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What Are the Characteristics of Evangelical Study of the Old Testament?

This article is an expanded version of a lecture given on the occasion of the author's installation as David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, on 5 May 1999.¹

Key words: Bible; Old Testament; scholarship; evangelical.

The inauguration of a chair named after David Allan Hubbard, the distinguished President and Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, seems an appropriate occasion to reflect on the nature of evangelical study of the Old Testament. What are its characteristics? What follows is, of course, a statement of my personal convictions. In form it is descriptive, but its deeper structure is prescriptive. These are some of the premises that I realize are implicit in the way I approach the Old Testament in living and writing, in teaching and preaching.

I. Evangelical study of the Old Testament works within the framework of the gospel

The first feature that makes evangelical study of the Old Testament evangelical is that it works within the framework of the evangel, the gospel.

So what is the gospel? The gospel is the fact that God had such love for the world as to give up the only son God had, and that God did this so that people could live real life. The gospel is the fact that God has thus set about turning the world into what it was always meant to be, a world that reflects who God is. The gospel is the fact that God wanted to be in relationship with us, and took the action that was needed so that nothing would stand in the way of this relationship. We study the Old Testament in the light of that.

One of my delights in teaching is getting students to read the Bible. Many come to seminary knowing that it is the inspired and infallible Word of God, yet (on their own account) having a strange impression of its contents. For instance, they thought that the God of the Old Testament was harsh and punitive. Then I send them off to read

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Genesis or the Psalms, and they come back wide-eyed. One student hesitatingly and tentatively commented in a class that it seemed to her that the God of Genesis was more hurt and saddened by human sin than angry about it: 'Was that right?', she asked, afraid to believe what she had perceived in the text because it did not correspond to what she had been told about this God.

She had been taught to read the Old Testament in the light of the gospel in a perverted sense, as if God's nature was to be angry with us, so that it was just as well that we had Jesus to placate this angry God. Reading the Old Testament in the light of the gospel in the truer sense means something different. It means recognizing that the God of love whom we encounter in Jesus is the God who created the world out of love and commissioned Abraham out of love and related to Israel out of love and in love. The structure of Old Testament faith is itself the structure of the gospel—or rather, the structure of the gospel is the structure of Old Testament faith. Like the New Testament, the Old Testament is about a God of love who relates to people in grace, that grace that receives supreme concrete form in Christ's cross. Yahweh is not a God of wrath and Old Testament religion is not one dominated by legalism. Yahweh is prepared to be tough when situations require it, as Jesus is, though Yahweh does not find it first nature to be like that. As Isaiah almost puts it (28:21), it requires the expression of God's shadow side.

When I send students off to read the Old Testament, as well as discovering that Yahweh is a much more interesting person than they thought, they also sometimes realize something else. They discover that the human beings in the Old Testament, especially the men (people like Abraham and Jacob and Joseph), are much shadier characters than they had been told. These human characters are also more interesting, too, partly because of that. To judge from the Old Testament story, David, for instance, whose name appears at the top of all those Psalms, was not an Old Testament Eugene Peterson. He was more an Old Testament JFK—great leader, no clue about women.

The nature of the gospel alerts us to the fact that all sinned and came short of God's glory. We can thus see the theme of the Old Testament story as resembling that of a film noir, a story in which there are finally no heroes, no role models, a story in which even the goodies are flawed, often deeply flawed. It is a story that can work this way and not make you leave the cinema feeling sombre as you do after *L.A. Confidential* or *A Simple Plan*, because you know that God is also at work in this story. God is not dependent on having flawless heroes to work with, but is committed to achieving a purpose all the same. That is the gospel, and that is the nature of the Old Testament.

My colleague Michael Moore tells of an occasion when he was teaching an adult Bible class and inviting them to see the struggles and failures in the lives of people such as Esther, Abraham, and Joseph. Eventually a veteran Sunday School teacher protested. 'You've got it all wrong because you fail to understand that these people aren't really like us. They have a special measure of the Holy Spirit. . . . These people are our heroes, our role models. That's why they are in the Bible'. The talk had been subverting this person's deepest convictions about what the Bible is.² Evangelical study of the Old Testament does not have to rewrite it in order to turn its heroes into saints; we can let them be the sinners we also are. We read the Old Testament as the story of God's grace not of human achievement.

Studying the Old Testament in the light of the gospel means studying it in the light of the conviction that here, too, God has been especially concerned to develop personal relationships with people and that the encouragement of these relationships is one purpose of scripture.

Now this is a dangerous statement. Evangelicalism has close links with pietism, and it can easily assume that developing personal relationships with us is the only thing God is really interested in. This is not so. Indeed, developing personal relationships with us may not even be the main thing God is interested in. If it were, the Bible would be a different kind of book. God has a much more varied range of concerns than that. That is why we should watch the world news.

