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Abstract:

God's representation of reality, the Bible, has been given for the purpose of allowing us to see what mere human observers cannot: the hand of God in the whirlwind.



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The Bible, History, and Objectivity

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Reality is seamless; history is not. History is sewn together in our minds by connecting fragments of the reality that we experience via our senses. And there is no possible way that human beings, individually or collectively, can even begin to observe all the nuances of reality; indeed much or most of reality escapes our notice. While the historian may attribute the winning of a great battle to the military genius of the victorious general, a peek at the undetected reality of it all might very well reveal that the losing army suffered defeat due to a plague of acute diarrhea (recall the plague of hemorrhoids that Yahweh brought upon the Philistines when they captured the Ark of the Covenant! [1 Samuel 5]). Indeed, the loss of a battle may be accounted by the historian as the result of any number of physical factors, while in reality it may have been the hand of God.

For some odd reason, historians and archaeologists alike (not to mention the majority of philosophers and scientists) meticulously avoid integrating the divine into their perceptions of the universe. Even when people of faith write history, they often seek to stroke the skepticism of their readers by sewing in patches of “rationalism,” which suggest that “miracles,” like the children of Israel crossing the Re(e)d Sea, could very well have been accomplished by a concert of converging natural phenomena. Just to mention the idea that God may have taken advantage of some localized climatological or geological occurrence to accomplish his purposes seems to make us feel better about the possibility that such stories may have some truth to them after all. Yet if God does exist, would he not be the most fundamental element of reality itself? Then why are some so eager to dismiss the clear work of his hand in the mortal dimension? And why should we suppose that our pathetically limited perceptions accurately represent the reality we so feebly observe?

I understand perfectly well the penchant of some historians to dismiss as much of the “supernatural” as possible. After all, logic and reason should prevail in our attempts to write about the past. But we must be careful about what we allow to pass for logic and reason. If God exists and he is the Creator of all and is actively involved in his universe, then it makes absolutely no sense to write him out of his own story. I find that in writing history, many historians are terribly illogical and unreasonable in their treatment of the biblical stories not only in disparaging the divine element, but also in dismissing the historicity of the people and events associated with divine activity. For example, not only is Abraham’s interaction with his God, Yahweh, disbelieved, but also the historical existence of Abraham himself is denied.¹

This kind of categorical dismissal of the historical character of the biblical narratives is, from a historiographical perspective, sheer nonsense. Such anti-biblical bias is clearly exposed when

¹ I cannot over-emphasize this point. Dismissing the historical factuality of biblical characters is not, nor has it ever been, a logical scholarly exercise. The fact that so many scholars are allowed to get away with such subjective nonsense casts a rather dismal light on the entire historical-critical community.

we examine how our understanding of history is pieced together from the extant records of the ancient Near East. The documents and inscriptions from which we derive our ancient Near Eastern “histories” are all, without exception, set within a mythological context amidst gods, goddesses, and demons, yet historians are accustomed to accept these ancient accounts as generally factual and their human characters as actual. If this were not the case, we would have no histories of ancient Egypt, Anatolia, or Mesopotamia. The stories of great Egyptian pharaohs like Tuthmosis III and Rameses II are inextricably bound to divine dimensions, yet no one denies the historical reality behind these characters, who, by their own proclamations, wore the mantle of divinity.

But often when historians and archaeologists approach the biblical stories, key characters—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua—and the accomplishments attributed to them because of their relationship to Yahweh are called fictional, non-historical, or mythical. The reality of the human characters in Egyptian records is uncritically accepted, while the existence of the Israelite heroes is readily dismissed. Treating the biblical characters in this manner is historiographically unjustified, illogical, and unreasonable. And we must not be so irresponsible as to reject categorically the interaction of Yahweh, the biblical God of history, with these men and women of old. Indeed, the whirlwind may be the result of God’s hand sweeping through reality, creating a vortex of observed phenomena which defies all human powers of observation and explanation. To the human witness, reality may evidence all manner of chaos, whereas the Bible allows us to see that the whirlwind is often shaped like the hand of God—but only for those who through Scripture have enough “distance” to observe from the divine perspective.

