

## OLD TESTAMENT POETRY AS A VEHICLE FOR HISTORIOGRAPHY

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IN THE PAST FEW DECADES the literary nature of the Bible has received significant attention.<sup>1</sup> Bible students have gained an appreciation for the biblical writers as literary artisans or craftsmen. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the biblical writers made use of literary features characteristic of given genres, rhetorical structures, stock expressions, word pairs, figurative language, and communicated God's message with vividness, clarity, and impact. Scholars have proposed various literary approaches to aid in understanding the Scriptures,<sup>2</sup> and this article addresses one area of this discussion, involving questions like the following. Can literary artifice or craft describe historical personages and events or must they be regarded as fictional? Is there any room for hyperbole in an Old Testament narrative that describes a historical event? How does one understand poetic passages that describe historical events? What evidence is there for the historicity of the prose and poetic accounts in Exodus 14-15? What principles should be kept in mind when dealing with historical and poetic material?

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview see Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 58-87; and Iain W. Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 585-606.

<sup>2</sup> A few examples of these literary approaches are (a) New Criticism (e.g., Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* [Sheffield: Almond, 1983]; and M. Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984]); (b) structuralism (Robert Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977]; and E. V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978]); and (c) deconstructionism (J. D. Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* [New York: Seabury, 1980]; and Peter D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]).

## NARRATIVE AND HISTORICITY

The growing recognition of the need to regard biblical narratives as literature has led to a greater emphasis on the creative art of the biblical authors. At the same time many scholars date these narratives fairly late, creating a significant chronological gap between the alleged events described in the narratives and the time of their composition. Although these narratives give the impression that they speak of the past, many scholars regard them as "historicized fiction," viewing them as "stories" rather than historically reliable accounts.

According to Millard a "story" can signify "a narrative, true or presumed to be true," or "history . . . as opposed to fiction," or "a recital of events that have or are alleged to have happened," or "a narrative of real or, more usually, fictitious events, designed for the entertainment of the hearer or reader."<sup>3</sup> Millard observes that this last definition is probably the most widely accepted meaning for the word among critical scholars today.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have proposed various terms to describe Old Testament narratives, some of which are "historicized fiction" or "fictionalized history,"<sup>5</sup> "storicized' history,"<sup>6</sup> and "fictive imagination."<sup>7</sup>

THE IMPACT OF IDEOLOGY<sup>8</sup>

Some writers claim that since biblical narratives are ideologically biased they cannot be presenting history.<sup>9</sup> Lemche plays history against ideology when he affirms that "the traditional materials about David cannot be regarded as an attempt to write history, as

<sup>3</sup> A. R. Millard, "Story, History, and Theology," in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 25, 33-34, 41.

<sup>6</sup> W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Burke O. Long, "Historical Narrative and the Fictionalizing Imagination," *Vetus Testamentum* 35 (1985): 405.

<sup>8</sup> John Bimson frames the discussion of the historiographical nature of Old Testament narratives by examining the impact of ideology, genre, and mythology ("Old Testament History and Sociology," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*, ed. Craig C. Broyles [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 134-37).

<sup>9</sup> For example Gosta W. Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 375-76.

such. Rather, they represent an ideological programmatic composition that defends the assumption of power by the Davidic dynasty, and it must have had one particular group of readers in mind, who required to be convinced of David's innocence."<sup>10</sup> Along a similar line Ahlstrom suggests that ideology and facts and/or objectivity are mutually exclusive. "Biblical historiography is a literary phenomenon whose primary goal is not to create a record of factual events. Rather, it is a form of writing steered by, the writers' idea that the events being described were expressions of the divine will. . . . biblical historiography is dogmatic in character. . . . Because the authors of the Bible were historiographers and used stylistic patterns to create a 'dogmatic' and, as such, tendentious literature, one may question the reliability of their product."<sup>11</sup> Ahlstrom also writes, "Biblical historiography is not a product built on facts. It reflects the narrator's outlook and ideology rather than known facts. . . . Most of the writings about the premonarchic time are of dubious historical value."<sup>12</sup> In another work Ahlstrom suggests that "biblical narrators were not really concerned about historical truth. Their goal was not that of a modern historian—the ideal of 'objectivity' had not yet been invented. In writing their 'historiography' they maintained that their view of the past corresponded to Yahweh's view. Sometimes their historical novels are no more than that: novels."<sup>13</sup>

The question is whether narratives with a didactic or propagandistic intent can also be viewed as history writing. Younger and Millard demonstrate that a definition of history that excludes ideological or propagandistic tendencies is unrealistically narrow.<sup>14</sup> Examining a number of historiographic records from various ancient civilizations, Chavalas concludes that "the fact that a work is propagandistic does not preclude it from having historical value."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1988), 53 (italics his).