But in reaction to a pietistic overstress on our personal relationships with God, scholarship has tended to ignore the Old Testament's own concern with these relationships. It has thereby missed an aspect of the Old Testament itself, and failed to do its own job. It has narrowed down its interest in the Old Testament to one that is a mirror-image of that of pietism.

We are fortunate to live in an age when this is no longer so, and when notable Old Testament scholars write books on Old Testament spirituality. Paradoxically, of course, what then happens is that we discover that the way Christians generally go about prayer and praise bears little relationship to the prayer and praise that appear in scripture. Reading the Old Testament in the light of the gospel then turns out itself to be a dangerous exercise. It may suggest we need to change, for instance to change the way we pray.

Reading the Old Testament in the light of the gospel means taking account of the fact that the gospel story is a continuation of the Old

2 See *Reconciliation: A Study of Biblical Families in Conflict* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1994; 2nd ed., 1998) 13-14.

Testament story. This does not affect the way we read individual episodes in the Old Testament itself; it affects the way we see it as a larger whole, and as part of an even larger whole. We read it as open to closure, though recognizing that in itself it does not prescribe what this closure will look like.

The Old Testament story is not one that leads inevitably to Jesus, as if it constituted Acts I to III of a drama from which you could extrapolate this Act IV. Yet it is a drama that looks unfinished and a drama of which the Gospels are a plausible continuation. The great story from Genesis to Kings leads round in circles, taking Abraham and Sarah and their descendants from Babylon to Jerusalem but then taking them back again so that the story as a whole goes nowhere. It is the story of how God created the world and tried to restore it, but failed. And the slightly less great story in Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah also ends with something more like a whimper than a bang. 'Is that all?', one asks as one comes to the end. Then the New Testament says, 'We have good news. That is not all'. Of course, as one looks at the church's story and at the church's state, one again says, 'Is that all?' It seems that God has succeeded little better with the church than God did with Israel. The church's relationship with God and with life, with itself and with its future, is not as different from Israel's as has often been implied by Christian polemic against Judaism.

So reading the Old Testament in the light of the gospel does not mean that we read Jesus into the Old Testament. It does not mean (for instance) using artificial techniques in order to make the sacrifices of the Old Testament pointers to Christ (whatever that means) that had little meaning in their own right. It does not mean finding spurious predictions of Jesus in the Old Testament, as if the Old Testament were an Hercule Poirot mystery in which the expert (Christian) detective can spot the clue that people such as unbelieving Jews or liberal scholars miss.

In the second Christian century theologians such as Justin Martyr started encouraging Christians to prove the truth of the gospel by appealing to fulfilled predictions, but he thereby set the church on a false track. The New Testament does not attempt to persuade people that Jesus is the Christ on the basis of his having fulfilled predictions. Indeed, there are hardly any points at which it describes Old Testament passages as 'predictions' of Jesus. This is good, because there are no Old Testament passages that are predictions of Jesus. God does not seem to have given prophets visions of events at the manger in Bethlehem or at the cross in Jerusalem. Jewish and Christian faith do not go in for prediction much, at least not for predicting events long before they take place. If you want that, you go to

the clairvoyants on Colorado Boulevard or Walnut Street in Pasadena or on equivalent streets in other cities. There was much similar predicting in the ancient world. Second Isaiah refers to it with disdain (e.g. 47.13).

The nearest to an example of the Old Testament going in for talk of fulfilment of predictions comes in 2 Kings 23.16. Even there the Hebrew word means 'proclaim', not specifically 'foretell', and the context indicates that the point being made is that a threat is being fulfilled, not merely that a prediction is coming true. Similarly, when the New Testament talks of 'prediction', it usually employs the word to mean 'warning'. Even Acts 1.16 is an example, as the content of the 'prediction' in v. 20 shows. In the New Testament as in the Old, when God speaks about the future, the words indicate a personal commitment to take action, which may be good news or bad news. And whether they are promises or warnings, they are designed to provoke a response from their hearers, not just to provide the curious with prognostications. They are not predictions designed to provoke a response from unbelievers living hundreds of years later, though in God's providence they may incidentally help later believers to gain an understanding of what God is doing with them.

II. Evangelical study assumes that the whole Old Testament issued from acts of communication between God and people

I hinted above that Christian prayer could be revolutionized and led into new freedom if it read the Old Testament. This leads me into my second thesis. Evangelical study assumes that God gave us the Bible in its entirety and that we are supposed to take the whole of it with absolute seriousness. Every page is designed to shape our prayer, our life, our thinking.

So we read those stories about Abraham and Sarah and Moses and David and Naomi and Esther on the assumption that they are given to us to form our worldview, to form our understanding of how God relates to us and how God relates to the world, and thus to shape our lives. We read the rules in Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy on the assumption that they are meant to influence social policy in any community that is to be shaped by God's word. We read the reflections of intellectuals in Proverbs and Job and Ecclesiastes and we determine to think hard about life and suffering and death in the way that they do. We read the Psalms and start to pray and praise the way they do. We read the visions and the nightmares of the prophets and determine to look at the future their way.

