Introduction to the Historical Books

Some people are prevented from reading the historical books because they find history dull or pointless. They share Huckleberry Finn's attitude to historical study: "I don't put no stock in dead people." However, the same people who say they find history dull find great enjoyment in other forms of storytelling, such as novels, television, movies, and gossip. Why, then, does history stand accused of being boring? Perhaps only a certain understanding of history is at fault. Modern people tend to think of historical narratives strictly as accounts of what actually happened in the past. Even a cursory reading of the Bible's historical narratives, however, should reveal that the biblical writers did not share this view.

Biblical Narratives versus Modern History

Biblical narratives differ from modern historical (or even fiction) writing in several respects. One striking difference is that biblical writers make extensive use of composed speeches and dialogue. Modern historians rarely include speeches in their narratives unless they have reliable access to the exact spoken words of persons who lived in the past. Biblical writers, however, like other ancient historians, abided by different conventions in the narration of history. Although they also lacked reliable access to spoken words, they regularly composed speeches to add interest to their narratives and highlight the issues at stake in the events (e.g., Joshua, chapter 23; 1 Samuel 8:10–18; 1 Kings 8:22–64).

Since modern historians do not often make use of dialogue, they resort to other literary devices to add color to their histories. For example, they sometimes supply detailed descriptions of landscape and character sketches that profile the temperament, attitudes, and values of individuals important to the story. By contrast, biblical writers rarely provide descriptive details concerning the landscape, buildings, or people unless these details are important to the narrative.

In fact, the biblical writers rarely give the reader access to the internal life of characters. We are left to infer character thoughts and motives from their words and actions. This reticence frequently creates ambiguity. For example, in Second Samuel, the motive for Ahithophel's suicide is not provided (17:23). Does he kill himself because he is overly concerned about his failing reputation or because he knows that, once his advice is ignored, David will regain the throne and punish those who sided with Absalom?

Modern historians often make explicit judgments about the actions of the people they describe. Even though many people think of the Bible as moralistic, biblical writers rarely state explicitly whether an action was good or bad. For instance, the several suicides in biblical narrative occur without narrative comment, so that interpreters may disagree about whether the Old Testament prohibits suicide (Judges 9:52–54, 16:25–30; 1 Samuel 31:4–5; 2 Samuel 17:23; 1 Kings 16:15–20). Most often, moral evaluations are placed in the mouths of other characters (2 Samuel 13:12–13). The major exception to this rule is the regular evaluation of kings as good or bad according to their obedience to the Law (1 Kings 15:34).

Illuminating the past to understand the present. The biblical narrative employs engaging storytelling about the past in order to understand the present. The past is illuminating because events have a way of recurring. We can gain insight into our present situation not only by understanding how it developed from past events but by searching for past situations analogous to our own. Biblical narrative employs extensive use of analogy to indicate the commonalities among diverse events. These similarities invite the reader to consider historical patterns and to discern what is unique in each episode.

For instance, the crime at Gibeah (Judges, chapter 19) connects with several other narratives. In the story, the men of Gibeah want to rape the male guest who is staying with one of their neighbors. To avoid this crime, the male guest thrusts his concubine outside for the men to gang rape through the night. In the morning, he finds her body on the doorstep, takes her corpse home, cuts it into twelve pieces, and sends the parts to the Twelve Tribes of Israel in an attempt to mobilize the tribes to exact revenge for the crime.
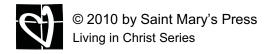
Most obvious, the outrage at Gibeah is strikingly reminiscent of the attempted rape at Sodom (Genesis, chapter 19) in which the men of the city want to rape the male guests of Lot. Although Lot offers his daughters as substitute victims for his guests in Genesis, chapter 19, the guests are angels who save themselves and Lot's family from the crowd. Through the many connections between the stories, Gibeah is presented as an Israelite city that is as bad as the proverbial wicked city of Sodom (Isaiah 1:9–10, 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14). The magnitude of the crime is adequate cause for the civil war that follows. Gibeah, which is the hometown of Saul (1 Samuel 10:26, 11:4), stands in contrast to Bethlehem (Judges 19:1–2), the hometown of David (1 Samuel, chapter 16), and to Jebus, a Canaanite city that will later be known as Jerusalem (Judges 19:10). The outrage at Gibeah leads the Israelite tribes nearly to extinguish the Tribe of Benjamin after the Levite sends the twelve parts of his concubine's body among the Tribes of Israel to raise an army (Judges 19:29–30). Later, Saul will send parts of oxen among the tribes to raise an Israelite army (1 Samuel 11:4–8). The connections among these stories invite the reader to consider the stories together. Among the implications is a comparison between David and Saul. David is the better man (1 Samuel 15:28) who comes from the better city. Saul, meanwhile, has a dubious heritage for a king (1 Samuel 9:21).