<sup>11</sup> Gosta Ahlstrom, "The Role of Archaeological and Literary Remains in Reconstructing Israel's History," in *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact, and Israel's Past*, ed. Diana Vilander Edelman (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1991), 118.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–35.

<sup>13</sup> Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> K. Lawson Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1990), 31–35; and Millard, "Story, History, and Theology," 54–60.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Chavalas, "Genealogical History as 'Charter': A Study of Old Babylonian Period Historiography and the Old Testament," in *Faith, Tradition, and History*:

In fact one could ask if "it is even possible, much less desirable, to write history apart from some angle or point of view that informs the historian's thesis. Historiography reflects intention, and intention requires selectivity and purpose."<sup>16</sup> Rather than something to avoid, it is important to recognize that biblical history does not have to be without bias to be regarded as history writing.<sup>17</sup>

#### THE IMPACT OF GENRE (AESTHETICS)

In the opinion of various scholars literary craft and an accurate historical representation are incompatible. This unfortunate conclusion arises, at least in part, from the association of biblical literature with modern literary theories. To secular literary theorists, literature is art, created for its own sake and not for any purpose external to itself. In other words, according to some, "literature has nothing to do with reality—past, present, or future."<sup>18</sup> Ramsay asserts that "the telling of a story does not in and of itself constitute a claim that the events narrated actually happened. The story has a world of its own, whether based on actual events or not. As a story it is not dependent on its correspondence with actual historical realities."<sup>19</sup> Others contend that the biblical writers' obvious concern for literary artistry (displaying traits normally associated with fictional narratives—plot, dialogue, point of view, and characterization)<sup>20</sup> demonstrates that biblical narratives were meant as literary pieces rather than historiographical material.<sup>21</sup> Davies contends that the literary nature of biblical narratives precludes their historical viability.

*Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Garnett H. Reid, "Minimalism and Biblical History," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998): 407.

<sup>17</sup> Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 33; cf. John Goldingay, "That You May Know That Yahweh Is God—A Study in the Relationship between Theology and Historical Truth in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972): 82—84.

<sup>18</sup> Tremper Longman III, "Storytellers and Poets in the Bible: Can Literary Artifice Be True?" in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 143.

<sup>19</sup> G. W. Ramsay, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Reconstructing Israel's Early History* (London: SCM, 1982), 123 (*italics his*).

<sup>20</sup> John Bimson, "Old Testament History and Sociology," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*, ed. Craig C. Broyles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 135.

<sup>21</sup> Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1992), 122; cf. John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 311, 319.

History is a narrative, in which happenings and people are turned into events and characters. . . . Whenever we try to describe the past we indulge in story-telling. . . . All story is fiction, and that must include historiography. The historian may like to invest trust in these stories, but should never avoid the question "why is this story being told?" The answer can never be "because what it describes happened," for not only is that untrue . . . but the fact of something happening does not of itself provide an adequate reason for telling it. Literature is a form of persuasive communication, and it cannot help conveying its author. Most literary critics would accept that . . . most literature is ideology. If so, historiography, as a genre of literature, is also ideology. It is not acceptable for an historian to trust the text or its unknown author. Credulity does not become an historian. Skepticism, rather is the proper stance. . . . What is important is that the historian's story must in some way ring true to modern ears.<sup>22</sup>

Referring to Judges 5 as narrative poetry, Berlin affirms that narrative is a "*form of representation*."<sup>23</sup> "Abraham in Genesis is not a real person any more than a painting of an apple is a real fruit. This is not a judgment on the existence of a historical Abraham any more than it is a statement about the existence of apples. It is just that we should not confuse a historical individual with his narrative representation."<sup>24</sup>