Now this is not what the New Testament is doing when it refers to

the Old Testament, because its interest in the Old Testament is focused on its need for resources to help it think through the answers to particular questions, 'Who is Jesus?' and 'What is the church?'. These are crucial questions, but they are not the only questions. The very fact that the first three-quarters of the Bible concerns questions other than 'Who is Jesus' and 'What is the church' shows that God wants us to be interested in questions other than the ones that the New Testament handles.

A commitment to taking the whole Bible with absolute seriousness constitutes one link between evangelicalism and the work of Walter Brueggemann and Brevard Childs, the premier Old Testament theologians in the English-speaking world. In Brueggemann's case, at least, there is admittedly a contrast (I will comment on some other contrasts later in this paper). Brueggemann has no theory about this commitment to taking the whole Old Testament with absolute seriousness, though he demonstrates it in practice. Evangelicalism has a theory about it but does not demonstrate it in practice. We know in theory that the Old Testament is the authoritative word of God, but having acknowledged that in theory, we ignore it. In general, if you are not an evangelical you need have no problem when there are aspects of the Bible that you do not like, because you can simply disagree with them. If you are an evangelical you cannot do that, so you have to find a way of reinterpreting it instead. One of the most important callings of an evangelical Old Testament scholar is therefore to encourage Christians to read what the Old Testament actually says, rather than reinterpreting it so that it means something that fits with what we already believe. In other words, we read it also in the awareness that we ourselves are sinners and that our sin affects our interpretation. Our sin makes us avoid seeing things that we could not afford to see because we would have to change our lives if we acknowledged them. That is true of everyone who reads the Bible; it is therefore true of evangelical scholars.

One presupposition of that evangelical determination to pay attention to the whole Old Testament is that we believe that the Old Testament was an exercise in communication on God's part. There is a strand of current thinking about interpretation that emphasizes that it is readers who 'make sense' of texts. Texts themselves do not have meaning. Originally they may have been exercises in communication between an author and an audience, but they are now independent of author and audience. When T. S. Eliot was once asked what one of his poems meant, he is said to have responded 'I don't know—you tell me'. How much more is it the case that we have to decide what the text means when we cannot consult the author.

One way of handling that difficulty would be to suggest that we can

consult the author, because we can seek the Holy Spirit's help in interpreting scripture. The Holy Spirit did not fall silent after inspiring scripture. In teaching the Pentateuch recently, I have been especially struck by the story of a man called Zelophehad in Numbers 27, or rather about his five daughters. Zelophehad had had no sons, and these daughters challenged Moses to let them inherit his land rather than allow it to pass outside their nuclear family. To play for time, Moses consulted Yahweh, who like him knew it was unwise to argue with feisty women and agreed to bend the rules. Something similar happens in Isaiah 56 when the prophet is inspired to abrogate the rules in the Torah about whether eunuchs and foreigners can come to church. It happens again in Nehemiah 8, when Nehemiah reworks the rules in the Torah in the light of the situation his community finds itself in.

The Holy Spirit guides the people of God when it is engaged in its task of interpreting scripture today and hearing the new things that God is saying today. But how do we then evaluate what we and other people think the Holy Spirit is telling us about the text's meaning or about the way in which it applies? A key element in approaching that question is to go back to the historical meaning of the text itself. We go back to examining what was going on in the act of communication between God and people that led to these texts being preserved as of ongoing significance for the life of God's people. If some strands of scholarship will abandon the idea that texts have meanings, evangelical scholarship will not.

Evangelicals know that the Old Testament resulted from a concern on God's part to communicate. God spoke in such a way as to communicate with the original audiences of the material that now appears in the Bible, and this implies that this material has its own meaning and not merely the meaning we read into it. God is also concerned to communicate with us, and does so not least via those past acts of communication.

It is the same evangelical conviction about God's delight in communicating with people that makes it so difficult for an evangelical to believe that Isaiah wrote the whole of the book called Isaiah or to believe that the visions in Daniel came from the sixth century. What would God be doing giving Isaiah in the eighth century words to write down that were addressed to people two centuries later ('Comfort, comfort my people. . .')? What would God be doing giving Daniel in the sixth century visions whose message was designed to speak to people another four centuries later? How could an evangelical ever believe that? We know that God speaks to us where we are, relates to us personally. Surely it would be the same in scripture? How could evangelicals ever have thought anything else?

III. Evangelical study of the Old Testament will feel free to be independent of human tradition

That rhetorical question leads into my third thesis, that evangelical study of the Old Testament will feel free to be independent of human traditions in its work. The Bible itself is what counts, not human traditions that claim to interpret it.

Evangelicalism is not rejecting of all tradition. It accepts the doctrinal traditions of the patristic period, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. We accept the Christian tradition that found itself developing a collection of new covenant scriptures and arguing about which books belong to this collection: we assume that our Christian ancestors drifted into the right decisions about this canon of scripture, or we trust God's providence to have ensured that they did so, even though we cannot provide a justification for the precise bounds that the canon of scripture has. There are traditions we accept.