Perhaps the most obvious reason to read the historical books is to learn about Israel's past. However, one can fairly ask whether this history can best be learned from the biblical accounts or from books written by modern scholars with such titles as *A History of Ancient Israel*? Modern historians have access to information that is not mentioned in the biblical texts, such as ancient inscriptions found in and around the land of Israel. Also, we think of modern historical works as somehow objective in a way that ancient narratives are not. Consequently, a modern book might be a more accurate guide to Israel's history than the biblical books.

Fact or fiction. The first section in this introduction began the discussion of how ancient and modern historical narratives differ and how these differences reflect various ideas about what history is. Because modern historians often seek to present their work as objective and scientific, they avoid rhetorical techniques associated with imaginative or persuasive writing. Biblical narrative uses techniques common to imaginative and persuasive discourse (such as composed dialogues) because history is understood as an imaginative enterprise (representing the past) with a persuasive dimension.

Because the biblical narrative does use rhetoric in an imaginative effort to persuade, scholars disagree about how reliable the information derived from biblical narrative is. Consequently, they strive to separate the interpretations from the facts. The facts are difficult to establish with certainty because the Bible remains the only significant written source for the history of Israel. In order to gauge the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative, scholars seek to correlate biblical texts with archeological evidence to determine whether or not the archeology confirms the biblical account. These efforts have met with mixed and inconclusive results. For example, archeologists have found that the gates of Hazor, Meggido, and Gezer, dating from Solomon's time, share nearly identical fortification patterns, suggesting centralized control. Since 1 Kings 9:15 credits Solomon with construction at these sites, scholars associated the archeological finds with Solomon's activity. Recently, however, some archeologists have questioned that the gates date to Solomon's time and think they were erected at a later time. If this is so, then the Bible attributes to Solomon the work of a later king, which leads one to wonder how much of the biblical account of Solomon is exaggerated. Overall, the archeological evidence concerning ancient Israel does not offer the definitive proof of the Bible's historicity that some had hoped for. At the same time, several correlations between the Bible and archeology and the biblical claims to historicity are not easily dismissed.

Biblical narrative (like other historical narrative) is not merely a passive presentation of historical facts but an imaginative presentation of Israel's history that seeks to persuade the reader of a given interpretation of that history. Historical information, however, can be interpreted in more than one way.
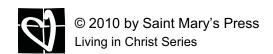
Modern books with titles like *A History of Ancient Israel* narrate an interpretation of Israelite history that may or may not be similar to the interpretation of the biblical narrative. For example, the biblical narrative frequently involves the action of God in history, since it aims to reflect on Israel's relationship with God. God's activity, however, is beyond the scope of modern historical study. Therefore, modern histories of Israel (like modern histories of any other nation) make no reference to God as an agent in history. This significant difference between biblical and modern history necessarily leads modern historians to interpretations of Israel's history that may be at variance with the biblical version. Although modern histories are valuable for learning about the history of Israel and the history of the biblical text, all of these historians, in varying degrees, use the Bible as a primary source. Consequently, anyone who wishes to learn about the history of ancient Israel should begin where the modern historians begin—with the biblical narrative.

What Are the Historical Books?