Many scholars who study narrative or historiographical literature also make a similar affirmation about historicity. Even though a biblical narrative lacks the artificiality or heroic elevation of certain legendary genres and appears to be a "realistic narrative," these writers resist the idea that the narrative world depicted in these passages has anything to do with the "real" world of the past. It delineates a "'fictive world,' entire in itself and referring only to itself. Its integrity must not be compromised by seeking to relate it to anything outside itself. Text and history must be kept apart."<sup>25</sup> For example Nelson creates a gap between what the canonical text says and what may have actually happened. Concerning Jeroboam I he writes, "Historically the narrator may be doing Jeroboam a grave injustice; canonically the anachronistic evaluation is fully justified."<sup>26</sup> Thompson defines historiography as "a specific literary

<sup>22</sup> Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel,"* 13-14 (italics his).

<sup>23</sup> Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 13 (italics hers).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville: John Knox, 1987), 81. Just before this statement Nelson affirms that he has no idea whether what the

genre relating to critical descriptions and evaluations of past reality and events, in contrast to more fictional varieties of prose," but then he states that the Old Testament contains no historiographical accounts at all.<sup>27</sup> Thompson distinguishes between salvation history, (which he says never happened and is only a literary form) and actual history.<sup>28</sup> Many writers distinguish between "historical Israel," discernible by uncovered artifacts and datable inscriptions, and "biblical Israel," the Israel described in the Old Testament.<sup>29</sup> For these writers the "biblical Israel" is only a literary construct that has "some points of contact with the past, but is so ideologically slanted that it cannot serve as a starting point for serious historical enquiry. It must be set aside, as we attempt to replace fiction with facts—as a truly critical scholarship takes over from a scholarship compromised by religious sentiment."<sup>30</sup>

In response Provan affirms that biblical historiographical narratives (1 and 2 Kings in particular) seek "to tell us, not about a fictive world, but the real world that God has made and in which God acts."<sup>31</sup> He adds, "There appear to be literary conventions governing the use of names and numbers, for example, that must be taken into consideration when attempting any correlation between text and history where these phenomena are concerned. To fail to take the historiographical impulse seriously overall, however, is to fail to take the book seriously. That failure is as profound as the failure to read the book as a book. It will not do—at least if one thinks it important that texts and their authors should be treated with respect."<sup>32</sup>

The literary craft of the Bible does not in itself argue against the truthfulness or historicity of the events and people it describes. As Millard points out, "The history writer is only as limited as the

narrator records about Jeroboam I is "based on genuine annalistic sources or is pure fiction."

<sup>27</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 373.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>29</sup> Some of the scholars who take this approach are Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*; Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*; and Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources*.

<sup>30</sup> Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

repertoire of his genre as any other artist is, namely, by the constraints of the primary materials. The writer's store of language, experience, and imagination can all contribute to enriching the narrative without smothering the reality of the events he describes or detracting from it."<sup>33</sup> Sternberg demonstrates that ideology, history, and literary aesthetics come together in Old Testament narratives.<sup>34</sup>

#### THE IMPACT OF RECORDING DIVINE ACTIVITY

Various scholars argue that the biblical narratives' concern for recording divine activity precludes one from utilizing those narratives as a legitimate historical source. For example Ahlstrom writes, "Since the biblical text is concerned primarily with divine actions, which are not verifiable, it is impossible to use the exodus story as a source to reconstruct the history of the Late Bronze and Early Iron I periods. The text is concerned with mythology rather than with a detailed reporting of historical facts. As soon as someone 'relates' a god's actions or words, mythology has been written."<sup>35</sup> Ahlstrom then cites the Kadesh Inscriptions of Rameses II, which present the Egyptian pharaoh (and the god Amon) as a powerful victor when the battle might have been a near-disaster for the Egyptians. Ahlstrom contends that this biased reporting of the battle indicates its mythological rather than historiological function.<sup>36</sup>

However, notwithstanding Rameses' open reliance on divine help and the biased (propagandistic) purpose of the inscriptions and accompanying sculptures, Egyptologists accept Rameses' records as primary documents in reconstructing a major episode in Egyptian military history.<sup>37</sup> Bimson concludes that references "to a deity, even to a divine intervention and causation, should therefore be seen as cultural or religious encoding; they tell us nothing about

<sup>33</sup> Millard, "Story, History, and, Theology," 48-49.