Evangelicals have nevertheless reckoned it theologically important to feel free not to be bound by tradition. But evangelical scholarship has not applied the principle of freedom from tradition to our study of scripture itself. The essential nature of biblical criticism is to be critical of tradition. It feels free to be critical of the doctrinal tradition that the church claims issues from scripture, of traditions about the origin of the books of the Bible, of the traditional form of the text of the Bible, and of traditional understandings about the nature of the books of the Bible. Because evangelicalism knew it needed to oppose many of the results of much of that criticism, it set itself against the critical stance itself. People who questioned traditions about the Bible, such as 'Moses wrote Genesis', ended up with dangerous-looking theories about the Bible's origin, its text, and its meaning. So it is better to stick with the traditional views.

Evangelical scholarship thus came to be characterized by the maintenance of certain concrete views about the authorship of the different books of the Bible, and by the maintenance of traditional views about the Bible's background even when nothing hung on it. So the prophet Joel would be dated in the eighth century and Moses would be credited with the authorship of Genesis even though the books make no claims about that. This view would be maintained because it is the traditional view—and if we question that tradition, in a moment we will be questioning whether Moses lies behind the rules he is supposed to have mediated at Sinai. And of course that was right: people who began asking questions about Moses and Genesis were soon asking questions about Moses and Deuteronomy. But that was no basis for a groundless, irrational commitment to tradition just because it was tradition. We may accept that the church's doctrinal

tradition reflects the work of God's Spirit in guiding the church in God's truth, but it too remains subject to criticism, and we do not let this tradition determine our understanding of the Old Testament.

So when tradition says that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, evangelical study of the Old Testament is quite at home asking 'Did he?'. It knows that we do not need to provide God's word with spurious support by linking it with some famous figure, as if it might lose its authority if it were of anonymous authorship. The belief that Moses wrote the Pentateuch was only a human tradition.

Tradition says that Job, Ruth, Jonah, and Esther are factual stories, but evangelical study of the Old Testament can be quite at home concluding that actually they are God-inspired parables.

Rather than describing them as parables, I would prefer to describe them as fictional stories, novels inspired by God, but in the end I have yielded to the persuasion of my colleague Marianne Meyer Thompson. In the course of kindly attempting to help me say more clearly what I wanted to say in this lecture (which does not imply that it is what she would want to say), she urged me to take account of the fact that 'fiction' suggests to people something humanly-devised and something that is not true. I recognize that this can seem to be the word's implication, yet we also recognize that fiction can often powerfully picture truth. Many of the stories outside scripture in which we recognize truth about God and ourselves are fictional stories, and there seems no reason why this should not be so within scripture. Danna Nolan Fewell suggests a nice instance of the power of fiction in scripture in a comment on Daniel 4, where Nebuchadnezzar 'is made to utter praise . . . for a god for whom the historical king had no respect. In its confrontation with the historical Nebuchadnezzar, the Israelite community was impotent. But years later a member of this once impotent community played a joke on the infamous king of the exile by creating a new memory of Nebuchadnezzar. . . . The human imagination is able to overpower human history.'³

Evangelical study recognizes that factual narrative is essential and central to the Bible because Christian faith is an evangel, a piece of news about something that happened. But it also recognizes that parable is essential to scripture, too. Historical narrative is really important because it tells you things that actually happened. But as Aristotle almost said, the correlative limitation of factual narrative is that it can only describe what has happened; parable can describe what could happen (Poetics ix [1451ab]). The New Testament includes parable as well as history; Jesus needed parables. It would

3 See *Circle of Sovereignty* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988; rev. ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 80.

thus be surprising if the Old Testament did not include some non-factual narrative. To put it another way, we need vision as well as fact, and parable can express vision. That is part of what books such as Job and Ruth and Esther do. Their being factual stories is only a human tradition.

Admittedly the conviction that Jesus's parables are, on the contrary, factual has also sometimes been a tradition of interpretation, and it is still held to be important by some Christians. I suspect that whatever are the arguments that satisfy most people that the parables are fictional are also the arguments that establish that books such as Job, Esther, Ruth, Jonah, and the stories in Daniel are fictional. Admittedly one of the most difficult tasks in interpretation is to determine whether a narrative is factual or fictional (because fiction often seeks to be realistic). But that will not lead evangelicals to assume that their default position should be that a narrative is factual unless it is proved to the contrary, as if this were equivalent to being presumed innocent until proved guilty. Fact and parable fulfil different aspects of scripture's aims, so there is no presumption regarding which category a narrative belongs to until we have studied it to see which it might be. Both are innocent categories.

In not being tied to tradition, evangelical study of the Old Testament assumes that we are always beginning afresh in our understanding of the Old Testament.

