the first two. With this clarification in mind, readers experience another conflict that recalls the second episode and then a final clash that comes back around to recall the first episode. The five episodes also contain a linear progression. From the first to the fifth episodes, Jesus' anger with the authorities grows as he futilely tries to explain his actions, while the opposition of the authorities gradually escalates. For the

Herod, and the high priests were real people, they are, in Mark, nonetheless characters portrayed in a story.... *all subsequent references to people, places, and events refer only to the story world inside Mark's narrative*" (5, emphasis in the original). They also instruct that we should “read Mark as story rather than as history. For if we look through Mark as a window into history, we will think first of the historical figure Jesus rather than of Mark's *portrayal* of Jesus" (5). It is true that there is a technical distinction between the real person of Jesus and a literary portrait of him, but the two should never be separated. The portrait of Jesus in Mark's gospel is an accurate, historical portrait of Jesus.

⁴⁹Reynolds Price, in his foreword to the first edition of Rhoads & Michie's *Mark As Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), xiii. He does note that “such a strategy could conceivably have resulted from conscious or even unconscious art.”

fact, repeat this prophecy three time—i.e., there is a historical basis of event for the structure reflected in the text.

It would seem, at least in the case of Mark, that the more detailed and more complex and sophisticated the structure proposed, the less likely that it is authorial in origin. Most is *not* deliberate and therefore not particularly significant. In the original oral setting (Peter's preaching) some simpler and briefer patterns might have been intentional or obvious, but elaborate ones are much less likely. An approach to the gospel which requires complex structure and arrangement to understand the text may well be overdrawn and place hermeneutical weight where it was not intended. Granted, every element of the text is providential (assuming a sovereign God!), and Scripture is verbally, plenary inspired and therefore inerrant, but that does not require that every linguistic or literary detail is semantic—i.e., that it carries/has meaning.

Conclusion

Why would this approach appeal to conservative, evangelical scholars (or students or pastors)? Some may be persuaded that there are sufficient benefits to be offered by this emphasis to be worth traversing the theoretical mine fields of theory (most of which appear to be hostile to a biblical faith). It does result in a renewed focus on the text (which, as I indicated above, is always welcome). So long as this focus maintains a deliberate and sturdy grasp on historical issues, it may have its place.

In other cases, however, such an approach may allow people to deal with the text in an apparently careful way, yet by deliberate disinterest avoid the sticky questions of authorship, composition, and historicity.⁵⁴ Is it perhaps the concern, "I don't think that I can honestly hold the old conservative views or rebut the 'liberal' ones, so I will address the text as it stands and declare the other questions irrelevant"? In some cases this may be a real concern; in others it may serve to mask a shift in theological position, moving away from a traditional, orthodox view of inerrancy.⁵⁵ Such individuals may still give assent to inerrancy, but a literary approach allows them to bypass sensitive questions with which it would be uncomfortable to deal in a conservative theological setting.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Porter notes that this is a strong suspicion among historical critics ("Literary Approaches," 119).

⁵⁵This is not to suggest that anyone who rejects a traditional interpretation of a particular text is thereby denying the truth of the Bible! As Moisés Silva points out, "for many believers, unfortunately, assurance that the Bible is true appears to be inseparable from assurance about traditional interpretive positions, so that if we question the latter we seem to be doubting the former" ("Old Princeton, Westminster, and Inerrancy," *WTJ* 50 [1988]: 78). He goes on to say the "the Christian church may and must condemn hermeneutical approaches as well as specific interpretations that contradict the teaching of Scripture. But the point is this: the church cannot simply appeal to the infallibility of the Bible. The church is obligated to show persuasively that these interpretations are wrong. In short, we must exegete that infallible and demonstrate that we have understood its teachings" (*ibid.*, 79).