<sup>34</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1-57.

<sup>35</sup> Gosta W. Ahlstrom, *Who Were the Israelites?* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 46; cf. idem, *The History of Ancient Israel*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Israel*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe ca. 1200 B.C.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 130-34; and R. O. Faulkner, "Egypt: From the Inception of the Nineteenth Dynasty to the Death of Ramesses III," in *The Middle East and the Aegean Region c. 1380—1000 B.C.*, CAH 2/2, 3d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), chap. 32, sec. 6.

the historicity of the event so encoded."<sup>38</sup> Millard adds that the presence of a "report of divine communication does not invalidate the accompanying episodes in biblical or other ancient texts any more than it does in the story of Joan of Arc."<sup>39</sup>

Some authors suggest that the word "fiction" can be used to describe the work of a biblical writer whose narrative is not the event itself but serves as an account of that event.<sup>40</sup> However, as Long suggests, the terms "artistry" or "craft," not "fiction," should be used to describe the biblical writers' creativity and selectivity in relating various historical events.<sup>41</sup> Of course any reference to a biblical writer's creativity does not imply that he inserted information that was not true historically. As with all Scripture written by human authors, the Holy Spirit made use of their personalities and writing styles in the process of inspiration.

#### OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES AND TRUTH

Are Old Testament historical narratives to be regarded as "true"? Most nonevangelical scholars maintain that the Bible's historical narratives, while fictitious, are nonetheless "true." As Reid points out, "This oxymoron, that an event can be true yet not true, is explained by redefining what 'true' means. To a minimalist, a historical event is not 'true' in that it conforms to the real or actual but that it conveys teaching—it presents 'truth.'"<sup>42</sup> Minimalists Ord and Coote contend that "many biblical stories are like *Animal Farm*. They are true, though not historically accurate or factual. They are concerned with proclaiming a message, not with provid-

<sup>38</sup> Bimson, "Old Testament History and Sociology," 137. Concerning "cultural or religious encoding" see Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> Millard, "Story, History, and Theology," 43. Prior to this statement Millard delineated Joan of Arc's reliance on visions and voices (idem, 42-43).

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion in V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 62-63, 86.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 63, 86.

<sup>42</sup> Reid, "Minimalism and Biblical History," 396. Reid defines "minimalism" as follows: "Their method is primarily nontextual; they admit deriving a minimum of credible history from the biblical materials themselves. The Bible is primarily fiction, as they view it, consisting of myth and legend. Instead they appeal to what they see as more objective, scientific sources of historical data, namely, the results of archaeology and social science. Their ideology in turn rests on a philosophical hermeneutic inclined toward discounting the Bible as a reliable source in matters historical" (ibid., 394-95). Some scholars who have been described as minimalists are Gosta Ahlstrom, Robert B. Coote, Philip R. Davies, Niels Peter Lemche, Thomas L. Thompson, John Van Seters, and Keith W. Whitlam.

ing us with a chronology of events from the history of Israel or, the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We must learn to read them not as history but as message."<sup>43</sup> In that perspective, for example, Exodus 14-15 tells a story of release from bondage that, they say, "presents truth but does not narrate history; its effect is to produce faith, yet its content does not provide fact."<sup>44</sup> In other words there is no necessary connection between the events portrayed in a biblical narrative and the actual history of that time. Davies suggests, "Where this sophistication has percolated into university and college curricula, it is now much easier for a student to appreciate that the deity who destroys Sodom and Gomorrah and the fish that swallows Jonah are each characters in a narrative constructed by an author, and, as the phrase goes, any resemblance to real or actual persons or events may be purely coincidental."<sup>45</sup> Lemche, another minimalist, affirms that "it is a fact that the history of Israel as told by the Old Testament has little if anything to do with the real historical developments in Palestine until at least the later part of the Hebrew monarchy. [It] should be argued that from a historian's point of view we have to consider the historical literature of the Old Testament a poor source of historical information."<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to this perspective evangelicals affirm that the biblical narratives present events and characters to the reader as "true" history, conveying truths and conforming to reality.<sup>47</sup> As Merrill writes, "If the story as a whole is to be taken seriously as portraying facts, the persons and events to which it attests must also be taken seriously. That is, it must be seen as a true story, a narrative not only reflecting perception about events but one that recounts with accuracy and integrity the events as they actually happened."<sup>48</sup> As Sailhamer proposes, "The authors of the biblical narratives intended to write history and not fiction. Their aim, as they imply throughout, is to record what actually happened in human history."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> David R. Ord and Robert B. Coote, *Is the Bible Really True?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 33; cf. 120.