The foundation documents of Princeton Seminary required first that students become well-skilled in Hebrew and Greek. One reason for this, Archibald Alexander commented at his Inaugural Address there, was that translations of the Bible are not inspired, authoritative, or infallible; only the Bible is that, and presumably ordinands should be able to study what the Bible says, not only what a translator has said it says. The second reason was that they be able to explain the principal difficulties that arise in the perusal of the scriptures. The third was that they should know about middle-eastern antiquities, geography, and customs.⁴

The second of these requirements especially strikes me. Alexander implies that biblical study is about explaining problems, not (for instance) living with them or causing them, let alone discovering things.

Often evangelicalism has prided itself on being conservative, and we indeed want to conserve that truth that God has given us. But it would be at least as logical for evangelicalism to be adventurously lib-

⁴ See M. Noll (ed.), *The Princeton Theology 1812-1912* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 56-57, 83. I am grateful to one of my students, John Yeo, for drawing my attention to this book.

eral and critical as to be conservative. Evangelicalism can afford to be open-minded. We know the Bible is the word of God; we therefore need have no fear about discovering what it says and about ignoring human traditions about what it says.

This has not been a common evangelical attitude. Instead, much so-called evangelical scholarship assumes that we already understand the Bible, that anything new that anyone says is suspicious just because it is new, and that the task of scholarship is essentially defensive, essentially to explain problems. This is not an evangelical view. The glorious prospect of evangelical study of the Old Testament is to open this wonderful book confident that it is God's word, and untrammelled by theories about what it has to say. It can say what it likes.

IV. Evangelical study of the Old Testament is interested in the actual text of scripture and in the history it refers to

Fourth, evangelical study of the Old Testament is interested both in the text of scripture as we have it and in the history it refers to.

One of the first books I bought when I went to university to study theology nearly forty years ago was John Bright's *History of Israel*. In Britain teachers do not make as much use of textbooks, a fact that sometimes puzzles my students in California, but John Bright's *History of Israel* was once as near as you could get to a textbook for Old Testament. This now seems a weird fact. It implies that studying Israelite history is studying the Old Testament, that if you have gained a grasp of the history of Israel, you have gained a grasp of the Old Testament. This had better not be the case, given the difficulty most students have in gaining the vaguest grasp of the history of Israel. More seriously, the approach implies that the Old Testament itself is about the history of Israel, as if the Old Testament were a history book.

Going to a passover meal involves taking part in the retelling of the exodus story. It is passionately vital that this retelling refers to something that actually happened, but the participants know that the story that is told is something different from a CNN video of the event. Indeed, a moment's thought will make clear that one might have a hard time turning the order of service into objective, factual history. When movies attempt to do that, even believing movies, there always seems to be something wrong with them. One leaves the theatre saying, 'It can't have been like that', 'There must have been more to it than that'. And one says that because people try to represent a wonder like the deliverance at the Red Sea, not because they avoid it.

The exodus story in the Old Testament itself is not something that could be turned into a realistic movie script. It has been meditated on, applied, and refracted through Israel's continuing experience of God over the centuries. It is passionately vital that this story refers to something that actually happened, but it appeals to the imagination, to the heart, to the instinct to worship, to the needs and aspirations and experience of the people who told this story over the generations. It is not pure history. (Actually Bright's *History of Israel* was not pure history; it was a 'theological interpretation of history packaged as a history textbook' designed to lure conservative students like me into something that could purport to be critical study of history.)⁵

I might make the point another way. The Old Testament offers us two accounts of Judah's history from David onwards, in Chronicles and in Samuel-Kings. The words in these two are sometimes exactly the same, but that makes it more striking that at other points they give a markedly different impression of what people said and did. They thus anticipate the nature of the Gospels. A synopsis of the Gospels puts the four New Testament Gospels in parallel columns and is thus hugely illuminating in allowing the reader to see (for instance) what they have in common and what makes each individual Gospel distinctive and worth having. An American friend of mine went to a seminary where students were never invited to look at one of these synopses of the Gospels. It exposed what seemed to be a problem. By showing you the similarities and the differences, it showed you how at least two of the Gospels must have rewritten the others, and how at least two of them are not giving us an exact historical account of what Jesus did and said. The same is true of Chronicles and Samuel-Kings. Actually, of course, all four Gospels and both those Old Testament narratives are proclaiming their story in a way that shows how it applies to an audience, and therefore none of them is aiming to write mere history, mere correct fact.

