ABBREVIATIONS

Only titles that are cited more than once are included in this list.

AB	**Anchor Bible**
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CBQ	*Catholica Biblical Quarterly*
FCI	**Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation**
HTh	*History and Theory*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTS	**Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series**
Proof	*Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*
SBLDS	**Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series**
ScotBEv	*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SJO T	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
Them	*Themelios*
TrinJ	*Trinity Journal*
TynB	*Tyndale Bulletin*
VT	*Vetus Testamenturn*
VTSup	**Supplements to** *Vetus Testamenturn*
WBC	**Word Biblical Commentaries**
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*

INTRODUCTION

Consider the following narrative:

The two brothers had been in the attic for nearly two hours when they came upon something that intrigued them more than all their previous discoveries. Much of what they had already found was what they had expected: old letters and photographs at once inviting and discreetly forbidding perusal; items of clothing too frayed or unfashionable to be worn but too fraught with memories to be discarded; boxes of old books decrepit with age and, in the case of the favored, with much use; odd bits of furniture with careers cut short by injury or rivalry but resting serenely in the dimly lit confidence of eventual rediscovery and rehabilitation by a future generation; stacks of sheet music that chronicled the first fifty years of the twentieth century and whose melodies were as much a part of the boys' concept of "grandmother" as was the scent of the roses that she had so lovingly cultivated; sun hats and fishing poles that brought back memories of Granddad and of the "good old days" when speckled trout and Spanish mackerel were plentiful on the grass flats of the Gulf of Mexico.

These and many other discoveries were made as the boys explored the attic, but it was a small painting, carefully wrapped in brown paper, that most intrigued them. In the painting was a young girl sitting before a piano, atop which was an embroidered cloth. On the cloth lay cut roses, garden gloves, and shears. Leaning against the piano stool was a field hockey stick and at its base a basketball. The style and condition of the painting indicated considerable age. Particularly striking was the face of the girl, which, though rendered with an economy of brush strokes, suggested experience of life and wisdom unusual in a child so young. Most peculiar was the depiction of the girl's right hand, which displayed what appeared to be a second thumb!

Upon uncovering this curious painting, the boys immediately set about to discover its nature. The medium appeared to be oil paint. No signature was apparent-though, as best the boys could judge such things, the artist seemed to have been quite accomplished. The question that most interested them was whether the painting was a portrait, perhaps of a member of the family, or some other type of painting—a kind of visual parable perhaps, or just an interesting example of "art for art's sake." Their first impression was that the scene seemed somewhat artificial-pianos are hardly normal resting places for gardening tools or sports equipment. Nevertheless, the girl's appearance was more suggestive of personality and individuality than would be expected in a "young maiden" painting of the generic variety.

The tentative theory that soon emerged was that the painting must indeed be a portrait, the oddly arranged assortment of props serving to indicate not idiosyncratic house-keeping but the young girl's budding interests. Should this theory be correct, then the painting might even be of the boys' grandmother in her youth. Her interests in music and gardening were well-known and could still be corroborated by material evidence from the attic itself. Of her athletic prowess the boys knew little, though the thought that further searching in the attic might turn up a hockey stick excited them. Troubling for their theory, however, was the matter of the extra thumb, for in their experience their grandmother had never sported more than the usual complement of digits. Perhaps the extra thumb could be explained simply as a symbol of unusual precocity on the keyboard; the matter, however, bore further investigation.

Before ending their exploration of the attic, the boys turned up some evidence that tended to corroborate the portrait theory. Several other paintings were discovered in a corner, among them three more paintings of people and two landscapes. Three of the paintings were signed by the same artist, and given the similarities in style and the fact that the paintings were all found in the same attic, the boys felt it likely that all the paintings were by the one artist. Both landscapes were quite freely rendered, the artist apparently taking as much delight in the potentialities of the medium as in the subject itself.

The boys scrutinized the paintings of the people particularly closely and concluded that the positioning of the subject and the presence of a limited number of props in each painting tended to confirm their

portrait theory. The artist's apparently strict adherence to the normal organization of physical features, however, left them even more undecided as to the significance of the extra thumb in the first painting. The additional paintings confirmed their common-sense judgment that in the artist's world, as in theirs, people have but one thumb per hand. Nevertheless, if the artist had felt free to include a symbolic thumb in one painting, why had no symbols been included in the others?

Determining that their investigation had been advanced as far as possible on the basis of the evidence before them, the boys exited the attic to take their inquiry farther afield. Searching out their mother at her desk, they presented her with the six paintings and mooted their theory that four of them must be portraits. This theory she was able to confirm, even to the point of giving names to the faces. The boys had been right in their assumption that the props in each of the portraits were included to give a fuller picture of the subject's character and interests and not to give information about where the items were normally kept.