<sup>44</sup> Reid, "Minimalism and Biblical History," 397.

<sup>45</sup> Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel,"* 12.

<sup>46</sup> Niels Peter Lemche, "The Old Testament — A Hellenistic Book," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 7 (1993): 182.

<sup>47</sup> Reid, "Minimalism and Biblical History," 400.

<sup>48</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "Old Testament History: A Theological Perspective," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:20.

<sup>49</sup> John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zon-

## HISTORICITY AND EXODUS 14-15

Various scholars refer to the unknown location of sites mentioned in Exodus 14:1-2 as an obstacle to historicity. Although the precise route of the Exodus has vexed many Bible students, solving that problem is not necessary in order for one to accept the historicity of the place names mentioned. Others have asked where all the horses used by the Pharaoh's forces in pursuing Israel came from in light of the fifth plague in which "all" livestock died (9:6).<sup>50</sup>

The answer might be found in Exodus 9:20-21, which reads, "The one among the servants of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD made his servants and his livestock flee into the houses; but he who paid no regard to the word of the LORD left his servants and his livestock in the field." These verses imply that many slaves and livestock were saved during the seventh plague because some Egyptians feared God and took appropriate action in light of the warnings that had been given.

In summary the first objections to the historicity or accuracy of the account found in Exodus 14 are somewhat inconsequential. A feasible answer for those concerns is available. For many, however, a major obstacle to accepting the account in Exodus 14 as historical is the astounding nature of the crossing itself. The idea of a group of people (whatever the size) being able to cross a large body of water on dry land with the water piled up as walls on both sides of their route seems to them simply incomprehensible. The subsequent destruction of the pursuing Egyptian force is also amazing and the presence of chapter 15, with its poetic rendering of the events, adds to the problem for some.

## THE COMPLEMENTARY NATURE OF EXODUS 14 AND 15

In discussing Judges 4-5, Younger considers the prose/poetic phenomenon in various ancient Near Eastern texts. He compares poetic accounts with prose annalistic accounts of three Assyrian rulers<sup>51</sup>

dervan, 1995), 54.

<sup>50</sup> The NET Bible note on the word "all" in this verse reads: "The word 'all' clearly does not mean 'all' in the exclusive sense, because subsequent plagues involve cattle. The word must denote such a large number that whatever was left was insignificant for the economy. It could also be taken to mean 'all [kinds of] livestock died'" (p. 134).

<sup>51</sup> Tukulti-Ninurta I, Tiglath-pileser I, and Shalmaneser III (K. Lawson Younger Jr., "Heads! Tails! Or the Whole Coin?! Contextual Method and Intertextual Analysis: Judges 4 and 5," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective*, ed. K. Lawson Younger Jr., William W. Hallo, and Bernard F. Batto [Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1991], 110-16).

and three Egyptian rulers.<sup>52</sup> Younger observes,

Ancient scribes could write different accounts about the same referents. But difference in purpose could determine differences in detail (e.g., the lists of Hittite allies in the Kadesh inscriptions), and in the selectivity of the events narrated (e.g., the Shasu spies in the Ramesses' Bulletin). If the scribes' purpose was to praise the king and/or the gods, poetry naturally offered a medium to heighten the emotions of the praise through rhetorical embellishments. Hence, divine activity and praise of the deities is encountered more often in the poetic versions. Poetic versions, in fact, also provide a very suitable ground for legal legitimation (cf. the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic and the Israel Stela). But in most instances the poetic (or more rhetorical) text also added significant historical details so that the complementary nature of the accounts is manifest.<sup>53</sup>

Commenting on Judges 4 and 5, Younger points out that the song (the poetic account) "provides an emotional and more figurative account with special themes and purpose."<sup>54</sup> As in Judges 4 and 5, the narrative record of the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14) has several points in common with the poetic account and also various points of divergence.<sup>55</sup> The points of divergence arise from the selective presentation of the biblical narrator (Moses) and are not meant to be understood as contradicting the details in the corresponding prose account.