It passionately matters to these two Old Testament writers, as to the Gospel writers, that they are talking about things that happened. But it also passionately matters to them that you see the point of the story, see the way it applies to you. They do not want to waste their time writing history. 'History is bunk'. It is one of the great American sayings by one of the great Americans, though the actual words of Henry Ford were apparently slightly different, like many famous 'quotations': 'History is more or less bunk'. Interestingly, the quotation goes on, 'It's tradition. We don't want tradition. . . .' While this may be a good basis for manufacturing automobiles, on my lips, at

5 So K. L. Noll, 'Looking on the Bright side of Israel's history', *Biblical Interpretation* 7 (1999) 1-27 (see 21).

least, it is of course not a dig at church history, or at any historical study genuinely worthy of the name. The concern of such disciplines is not mere antiquarianism but insight on our own lives.⁶

That desire to show people how past events impact the present is part of what makes Samuel-Kings and Chronicles the inspired and infallible word of God. These narratives include material that is not factual, not historical. They tell us that people said and did things that they did not do and say, just as the Gospels tell us that Jesus said and did things that Jesus did not say and do (this is simply an implication of the evidence presented by a Synopsis). That is the case, not because someone made a mistake or is deceiving us, but because that is the God-inspired way to ensure that scripture tells us the truth about David or about Jesus. It is in this way that it does the thing it was designed to do, gives us a true indication of the significance of David or of Jesus. Every word in Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, every word in the Gospels, is God-given, God-inspired, and contributes to our getting a true impression of the history, but not every word or every shot corresponds to what CNN would have broadcast if it had been there.

To be evangelical is to know that the actual books we have, Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, are the inspired word of God. The actual history of Israel as someone like John Bright might reconstruct it is not what God wanted us to have in the Bible. Merely studying the history of Israel is not the way to discover what the Old Testament is about.

Does the actual history matter, then? Indeed it does. The instinct that led evangelicals to enthuse over John Bright's *History of Israel* was half-right. It does matter to us to know what events happened, not because we will then understand the Old Testament narrative, but because without there being some events behind the narrative, the Old Testament narrative could not be the word of God.

Gerhard von Rad once described Kings as an act of praise at the justice of the judgment of God (he can say that in one word in German: it is a *Gerichtsdoxologie*). What Kings does is say, 'this is how we have behaved over the past four hundred years, so God has been entirely justified in letting calamity happen to us; what we need to do now is acknowledge the facts in order to cast ourselves on God's grace, because if we have any hope, that is where it lies'. If the story is wrong over the way Israel has behaved over four hundred years, who knows whether God was justified in letting calamity happen and who knows what basis there might be for casting oneself on God or for any hope

6 For Ford's remark, see *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (revised 4th ed., Oxford/New York: OUP, 1996) 289; it attributes the words to the *Chicago Tribune* of 25 May 1916.

for the future? And if that is true of Kings, it is much more true about the narratives about Abraham or Moses or Joshua. It does matter to us that their stories have some facts behind them.

I said I would comment further on the difference between evangelical study of the Old Testament and the work of two great Old Testament theologians with whom evangelicals have sensed significant commonality (I do so at this point partly because I am not aware of indications of what they would think about my fifth thesis).

I began with evangelicalism's emphasis on getting one's personal relationship with God right. I have the impression that Childs is more concerned with right thinking, right theology, while Brueggemann is more concerned with right behaviour, and specifically with getting societal relations right. Evangelicals, Childs, and Brueggemann all care about all three, but there are differences of emphasis or profile.

My third thesis declared evangelical independence of tradition. Brueggemann is inclined to set himself over against the church's doctrinal tradition; it is a corollary of taking scripture itself with absolute seriousness. In contrast Childs is significantly influenced by the church's doctrinal tradition. In my judgment that makes Brueggemann's stance resemble the one evangelicals should take, while Childs's resembles the one evangelicals actually take.

My fourth thesis was that evangelicals are interested in both history and story. Both Childs and Brueggemann have given the impression of turning their backs on history more firmly than evangelicals can afford to. Admittedly Childs has emphasized that he has not turned his back on history; but that is nevertheless the drift of his emphasis on the canonical form of the text. Brueggemann has declared that he is indeed interested in rhetoric not history or ontology, though amusingly Norman Gottwald has pointed out that in practice he is less rigorous in this direction than he is in theory (and rightly, Gottwald implies). Evangelicals will want to emphasize ontology, too.⁷

V. Evangelical Old Testament study is done by faith

Talk of the importance of the Old Testament's factuality takes me to my fifth thesis, that evangelical Old Testament study is done by faith, though perhaps not in the sense that is usually attributed to that phrase. The reason is that unfortunately Old Testament study is never going to establish what events lay behind the Old Testament narrative.

⁷ See N. K. Gottwald, 'Rhetorical, historical, and ontological counterpoints in doing Old Testament theology', in *God in the Fray* (W. Brueggemann Festschrift, ed. T. Linafelt and T. K. Beal; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 24-37.

I exaggerate slightly. The scholarly consensus is that there are good grounds for reckoning that Kings is a basically factual account of those 400 years from Solomon to the fall of Jerusalem. That is not a universal consensus: over recent years a strong minority voice has developed the view that the entire narrative from Genesis to Kings was written much later, in the Persian period, and is in effect a piece of fiction. But at present that is just a view held by a small but vocal number of people in places like England.

