

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

### *HISTORY AND MYSTICISM.*

LORD LEIGHTON used to tell how once when he was painting one of his Autumn pictures in the Scottish Highlands a countryman came beside him and looked on in silence for a while. At last he spoke. "Man," he said, "did ye never try photography?"

"No," said Lord Leighton, "I can't say I have ever tried it."

"It's a hantle quicker," said the man, and then as a parting shot he added, "And it's mair like the place."

The story may serve to illustrate the contrast between the standpoints of the photographer and the painter, the mathematician and the poet, and, what is more important for the subject of this article, it illustrates two different ways of regarding history. Is it the function of the true historian merely to register facts as a photograph registers the position of leaves and branches at a particular moment, or is he to be allowed the freedom of the painter to depict what no photograph can reflect but what the inner eye can see? Are the highest ends of truth better served by the methods of the photographer or by the methods of the painter?

Let us take an illustration. The great painters often represent the Infant Christ with His little hand raised in benediction. Would a photograph—if there had been photographs in those days—ever have obtained such a result? Yet would any realistic picture of a Jewish infant "taken from life" express with anything like the same truthfulness the purpose and meaning of the incarnate Life?

Or again, think of Raphael's great picture of the Transfiguration, in which with true prophetic insight he blends in one canvas the scene of wonder and heavenly stillness and

beauty upon the Holy Mount with the anxiety, distraction and misery of the scene below. No photograph could have produced that result, but the painter was great enough to know when to sacrifice realism to reality and history to truth.

The contrast between the standpoint of Lord Leighton and that of his rustic critic is seen again in the comparison of the pictures of the Nativity by the great Italian Masters with the treatment of the same subject in some modern realistic pictures.

These latter are based on the Scottish countryman's conception of reality. The painter gets some young Jewish mother to sit for his picture and paints just what any ordinary eye can see. He produces a result "mair like the place" than the earlier painters achieved. In their pictures the Heaven world is breaking through, angel wings are hovering above, and the transitory world is seen for a moment in the glow of that "light that never was on sea or land."

But which pictures reveal most fully the truth of what really took place? And what are prophets for unless to reveal with their higher faculties that which the ordinary man with his lower faculties would *not* see?

I have more than once tried to get an artist to paint a picture of what a man would look like as seen by a mole, but I have failed, as the artist seemed—quite wrongly—to discern in the request not a compliment to his power of imagination but some sinister reflection on his powers of vision. It is not difficult, however, to conceive what it might be like. A portion of a pair of boots shading into mist and darkness and far distances would represent the similitude of "the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals." Certainly it would not be like a man as we know him, but the mole would have as much right as the realist

to maintain that that picture represented what was actually there apart from "fanciful nonsense." We might even let our imagination take a higher flight and wonder what a man would be like as seen by an Angel. He would be visible, we should fancy, not so much in the lines and curves and colours of face and figure as in the nature, quality, and intensity of his desires and thoughts. Any one who compares Doré's coarse pictures of the Paolo and Francesca of Dante's Vision driven before the storm blasts of Hell with the noble painting of the same subject by G. F. Watts will recognise the different points of view referred to.

The realist fancies that he is limiting his picture to what is there. As a matter of fact he is only revealing how little he can see. His realism and that of the mole differ only in degree.

Now is it not possible to imagine that the great prophet-historians of the Hebrew race have treated history much as Raphael treated the story of the Transfiguration and as the Italian Masters treated the Nativity? They have helped history to give birth to truth. For history is the reflection of the eternal in the transitory. It is truth striving in spite of difficulties to express itself in action. It is the medium in which God's parables are written. Yes, but the medium is inadequate for its work—as inadequate to be the vehicle of truth as the length and breadth of a picture canvas to express the three dimensional events which it portrays. Line and curve, light and shadow, have to be brought in to help the deficiency and to suggest to the imagination what cannot be depicted, and thus all the painter's art contributes to the expression of truth.

In a similar way history from, let us say, an angel's point of view is a useful but quite inadequate medium for the working out of God's parables, for the reflection under conditions of time and space of His eternal truths.

Our consciousness is centred in a world where—if we could only realise it—all is shadow and where nothing lasts. We are like children looking at trees reflected in the still waters of a lake. So clear they seem that we can scarcely help asking, Can you deny their reality? A storm comes, and we almost wonder, Did they ever exist? Then we look up to the trees which threw the reflection and *they* remain in storm and sunshine alike. Even so the things of creation, as Plato taught us long ago, are just the projection of God's thoughts upon the ever-changing ocean of matter. They are reflections in three dimensions indeed, but not less reflections for that. They form and break; they arise from and return to the ocean of matter. The real permanency is not in the reflections but in that which they reflect.

The value of art is not in the finite things which it portrays but in the infinite which it suggests. That at least would be the opinion of the painter though not of the man who preferred photography.

Similarly, are we not right in saying that the purpose of history is not so much to register facts as to reveal truth? Its value is that in it are reflected the purposes and the parables of God, and God's parables are written in history.

Of course one anticipates the obvious objection that this theory of the true function of the historian would seem to justify every enthusiast in writing history "to order" so to speak. But history, like painting, is an art, and real history can only be written by great seers just as real paintings can only be produced by great artists. Any school-boy can mess a canvas with oil paints and call it a picture, as any enthusiast can distort facts and call it history, but such "pictures" and such "history" soon sink into the obscurity which their merits demand.