Whereas Exodus 14 narrates the crossing of the Red Sea (affirming the event), Exodus 15 has a different purpose. Through poetic vividness, the songs that Moses and Miriam sang exalt Yahweh as the all-powerful God who intervened on behalf of His people. The descriptions in that chapter, though founded on a historical event, are meant to focus attention on God. The statements in chapter 15 are true, even though God's right hand, for example, did not literally appear to vanquish the Egyptians (vv. 6, 12).

Just as the pairing of poetic and prose narratives in various ancient Near Eastern settings does not cause historians to question the historicity of a given campaign or person, so the complementary nature of Exodus 14 and 15 should not occasion that understanding either. In addition to recognizing the connection in Old Testament accounts between truth and historicity, one must also give attention to the intent of a given passage.

<sup>52</sup> Thutmose III, Ramesses II, and Merneptah (ibid., 117-27).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Richard D. Patterson gives some examples of these similarities and dissimilarities ("Victory at Sea: Prose and Poetry in Exodus 14-15," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 [January-March 2004]: 42-54).

## THE PARADIGMATIC FUNCTION OF THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA

The fact that several biblical writers referred to the crossing of the Red Sea argues for its actual occurrence in time and space; this miracle serves as a paradigm for salvation and deliverance throughout the Bible.<sup>56</sup> Here are just a few examples of later texts that draw on the crossing of the Red Sea as a paradigm. In Joshua 3-4 the crossing of the Jordan River demonstrated to the Israelites that Joshua, their new leader, was a leader like Moses and was worthy of their submission. The Jordan River, at flood stage, was an insurmountable obstacle through which God led them after He parted the waters (3:13-17). The miraculous transit across the Jordan River was a kind of reenactment of the crossing of the Red Sea.<sup>57</sup>

The prophet Isaiah described God's promise to return Israel to the land of promise with abundant allusions to the Exodus event and the crossing of the Red Sea in particular. For example Isaiah 43:16-17 states, "This is what the LORD says, the one who made a road through the sea, a pathway through the surging waters, the one who led chariots and horses to destruction, together with a mighty army. They fell down, never to rise again; they were extinguished, put out like a burning wick" (NET Bible). Through the use of Exodus terminology, God was telling His people, in effect, "I did it before, and I'll do it again."<sup>58</sup>

In Isaiah 51:9-10 the prophet used Exodus imagery to depict God as the one who is able to bring this deliverance about. "Wake up! Wake up! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD! Wake up as in former times, as in antiquity! Did you not smash the Proud One? Did you not wound the sea monster? Did you not dry up the sea, the waters of the great deep? Did you not make a path through the depths of the sea, so those delivered from bondage could cross over?" (NET Bible).

The prophet's reference to the "Proud One" ("Rahab"<sup>59</sup> in some

<sup>56</sup> Peter Enns provides a lengthy and helpful overview of the role of the Exodus event as a salvation paradigm throughout the Old and New Testaments (*Exodus*, New International Version Application Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 279-89). See also F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 32-50.

<sup>57</sup> Enns, *Exodus*, 280.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>59</sup> A note in the NET Bible on Isaiah 51:9 states: "The title רַהַב, 'proud one' (sometimes translated as a proper name, 'Rahab' [cf. New American Bible, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, New Revised Standard Version]) is used here of a symbolic sea monster, known elsewhere in the Bible and in Ugaritic

translations) refers to a symbolic sea monster cited in various ancient Near Eastern creation accounts. In those accounts the sea was a symbol of chaos, and the gods needed to bring the sea under control in order for the world to enjoy stability.<sup>60</sup> At the very least the wording of this verse clearly alludes to the Israelite crossing of the Red Sea recorded in Exodus 14.<sup>61</sup>

The use of the crossing of the Red Sea as a paradigmatic event in these three passages (as well as several others not cited here), argues for the historicity of that event. An event that never happened can hardly serve as a paradigm that would encourage and challenge later generations.