⁵⁶Moisés Silva comments that "there has long been a need for capable evangelical scholars to address this issue [of historicity] head-on. Those who have tried their hand at it have usually hesitated to go much below the surface ... or they have adopted mainstream positions without integrating them into basic tenets of the Christian faith" (editor's preface to *Art of Biblical History* by V. Philips Long, 9–10). Also see Henry's comments in this regard ("Narrative Theology," 12). This may well be one of the issues behind Robert Gundry's commentary on Matthew in which he uses literary arguments (in this case largely genre: midrash) to deny the historicity of many events (e.g., the wise men story is a creative, literary fiction that Matthew "creates" out of the shepherd story in order to attribute royal worship to Jesus). Gundry still affirms inerrancy, but he was asked to resign from ETS since, in their judgment, his practice denied what he professed to believe. (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.) To be fair to Gundry, it should be noted that some of the proceedings may have been handled less than courteously and that many of the charges against him failed to address the real issues. For an assessment of the hermeneutical issues involved, see Carson, "Recent Developments," 35–36 and the articles footnoted there. Those

“Can’t we simply enter imaginatively into the world that the Bible creates and let that imaginative identification mould our thoughts and actions—even if that world itself, like Tolkien’s Middle Earth, should turn out to be purely imaginary?”⁵⁷ Long’s answer to that question, with which I agree, is, not so long as Paul’s declaration stands: “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.... your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:14, 17).

Postscript

This paper should not be taken as a rejection of all elements of literary criticism, whether literary structure or literary genre. That is another paper. This discussion has sought to focus on some basic precautions that must be observed in any use of such conventions in the framework of an evangelical view of Scripture as inspired and inerrant. Indeed, there are some positive values in literary study. Vanhoozer summaries some of these issues well.

Real appreciation of Scripture’s literary pluralism has been somewhat overshadowed by the paradigm of God as author. A thoroughgoing acknowledgement of Scripture’s diverse forms better helps us to understand the *humanity* of Scripture, without surrendering the notion of divine authorship. God used linguistic and literary conventions in order to communicate with human beings. The diverse literary forms, far from being a weakness of Scripture, ensure a rich communication and are actually one of Scripture’s perfections.⁵⁸

Scripture is composed of “ordinary” language and “ordinary” literature. To say this in no way disparages Scripture, nor does it dispute its status as “God’s Word.” “Mere” language is itself miraculous; it is the currency of our everyday transactions, of our personal, business, and even spiritual relationships. Jesus prayed and taught in “ordinary” language. There is no such thing as “religious language” as such; poetry and science are two artificial perfections of ordinary language. That God’s word has been communicated in everyday language is not a fault so much as a perfection or divine revelation, for only as “ordinary” language could Scripture communicate to “ordinary” people in “ordinary” situations. We should no more consider it a “weakness” that the Bible is a human book than we should deem Jesus’ humanity an “imperfection.” Indeed, these ordinary human forms were essential both for revelation and redemption.

Considering the Bible as ordinary language and literature has implications for theology. It would appear to rule out the basic premise of the Biblical Theology movement, viz., that there are biblical or “religious” words that have a special theological significance. Similarly, the presupposition of the New Biblical Theology [i.e., literary criticism] also becomes doubtful. The “shape” of the biblical genres does not have an additional theological significance that is appended to the normal functioning of its literary forms. The attempt to read theological significance into literary forms is ill-advised—particularly when “literary” is taken to mean “poetic,” hence nonreferential.⁵⁹

Systematic theology attempts to give a coherent articulation of the Christian vision or world view, as presented through Scripture’s literary forms. At the same time, theology is conscious of its second-order status as a discourse. Because it stresses logical consistency, theology is prone to lose noncognitive aspects of Scripture’s communication (such as its force).

Does this mean that the actual literary form is indispensable, that we can only have, say, “narrative theology”? No, for theology can attempt to describe what it cannot conceptually paraphrase. But theologians are bound to their texts unlike secular literary critics, for theology’s text is extraordinary: it is the word of

who deny the historicity of Jonah on literary grounds (by defining it as fictional genre—and this is one of the raging debates in Old Testament studies currently) reflect a similar problem. I have known of several professors in past years who taught at other very conservative schools who left for “wider pastures” after teaching in their original setting for a number of years while privately holding views much broader than the school on such issues. These men have not “gone liberal”—and I still count them friends, but their theological shifts have certainly moved them to the left on that (rather ambiguous) scale of evangelicalism.

⁵⁷Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 119.

⁵⁸Vanhoozer, “Semantics of Biblical Literature,” 79.

⁵⁹Ibid., 85.

God. Theologies, then, are never substitutes for Scripture (for what God has said in ordinary literature to ordinary people). Rather, theology is the humble attempt to receive God's extraordinary communication in all the fullness of its meaning, power, and truth.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Ibid., 104.