In dismissing the historical integrity of the Bible, some scholars are forced by their anti-biblical bias to postulate extremely late dates for the origin of biblical stories. But in doing so, they multiply their error and reveal their inability to exercise reasonable objectivity. One good example of this—and I could give dozens of others²—is the use of selective comparisons between segments of biblical narrative with cultural contexts that are much later in date than the face-value biblical chronology would suggest. J.K. Hoffmeier, in his excellent work *Israel in Egypt*, notes the glaring weakness of J. Van Seters’ comparison of the Israelite crossing of the Jordan River during flood stage with Neo-Assyrian (ca. 8th century BCE) accounts of Sargon II and Ashurbanipal’s crossing of the Tigris and Euphrates during the spring high-water season. Hoffmeier counters:

Van Seters’s treatment of this matter fails on two points. First, the spring of the year was the traditional time for kings to go to war in Israel (cf. 2 Sam. 11:2) as well as in Mesopotamia....Spring is also when the rivers, the Jordan as well as the Tigris and Euphrates, are at their highest levels because of melting snow from the mountains to the north. Secondly, the seemingly miraculous crossing of raging rivers by a king is well attested in earlier Near Eastern sources [such as] Hattusili I (ca. 1650 B.C.) [and] Sargon the Great (ca. 2371-2316 B.C.). Consequently, there is no basis for Van Seters’s

² See works such as I. Finkelstein and N. Na’aman, eds., *From Nomadism to Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994); N. P. Lemche, *Prelude to Israel’s Past* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998); I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001); and G. W. Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). For potent refutations of this kind of hypercritical thinking, see W. G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001); and K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003).

assertion. The river crossing in Joshua 3 by Israel's forces accurately reflects the seasonal realities of military life in the Near East throughout the three millennia B.C.³

Scholars like Van Seters are fond of comparing biblical materials with later (usually late Iron Age) Near Eastern texts and cultural settings for the purpose of supporting their thesis that the stories of the biblical patriarchs and origins of Israel were myths or fictions concocted by Jewish priests as late as the Persian, even Hellenistic, periods. Their disregard for objectivity is evidenced by the fact that they fail to make comparative analyses based on Near Eastern texts and cultural contexts of the third and second millennia BCE where, according to the biblical chronology, the events actually took place.

We must be careful to admit that human sensory observation, memory, and recall are, at best, only frayed pieces of the seamless fabric of reality. Thus, God is the sole objective observer of reality, because only his perspective allows a viewing of the seamless whole. When God represents reality, or a segment of it, that representation is perfectly true. And even if the divine representations provide only minute glimpses of past events, those glimpses are perfectly factual on all levels of reality, including God himself. And surely, God's representation of reality, the Bible, has been given for the purpose of allowing us to see what mere human observers cannot: the hand of God in the whirlwind.

Relative to the human task of writing our conceptions of ancient Near Eastern history, the traditional approach to the Bible—albeit typically with a good dose of anti-biblical bias—has been to treat it as patient rather than agent. But because the Bible is God's representation of reality, and because the perfections of the true narrative case⁴ in Scripture are far superior to all other representations, I am convinced by substantial evidence⁵ that biblical data must occupy the role of agent in our attempts to reconstruct any sequence of ancient Near Eastern events which overlaps the biblical narrative. Treating the Bible merely as another extant ancient Near Eastern text to be critically considered may lend an air of scholarship to the work of those who deal with biblical subjects, but it is actually the death of true objectivity. The Bible must always be the corrective, never the corrected. If the Bible is God's representation of reality, then an objective assessment of all matters must begin and end with Scripture.

³ J.K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York/Oxford: Oxford U., 1996).

⁴ See J. W. Oller, Jr. and S. Collins, "The Logic of True Narratives," *Biblical Research Bulletin* 1.2 (2001) ; and S. Collins and J. W. Oller, Jr., "Is the Bible a True Narrative Representation?" *BRB* 1.3 (2001).

⁵ For example, see K.D. Boa and R.M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2001); G.R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin: College Press, 1996); and J.W. Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1978). For a concise, practical presentation of evidential Christian apologetics, see S. Collins, *The Defendable Faith: Lessons in Christian Apologetics* (Albuquerque: Trinity Southwest University Press, 2005).