On the matter of the extra thumb, while the mother granted the logic of the boys' empirical argument that its significance must be only symbolic (in all their experience with hands, they had never encountered one with six digits), she told them that in this case they must allow an exception. It seemed that their grandmother had been born with a thumblike appendage on her right hand. The slight embarrassment that this had caused her as a child had been somewhat compensated by her ability to play chords on the piano forbidden to most other mortals. As she approached age twelve, however, her parents began to reason that a suitor someday might be more attracted by physical normalcy than musical virtuosity, and they wisely decided to have the surplus appendage surgically removed.

On the matter of whether the portrait in question offered a good likeness of the boys' grandmother as a young girl, the mother was not in a position to render an opinion, except to observe that it seemed to have been the artist's intention to give a fair representation and, if the artist whose signature appeared on one of the landscapes was responsible also for the portrait in question, she had it on good authority that he had enjoyed an outstanding reputation for doing justice to his subjects. As for the two landscapes, the mother was unable to decide whether they were intended to record

the artist's impression of specific vistas, were meant simply to present scenes typical of the gulf coast, or were created solely for their aesthetic appeal.

What can we learn from this strange tale? In what possible sense does it relate to the issue of biblical historiography, which is our present concern? While analogies are never perfect and should not be over-pressed, there are a number of parallels between the boys' attempts to explore the nature and significance of the artwork they discovered and the challenges that face those who would understand the Bible.

The boys' first challenge was to determine the genre (type or kind) of the painting of the young girl. They quickly recognized that the object before them was a painting and not, for example, a photograph. This perception was arrived at automatically and intuitively—though, had argument become necessary, the boys might have observed that the texture of the work's surface revealed brush strokes and not the fine-grained detail typical of photographs and that, at any rate, the apparent age of the work would place its creation in a period prior to the development of the techniques of color photography.

Having arrived at a very general genre description (i.e., *painting),* the boys sought to become more specific. The question that particularly intrigued them was whether and in what sense the painting might be referential, that is, depictive of a reality outside itself. If so, and not just art for art's sake, was it a representation of a particular person in a particular setting, perhaps even one of their ancestors, or simply a picture of what a typical young girl of the period might have looked like? Although the composition of the painting (e.g., the particular placement of some of the objects) suggested a certain intentional artificiality of arrangement, the painting overall gave a realistic impression. The rendering of the young girl's face in particular showed careful selection of detail, suggestive of a desire to capture a true likeness, and was accomplished with an economy of strokes that attested to the genius of the artist. Tentatively, the boys decided that the artwork before them was essentially representational, though the referential aspect was considerably more pronounced in some passages (e.g., the girl's face and figure) and less so in others (e.g., the props were rather loosely rendered and background objects only indicated by blocks of color).

Those who would read the Bible with understanding are similarly faced with the challenge of genre recognition. At a very general level, the Bible is literature, or, more specifically, a unified collection of literary works. Going beyond this very basic recognition, one may distinguish broadly between passages that tend to be more poetic in character and those that are in prose. [1] Further still, these basic divisions may be subdivided into subordinate categories and so on to the point of diminishing returns. Thus, genre description may take place on various levels of generality. I shall have more to say about genre criticism in chapter 1. The point that needs to be made at this juncture is simply this: The Bible is literature, but to recognize it as such does not settle the question of reference (whether it refers to realities beyond itself, real people and real events) any more than the boys' recognition of the work before them as a painting foreclosed the question of whether the painting was representational or nonrepresentational. Much of the Bible gives the impression of, and some of it explicitly presents itself as, representational literature—history-writing. It will be important for our consideration of biblical historiography to consider the relationship between subject matter and artistic medium. This will be the focus of chapter 2.

Now back to the boys in the attic. We may recall that their tentative decision that the painting before them must be representational was arrived at initially through close inspection of the painting itself, that is, on the basis of internal *evidence.* Certain features were somewhat perplexing, such as the unusual arrangement of props and especially the surplus thumb. But the boys were able to overcome this difficulty by nuancing their understanding of the painting's genre. In a portrait, for example, some artificiality in the arrangement of props would be quite acceptable. Further, a portrait might well tolerate some deviation from strict literality in the interest of capturing some aspect of the subject's essence. This

[1] See, e.g., D. J. A. Clines, "Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and Scripture," *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 115-27.

made room for the boys' hypothesis that the entirely unnatural thumb must be a symbol of something else.