It is otherwise with the story of Abraham and Moses and Joshua. The kind of confidence in their basic historicity that John Bright showed has largely collapsed. The scholarly world's confidence that it knew approximately how the books that tell their story came into being (JEDP and all that) has collapsed. The assured results of modern criticism have all ceased to be assured. Over the past century or so, Old Testament study has gone full circle, the questions that everyone thought had been answered have all turned out to be open questions again, and the conclusions that everyone thought were wrong have all turned out to be open possibilities again. Old Testament scholarship has resisted conforming to Thomas Kuhn's thesis that a scholarly guild does not abandon a theory until it has a better one, even if the theory looks full of holes. The Old Testament scholarly world corporately does not know anything about when those books were written or what their historical value might be. Perhaps it has moved from the pre-modern position (Moses wrote the Pentateuch) through the modern position (JEDP wrote the Pentateuch) to the post-modern position (we do not know who wrote the Pentateuch, and it was probably the wrong question).

Might this be good news from an evangelical perspective, if it shows that the entire historical-critical enterprise was mistaken and that we are justified in sticking by the traditional view that Moses is the key figure behind the Pentateuch? Unfortunately this does not follow. The real data in the text that led to the critical study which eventually issued in the consensus that has now shattered are still real facts. They still point to some compositional process rather than to Moses sitting down with a ghost-writer during the long evenings on the way from Sinai to the Plains of Moab and wondering whether to include the account of his own death. It was a compositional process; but what was its nature, how long it took, when it was completed, and how far it preserved historical information about Abraham and Sarah or Moses and Miriam, we do not know. It is for this reason that Brueggemann declares that 'a theology of the Old Testament cannot appeal to "history"'.⁸

8 'The Theology of the Old Testament: A prompt retrospect', in *God in the Fray* (see above) 307-20 (see 308).

The sobering fact that emerges from the story of biblical criticism over the past two or three decades is that critical study will never come to definitive conclusions about Old Testament history. The scholarly consensus that once obtained in the English-speaking world about the history of early Israel was nothing more than that—a scholarly consensus. The nature of the material on which scholars need to do their work, the nature of the books that God inspired, is such that we cannot get behind them to establish historically what events they refer to.

Yet I have implied that we need to know that there is some history behind these books. So what we are reduced to is—living by faith that this is so. That may raise a smile, for living by faith is supposed to be fundamental to evangelical faith. In our Old Testament study we have to trust God that the word of God has enough history behind it to be valid as the word of God. And we can live with that, because we know that the Old Testament is indeed the word of God. We know it, because Jesus gave it to us (and we know that we have better historical-critical grounds for our convictions about what Jesus said and did than we have for early Old Testament history—and I am prepared to see the providence of God in that). And we also know that the Old Testament is the word of God because God keeps speaking to us through it.

I have hinted that there is a streak of evangelical logic that says 'it is because people like Moses, David, and Solomon wrote it, and because its history is factual, that we know that the Old Testament must be authentic, must be the word of God'. It transpires that this logic needs to be inverted. 'It is because the Old Testament is authentic, is the word of God, that we know its history must be as factual as it needs to be (because God would not have given us a narrative without enough facts behind it); and saying that Moses wrote it is a way of giving expression to the conviction that this narrative really came from God'.

I am quite relaxed about that as a way of handling the fact that the scholarly world is never going to come to any agreed conclusions about the origins of the Pentateuch and the history of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Miriam. There is another question about which I am less relaxed. It is that as well as needing the basic Old Testament narrative to be historical, we really need to know the circumstances of its origin.

In order to understand a narrative, we may not need to know whether it is history or fiction. That may not affect its meaning. Readers may disagree about whether Jonah is history or parable, but they can agree about its themes, agree that it is about how not to be a prophet, and about God's attitude to other nations, and about the

possibility of repentance on humanity's part and on God's part. Those are the story's themes, whether it is history or parable. But our view on the message of a story may be affected by our view on when it was written and for whom.

I assume that the traditional critical view is right that Genesis 1 was written in Babylon among people from Judah who had been transported there by the Babylonians. So that chapter about creation confronts the story of creation as the Babylonians told it and brings the gospel to Judeans there who thought there was no gospel. The reason for picturing God creating the world in six days with the orderly patterning of God's work is to declare that God is a God of order and system not a God of mess and violence. The life of these Judeans had collapsed into mess and the Babylonian creation story portrayed gods as messy and violent in their relationships with each other; this new creation story assures the Judeans that this is not the truth about God. It portrays God as doing a week's work and then having a day off, in order to reassure the Judeans that their strange religious life that involved doing a week's work and having a day off was not just their religious peculiarity but a reflection of God's own intention. It declines to talk about the creation of sun and moon and stars until that week is half over, and even then it does not actually use the words 'sun' and 'moon', and it confines the stars to a delightful throwaway phrase at the end of a verse, 'he made the stars, as well' (literally, simply 'and the stars'). All this is for a reason: the Babylonians believed that the sun, the moon, and the stars decided people's destinies. Genesis 1 imagines the story of creation in such a way as to confront their beliefs and to declare the gospel to Judeans who were tempted to be overwhelmed by the collapse of their own life and to be overawed by Babylonian religion.