The historical books consist of the following biblical books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and First and Second Maccabees. Some of these books are more closely related to each other than others. Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings together comprise a continuous narrative of Israel's history from the death of Moses until the end of the monarchy and the Exile to Babylon. The Books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah narrate a separate history of Israel that concludes with the reconstruction of Jerusalem after the return from the Babylonian Exile. The Books of Maccabees narrate partially parallel stories about the attempt of the Israelites to throw off the oppressive rule of the Greeks. Finally, Ruth, Tobit, Judith, and Esther are each short narratives that stand independently of each other and the other historical books (although Ruth is placed between Judges and First Samuel).

The first set of the historical books (Joshua to Kings) constitute the bulk of the historical material and are thought to be the most ancient of the various narratives. Although this narrative consists of several books, modern scholars believe that these books were edited together as one larger work known as the Deuteronomistic history. The Deuteronomistic history includes Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. This historical work is called "Deuteronomistic" because the whole history seems to be influenced by the language and thought of Deuteronomy. For instance, the historical books share Deuteronomy's view that worship should be centralized in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:4–14; 1 Kings 11:13, 32, 36; 2 Kings 21:4, 7; 23:27). The work seems to have incorporated earlier sources and edited them into a larger work narrating the history of Israel from Moses' final speech in the wilderness to the destruction of the Judean state and the Exile of its leaders. Consequently, many scholars now approach these works as an interconnected whole rather than a disparate collection. The final editor gave shape and meaning to the whole narrative by composing several passages at significant moments. Some of these passages are narrative statements (Judges, chapter 2; 2 Kings, chapter 17) while others are speeches placed in the mouths of major characters (Joshua in Joshua, chapter 23; Solomon in 1 Kings, chapter 8).

The Deuteronomistic history provides the most detailed history of Israel before the Exile. It begins with Moses' summary of the Law in Deuteronomy. The Book of Joshua narrates the conquest of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. After Joshua's death, the period of the Judges begins. Although the Book of Judges ends before the birth of Samuel, the period of the monarchy does not begin until Samuel anoints the first king of Israel. During the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, the Twelve Tribes of Israel are unified under the rule of one king. After the death of Solomon, the period of the united monarchy ends and the divided monarchy begins when the northern tribes establish their own kingship

apart from the dynasty of David. Ultimately, this northern kingdom is destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. Shortly afterward, the Babylonian Empire destroys the southern kingdom and forcibly removes its leading citizens to Babylon.

Among the historical books is another set of books related to one another. The work of the chronicler's history includes First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Scholars disagree about whether a single editor is responsible for all of these books. However, the fact that the beginning of Ezra is the same as the end of Second Chronicles indicates a connection between the works: Ezra and Nehemiah is the continuation of the history narrated in First and Second Chronicles. The Books of Chronicles draw on earlier sources (including the Deuteronomistic history) to narrate the history of Israel until the decree of Cyrus permitted the Jews to return from Exile. Ezra and Nehemiah tell the history of Israel after this decree. In Chronicles, the description of events is sometimes significantly different from that of the Deuteronomistic history. For example, Chronicles shows little interest in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel that separated from the dynasty of David after the death of Solomon, whereas Kings narrates the history of this kingdom in some detail. Comparison of these two histories will reveal many differences large and small.

Unlike the dual Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, First and Second Maccabees do not form a continuous narrative. Rather, each book relates some of the same history in different ways. These works tell the story of Israel from the conquest of Alexander the Great into the Maccabean period. The Maccabees were Jews who lead a successful revolt against their Greek rulers and established Israel's independence until the Roman conquest.

The remaining historical books are sometimes characterized as short stories. They are Ruth, Tobit, Judith, and Esther. Each book is named after its main character. In three of the four cases, the main character is a woman who somehow saves Israel. Judith and Esther rescue Israel from the threat of destruction at enemy hands. Ruth, although a foreigner, saves an Israelite family from childlessness and becomes an ancestress of King David and therefore of Jesus. Finally, the Book of Tobit narrates the suffering and redemption of two Israelite families living in Exile.

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