We may say that the drama is to history what history is

to truth. The drama reflects history vividly but inadequately and with obvious and inevitable limitations. It crowds a lifetime into an hour but it reveals the salient points of the life. It needs amplification and supplementing if it is to represent history.

Now let us imagine a race of people who only know history as it is represented in the drama. The stage is their world. Its events are to them the only realities, and they are quite unconscious of its limitations. Let us suppose that they are familiar with the play of Richard III. and know intimately every scene and every saying. Then a professor of history appears who knows the life as it took place, and lectures to them on the subject. He has to supplement the stage account, to fill in its bald outlines, to round off with the story of years its abrupt transitions, to modify some vivid scene, to expand here, to contract there, to supply what is lacking somewhere else.

At once protests arise. The professor is destroying their world. He tells them that theirs is not the real world but only its reflection. His own account is the true record. Then why, they ask, was it not so reflected? Because of the nature of the case, he answers, because of the limitations of the drama as a reflector.

Now every argument that the historian can use against the imagined people of the stage-world, the mystic can use to the realistic historian and the painter to the believer in photography.

“All the world’s a stage,” as Jacques says, and history, like the drama and like photography, tells all it can. Prophets and seers, poets and painters exist in order to fill in their imperfections.

Now this is just what we seem to catch St. Paul in the very act of doing. He tells us that the things which happened to the Hebrews in their Exodus “happened unto them for

our ensamples," and he amplifies the Mosaic account by stating that "they drank of that spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ."

The great Apostle seems here to be assisting history in the interests of truth. To one who regards the Bible as the inspired revelation to man of the realities of the spiritual world, it could not seem an extravagant thought that the great unseen Beings who under God direct and control the progress of the world—the true "Kings of the Earth"—use history as far as it can be used to work out in parable His great age-long truths.

How important, for example, that men should have before them vividly and in concrete form the tremendous age-long drama of the deliverance of humanity from the sordid bondage of materialism into the glorious liberty of its true home in the spiritual world! In order that this parable might be written in history we see a race most carefully selected, separated and prepared. It is driven into Egypt by famine and suffers bondage until its great prophet and leader arises, and then follows its deliverance, guidance and sustenance in the wilderness, its battles, failures and triumphs, until at length the Jordan is crossed and the promised land attained.

What the exact incidents of that Exodus were as they might have appeared to a Scottish photographer or been described by a modern newspaper correspondent seems perhaps to be a matter of secondary importance. The great Hebrew prophet-historians saw the realities of which the events in the physical world were the inadequate reflection. Again and again both in the Old Testament and in the New the world-wide, age-long significance of Hebrew history was strongly emphasised. "All these things happened unto them for our ensamples," and "They were written for our admonition." The grand description of

the guidance of the host by the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night is in the deepest sense a statement of real truth. Whether or not that cloud would have made any impression on the film of a modern camera we do not know and we need not care. God's purposes and men's spiritual history were wonderfully made manifest and carefully worked out in the history of this selected race in so far as history could lend itself to the purpose ; but where history breaks down the vision of the seer comes to its aid. The truth with which St. Paul was concerned in the passage quoted above was the deliverance of man from "the bondage of corruption" and mortality into the promised land of the spiritual life. He dealt with the fact rather than the reflection and he assisted the reflection to give expression to the fact.

It is surely at least as difficult to work out this theme in history as it would be for us to translate 'Paradise Lost' into the language of the Australian aborigines. Doubtless, it could be done, but how terribly the sublimity, the glory, and the mystery would be stripped from it by the limitations of that miserable vocabulary ! How the translator would long to call in the aid of art to amplify by line and colour the poverty-stricken reflection of mighty thoughts and scenes ! How he would sympathise with St. Paul's bold endeavour to bring Hebrew history into still closer approximation to revealed truth ! Historical "facts" are the lines and pigments of the Divine Artist, and are meant less to register what is seen by the bodily eye than to suggest the great spiritual realities which are invisible to it. The prophet will not be confined to what the world calls "facts." He spends his life in trying to break through them and get behind them.

"To find their meaning is his meat and drink."

Now it is just here that the remarkable revival of Mysti-



cism in our own times is coming to our aid. It does not quarrel with "facts" but it puts them in their right place. It raises no protest against the ascertained results of Higher Criticism, though it smilingly points out that many critics take themselves far too seriously. It insists that men should come to a clear understanding as to what is meant by reality. To most men the transitory is the real world, and hence its events and facts assume an absurdly exaggerated importance. To the mystic, on the other hand, the real world is the spiritual, and nothing that happens under conditions of time and space can be anything but reflections. For example, he would not say that the salvation of the world depended on what happened on Calvary, but that what happened on Calvary made manifest once for all the eternal Sacrifice on which the salvation of the world depends. He does not think of the Virgin Birth at Bethlehem as the coming of the eternal Christ into the world, but as the manifestation to the world that He is there all the time. That surely is the lifting up of the Son of Man "out of the earth" which will draw all men unto Him.

H. ERSKINE HILL.