To this stage in the investigation the boys had proceeded largely on the basis of internal evidence, though some external considerations had already begun to creep in. Without their experience of life and the world, for example, the boys would never have been able to distinguish between the normal and the abnormal. Moreover, without some understanding of the conventions of portraiture the boys would have had no basis for classifying their painting as a portrait; they might have decided that the painting was a more or less realistic depiction of a particular person, but they would not have known to call it a portrait. Discovery of comparative material (more paintings) tended to confirm their tentative genre decision. None of the figures in the three additional portraits displayed any unusual features, however. This led the boys to conclude, falsely as it turned out, that the extra thumb in the first painting must indeed be a mere symbol and not a feature to be taken literally. It was in conversation with their mother that the boys learned that their concept of the "possible" needed expanding. The "possible," they discovered, should not in every instance be limited to the "normal," for their grandmother had in fact been born with an abnormality.

Again, there seem to be parallels between the way the boys assessed the visual art before them and the way biblical interpreters should assess the literature of the Bible. In either endeavor, the proper place to begin is with a close inspection of the work itself. The focus should be on both form and content. Careful reading of biblical texts will inevitably turn up perplexing features from time to time, features that call for explanatory theories. Tentative ideas regarding the text's specific genre will begin to emerge as reading proceeds, and these will require testing and perhaps modification as the investigation continues. The wider context and comparative literature (whether biblical or extrabiblical, ancient or modern) will often shed light on the biblical text, but again the interpreter must resist the urge to allow the "normal" to delimit the field of the "possible."

When once the boys' deduction that the first painting must

be a portrait of their grandmother had been confirmed by their mother, their attention turned to the question of whether or not the portrait captured a good likeness. In rendering an opinion on this matter, the mother did two things. First, she moved beyond the basic genre descriptor *portrait* to inquire after the artist's specific intentions. What style of portrait did he intend? In fact, of course, as the artist was unavailable for interview or investigation, her aim was to discern the intentionality apparent in the execution of the work itself-what might be called *embodied intention.* It was her judgment that the artist's style and detail suggested an intention to capture, to the extent allowed by the chosen medium, the essence of the visual appearance and character of the subject.

Now, the mere intention to achieve a good likeness does not in itself guarantee a good likeness, as many a mediocre portrait artist (and even a good artist on a bad day) can readily attest. Thus, before rendering an opinion on the painting in question, it was necessary for the mother to move on to a second consideration. Was the artist skilled in his craft? Strictly speaking, of course, some might wish to debate the identity of the artist-after all, the painting in question was unsigned, and even were it signed, the signature could be a forgery. The mother felt convinced, however, on what appeared to her to be reasonable grounds, that the artist was to be identified with the one whose signature appeared on several of the other paintings. Having made this identification, the mother felt herself in a position to attest to the artist's high level of competence. Her final deduction, based on these several considerations, was that the portrait was quite likely a fine representation of the boys' grandmother at a young age.

Biblical interpretation also tends to move beyond the basic question of genre to ask more specific questions. Having once identified a given text as, for example, historiography (a form of representational literature), interpreters will want to ask, What kind of historiography? If the author (or authors; the singular is used merely as a term of convenience) offers no statement of intention or, as is often the case in biblical literature, is not even identified, interpreters will focus on embodied intention, insofar as this may be inferred from the work itself on the basis of its literary

strategies, compositional structure, selection of detail, and manner of expression.

At this stage the interpreter is sharpening the question of the text's truth claim. The genre descriptor, historiography, already implies a basic claim to referentiality; the added nuance is to ask after the level of detail and precision intended. What kind of likeness of reality is the narrator attempting to create? When once a decision on this matter is reached, the interpreter is faced with a second question, How capable is the narrator of achieving his intention? How competent is he in his craft? Here questions of biblical introduction (isogogics)-authorship, date, provenance—may become important. Here, too, the fundamental issue of the Bible's ultimate author(ity) must be considered. It is one thing to discern what a work intends (truth claim), it is quite another to decide whether it succeeds (truth value). Interpreters' opinions on the latter question are inevitably affected, at least in part, by their view of the identity and competence of the work's creator.

Shifting gears, now, we may use the story of the boys in the attic to introduce a further issue that must be considered in any discussion of biblical historiography. Our focus in this instance will not be on the genre of the painting in the story, but on the genre of the story itself. While in most contexts genre decisions are made intuitively and almost unconsciously, the reader may have experienced some difficulty in deciding just what the story of the boys in the attic is meant to be, particularly since the text's form and content are not exactly what one would expect in a book on biblical interpretation.