Awareness of the historical context that a narrative addresses can illumine the narrative's meaning. The trouble is, I have had to choose my example carefully; there are few other stories that are thus clearly illumined by reading them against a known historical context. That may be just because we lack the historical information that enables us to see how to read the narrative. But it means we do not know what was going on between a human author and his or her readers, nor what was going on between God and the people God was concerned to speak to. So we have a problem in connection with my second thesis. The Old Testament began as a series of exercises in communication on God's part; we are able to overhear these so as to work out their implications for us, as we listen for what God says to us on the basis of them. But understanding the original communication depends on knowing who were the audience with whom God was communicating. And generally we do not in fact know who they were.

Let me suggest another example. We know something of the alterations that took place between the prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Hananiah, though we know of these only from Jeremiah's side. We know that Jeremiah was a 'true' prophet and Hananiah a 'false' prophet, but they did not go about wearing tee-shirts announcing which was which. Jeremiah's discussion of true and false prophecy hints at the fact that it was actually rather difficult to state what constituted true prophecy over against false. One reason for this is the fact that if you had heard Hananiah, he would have sounded entirely biblical. Indeed, he was entirely biblical. He would have sounded very like Isaiah, promising that Yahweh would in the end deliver Jerusalem from its attackers. There was nothing wrong with Hananiah except that he was living in the wrong century. Time had moved on, and Yahweh was no longer saying the things that Isaiah had said.

One can compare and contrast Jeremiah and Hananiah with Ezekiel and Second Isaiah a little while later. Ezekiel and Second Isaiah would be contradicting each other if it were not for the fact that there was half a century between the time when they ministered to the Judean community in Babylon. A true prophet or a true interpreter is someone who knows what time it is, knows what time it is now and knows what time it was when the text was written (E. Osswald).⁹

But what if the interpreter does not know when the text was written, how it confronted or comforted the audience it addressed? How then can it be interpreted? If it originally brought confrontation, what if we connect it with a situation in which it would have brought reassurance—or vice versa? Exactly that problem arises with different hypotheses concerning not the creation story in Genesis 1 but the creation story in Genesis 2 and 3, for instance, and the Cain and Abel story that follows.

I do not know the way through that question, and at one level this worries me. At another level it does not worry me. I have been through this experience before, the experience of recognizing a problem of principle in connection with the interpretation of scripture—not a problem with an individual passage but a meta-problem. I once had that difficulty over the presence of unhistorical material in scripture, but I found my way through the problem. I once had that difficulty over the patriarchalism of scripture, but I am now most of the way out the other side of that problem. I am not as far on with

9 *Falsche Prophetie im Alten Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1962); cf J. A. Sanders, 'Hermeneutics', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* Supplementary Volume (Abingdon: Nashville, 1976) 402-7 (see 404-5).

this other difficulty, our not having the kind of information about the origin of biblical texts that would enable us to understand them as exercises in communication between God and people. But it does not worry me because I have been this way before with difficulties over scripture. We will solve this one (and then another will arise). It will be OK. I know I can trust God with regard to it. I know God would not have given us a book with this particular profile if there was something wrong with it.

In other words, evangelical study of the Old Testament proceeds on the basis of faith. It is an aspect of the life of faith. The most basic truth about our relationship with God that evangelicals affirm is that it proceeds on the basis of trust in God, not of being able to prove God at every point, but of trusting that we have reason for living by faith. And our scholarship is an aspect of our human and Christian life. It works on the same basis. Because we know that the Old Testament is the word of God, we know that we can live with the problems that it raises which we cannot at the moment solve.

The problems will not always be insoluble. To return to my starting-point, we study the Old Testament in the light of the gospel. One aspect of the gospel is the conviction that God is committed to bringing the gospel story to its closure. The same will be true of the story of Old Testament interpretation, though I hope not before I finish my commentary on Isaiah 40-55. We interpret the Old Testament by faith, and we interpret it in hope, Old Testament hope. That constitutes assured expectation that God is at work, which then inspires our activity, because we know it works with the grain of God's own commitments.

Abstract

A properly evangelical study of the Old Testament works within the framework of the gospel—for instance, aware that its God is a God of love and grace. It assumes that the whole Old Testament issued from acts of communication between God and people—which means, for instance, that its texts have meanings of their own and not just meanings we read into them. It feels free to be independent of human tradition—for instance, about who wrote the books and whether they must always be factual history rather than parable. It is interested both in the text of the scriptural narrative (because that is what God inspired) and in the history it refers to (because that is where God acted). It is done by faith—for instance, because we cannot prove that it has the degree of historical factuality it needs to have; we trust God for that.