#### WHAT ABOUT HYPERBOLE AND OTHER FORMS OF ARTISTRY?

Hyperbolic language is dramatic language that adds to the vividness of the biblical writer's description of an event. Hyperbole does not refer to unwarranted exaggeration that does not correspond with or accurately represent reality. Nor does authorial creativity imply activity by the writers of Scripture independent from the overseeing and guiding ministry of the Holy Spirit. Linguistic artistry on the part of the biblical authors corresponds with and accurately represents the reality of a given historical event.

Judges 5, for example, provides a poetic description of Deborah and Barak's victory over Sisera and his Canaanite forces. Verses 19-21 read, "The kings of Canaan fought at Taanach near Megiddo's springs, but they carried off no treasures of battle. The stars fought from heaven. The stars in their orbits fought against Sisera. The Kishon River swept them away that ancient river, the Kishon. March on, my soul, with courage!" (New Living Transla-

myth as Leviathan. This sea creature symbolizes the forces of chaos that seek to destroy the created order. In the Bible 'the Proud One' opposes God's creative work, but is defeated (see Job 26:12; Ps 89:10 [ET]). Here the title refers to Pharaoh's Egyptian army that opposed Israel at the Red Sea (see v. 10, and note also Isa 30:7 and Ps 87:4, where the title is used of Egypt)" (p. 1266).

<sup>60</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr. writes, "In myth Leviathan represents the sea and those forces of chaos that oppose Baal's royal authority. In the Old Testament this sea/sea monster symbolism is applied to those forces, both cosmic and historical, that oppose the Lord's kingship and seek to destroy the order He establishes. The battle with the sea/sea monster motif is associated with the Lord's victories over chaos at creation and in history (cf. Pss. 74:13-14; 77:16-20; 89:9-10; Isa. 51:9-10). His subjugation of these forces demonstrates His kingship and sovereignty (Pss. 29:3, 10; 93:3-4)" ("Theology of Isaiah," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Chicago: Moody, 1991], 321-22).

<sup>61</sup> Enns suggests that Isaiah 51:9 also alludes to God's creative work (*Exodus*, 282-83).

tion). According to the biblical poem the overflowing Kishon River swept away Sisera and his Canaanite army and chariots (v. 21). One pictures a great river at flood stage wreaking havoc and destruction on everything in its path.

However, the Kishon River was a fairly small waterway (which could be called a stream) and the narrative in Judges 4:16 indicates that the Canaanite soldiers were killed when "Barak chased the enemy and their chariots all the way to Harosheth-haggoyim, killing all of Sisera's warriors" (NLT). No doubt many chariots became stuck in the water-logged ground of the Jezreel Valley while some were destroyed by Israelite forces later in the battle. Why then did the writer of Judges 5 describe the flooding of the river in this fashion? Was he departing from the truth? Was he describing a legendary event that never happened? No, he used hyperbolic language to heighten the drama and vividness of God's intervention on behalf of His people.

Was a biblical author "at liberty to reconstruct the words of conversations he was not present to hear or even the thoughts of persons which presumably had never been shared?"<sup>62</sup> Merrill proposes that historians "must frequently reconstruct settings in which events occurred, including conversations and introspections that most likely could or would have taken place. This is almost always necessary in order to transform the raw facts of what happened into a good story. The raw facts alone often do not make a story that lives and breathes. To use Alter's terminology, ancient historians used conventional 'type-scenes' to form matrices against which the past must be understood."<sup>63</sup> Lest one conclude from this that biblical "history" is not reliable, Merrill argues that the above conclusion

does not annul the integrity of the record, for facts in any case must be interpreted by the reader as well as by the historian. Every modern observer of the past is free and indeed obligated to "fill in the blanks," for no historical account can be complete. The Old Testament narrative may appear to be an exception to this inasmuch as it is revelation—inspired literature whose veracity is bound up in that dogmatic claim. But inspiration does not mean a sort of dictation where the human authors were simply automated writers. The biblical text consistently shows the marks of its human authors, with endless differences of literary technique and style. Thus, biblical his-