The reader has perhaps thought to ask whether the story is true or not. As it happens, a straightforward answer to this question cannot be offered, at least not until more thought is given to the genre of the story. The descriptors applied to the text—narrative, story, tale—are too general to get the reader very far in discovering the text's intended purpose. Even the authorship of the text may be in some doubt. The apparent significance of the fact that the story is found between the covers of a book upon which the present author's name appears, is somewhat offset by the fact that the text is formally distinguished, by its differing layout, from the main text.

Readers familiar with the convention in academic writing of citing sources for all excerpted materials might deduce from the lack of any such ascription that the little story must be the work of the author of the larger work; but, of course, literary conventions (even academic ones) may at times be modified or even disregarded by a given author. I may, for example, simply have forgotten to cite my source, or I may have chosen not to do so to make a point. Much of the biblical literature, as far as human authorship is concerned, is officially anonymous, and in many, even most, such instances, the human author may be beyond discovering.

To continue our discussion of the little story, then, let me confess to having composed it. And let us assume, very hypothetically, for the sake of discussion, that I have composed it perfectly to accomplish my intended purpose-that is to say, the truth value of each and every truth claim made by the text is assured. Even so, before I can answer the question regarding the story's truth, I must ask what you understand to be the purpose (and consequent truth claims) of the story.

We are back to the issue of genre. If you are asking, as you probably are, whether the sequence of events actually happened, the answer is no. If you are asking whether particular details in the story correspond to reality, the answers will vary. Did the painting of the young girl actually exist? No. Was someone's grandmother actually born with a surplus thumb? Yes, my own in fact. Was my grandmother a noted gardener and musician? Yes. Did my grandfather enjoy fishing and sometimes take me with him? Yes. Did my grandmother actually use her third thumb to play the piano before losing it to the surgeon's scalpel? Yes! Many of the details of the story are true, others are not, but the episode itself never took place. Does this make me a liar? I would argue that it does not, though were you to misconstrue the truth claim of the story to include factuality of the event and then learn that the event never took place, you might think me so.

To be fair, however, the truth question must be properly cast. Is the story true in terms of its intended purpose? Since the story is included in a book on biblical interpretation, the reader may well have surmised that its purpose is to illustrate some of the issues faced by those interpreting the Bible. For this purpose it is

not important whether the events described actually took place or not. They may have, or they may not have; it does not matter. Even to ask if the story is "true," without qualifying the question, may seem a little out of place, since the story's purpose is to illustrate a point and not to *affirm* or *establish* it.

It would be more appropriate to ask if the story succeeds in accomplishing its purpose. That the story is a fiction is acceptable, since its purpose is essentially illustrative and didactic (even though this or that item of detail may refer to some aspect of reality). Were the story meant to establish a truth on the basis of the sequence of events recorded, however, then the **factuality** of the sequence would be a much more pressing question. We shall look more closely at these issues in chapter 3.

As we move now to take up in turn certain basic questions relating to the historical character of the Bible, we do well to recognize that the Bible contains various kinds of stories, some meant to illustrate truth and others meant to establish it. The fictional scenario above is intended to introduce some of the kinds of issues that biblical interpreters encounter when they seek to come to terms with the Bible in all its historical, theological, and literary complexity. These issues will be given closer attention in the chapters that follow.

1

HISTORY AND THE GENRE(S) OF THE BIBLE

Is the *Bible* a *History Book?*

The simple answer to the question posed in the title to this chapter is ***no,*** *the Bible is not a history book.*[1] But this is just the kind of question to which a simple (simplistic?) answer should not be given, at least not without going on to say what else the Bible is not. It is also not a science book, a law book, an ethics book, a theology book, or even a book of literature or politics (the list could go on). The Bible may be of vital interest in each of these areas, but its essence cannot be reduced to any one of them. If the question means to get at the essential nature of the Bible, then *history book* is not an adequate answer. It is important to recognize the all-encompassing character of the question, however, lest one fall prey to the kinds of false dichotomies often encountered in discussions of the historical character of the Bible-namely, the Bible is not history but literature, or the Bible is not history but theology.[2] The Bible, in terms of its essence, cannot be fully and adequately described by any of the above labels.

[1] At least not in the sense of being a history ***textbook***. This point is widely acknowledged across the theological spectrum; see Moisés Silva, "The Place of Historical Reconstruction in New Testament Criticism," in Hermeneutics, *Authority,* and Canon, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 109.

[2] Cf., e.g., G. Garbini: The Bible is "no longer politics or religion or history—but only ideology" *(History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* [London: SCM, 1988], p. xvi; cf. pp. xiv-xv, 14, 176); cf. also T. L. Thompson, following N. P. Lemche: "In terms of genre, the biblical traditions are rather origin traditions than