<sup>62</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "History," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese Jr. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 103.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-4 (italics his).

tory is not precluded from critical analysis nor even from the possibility that some imagination was at work in its composition. But imagination is not synonymous either with error or lack of facticity. Though humanly unaware of all the ingredients of the original scene he described, the biblical historian, like any other, reconstructed the complex of events but . . . in such a way as to reflect accurately the acts, words, and even thoughts of the protagonists.<sup>64</sup>

In using hyperbole and other artistry the biblical authors' literary craft does not detract from or conflict with an accurate depiction of the events or persons in question. In fact their careful presentation of a given event and their use of artistic poetic language contribute to the vividness and drama of the narrative.

### PRINCIPLES IN APPROACHING POETIC NARRATIVES

Four suggestions may be offered on how to interpret biblical narratives written in poetic style.

*First, understand the differences between prose and poetic material.* There is no reason to reject the historicity of the events in Exodus 14, nor should one ignore the close relationship Exodus 15 has with the preceding chapter. The vivid and colorful language of chapter 15 does not prevent it from having a solid historical grounding in the events described in chapter 14. Also one should not press the language of poetry through the grid of prose. The language in Exodus 15 does not have to correspond in every detail to the prose description in Exodus 14.

*Second, do not discount the selectivity and creativity of a biblical writer in crafting a given narrative or poetic account.* Through selectivity, word choice, or points of emphasis, a writer can give a particular slant to his presentation of an event or person. The author's description may not be exhaustive, but it will be accurate in what it presents. On occasion a biblical writer may include a conversation or thought process that is understandable and fitting in light of the subject matter, even if those thoughts were not spoken to the biblical writer. The Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors to use words for the greatest dramatic, emotional, and rhetorical effect so that in the end the reader is left in awe of what God has done. Allowing for this reality, the interpreter must be cautious in identifying these kinds of phenomena.

*Third, do not assume that poetic patterns rule out chronological sequence.* In Genesis 1 literary artifice is evident in the parallelism between the first three days of creation and the last three. Some

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 104.

scholars reject the possibility that the days of creation mirror what actually happened, basing some of their conclusion on the poetry and literary artistry of the passage.<sup>65</sup> Literary artistry and/or poetic structure do not, in themselves rule out chronology (or historicity).

*Fourth, be cautious.* As evangelicals affirm the inspiration and inerrancy of God's Word and wrestle with the relationship between historicity and literary craft in Old Testament narratives, and as they seek to treat the biblical literature fairly, they must always be careful in what they regard as part of the literary craft.

### CONCLUSION

Exodus 14 and 15 function as a literary duet, describing one of the most momentous events in the history of God's chosen people. Chapter 14 describes the Israelite crossing of the Red Sea in clear narrative style. Chapter 15 views the same event, but with a much more vivid and impressionistic flavor. One need not question the historicity of the narrative account of this event. Although the event itself is stupendous and almost incomprehensible, the biblical narrator depicts it as historical reality. The prose of chapter 14 communicates the drama of the moment, paving the way for the marvelous intervention of Yahweh, Israel's covenant-keeping God. Then chapter 15 describes that event as a celebration of Yahweh's victory over His enemies and over the elements. The juxtaposition of this poetic account next to the narrative account helps bring to light the importance of giving attention to a passage's form or genre in the interpretive process. The unique wording found in the poetic passage is not meant to contradict the narrative account; instead it adds beauty and luster to the reader's appreciation of that impressive event. Readers must be careful to give due consideration to the historicity of the narrative passage as well to treat fairly the poetic passage that accompanies it.

<sup>65</sup> Meredith Kline, "Because It Had Not Rained," *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1958): 146-57; and Mark Futato, "Because It Had Rained: A Study of Gen 2:5-7 with Implications for Gen 2:4-25 and Gen 1:1-2:3," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60 (1988): 1-21.

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