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# Story, History and the Old Testament Narrative

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This essay seeks to address the tendency, whether conscious or unconscious, of the contemporary biblical narrative movement to distance the Old Testament (OT) narrative corpus from its historical referentiality by reconceptualising the narrative as a collection of artistic stories. Despite having done much to invigorate and inform theological reflections on the OT narrative over the last three decades, the narrative approach has, nevertheless, generated much scepticism regarding the historicity of the narrative by propagating the perception that the OT as a narrative literature and as a historiographic literature are two mutually exclusive categories. However, the rise of this modern narrative criticism within the arena of biblical studies is not the only significant factor contributing to the erosion of the confidence in the reliability of the OT narrative as historiography. The historical scepticism of the narrative movement merely reinforces and contributes to the attenuation of the historical confidence that was already in place when the philosophical foundations of modern historical studies were first laid in the 19th century as a scientific-oriented discipline. Past disputes on the historical integrity of the OT narrative have emerged whenever critical methodologies, conceived on the assumptions that do not resonate with the worldview of the Bible, are deployed by biblical scholars to evaluate the biblical text. Furthermore, the philosophical foundations of historical studies have not remained static but have shifted quite dramatically and violently

over the last century to the position where history as an academic discipline is today suffering from an identity crisis. Therefore, the confusions on the historical character of the OT narrative today is not only the aftermath of a clash of worldviews, significant though this may be, but also stemmed from the uncertainties regarding the very nature of history, historiography, and the role of a historian. If this diagnosis is accurate, we need to start our exploration a little further back in order to properly address the story-history issue of the OT narrative. Therefore, an understanding of how “what history is” has evolved from a scientific-oriented discipline into a social-scientific-oriented discipline before mutating into a disorientated-postmodern discipline in the latter half of the twentieth century is indispensable. This brief historiography, together with the insights and challenges from the modern narrative movement, will afford us a context to rethink and redefine a more robust understanding of the character of OT historiography. We now turn our attention to the impact of the narrative approach on the OT narrative.

### **THE IMPACT OF THE NARRATIVE APPROACH ON THE OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE AS HISTORIOGRAPHY**

The study of narrative has overtaken the study of poetry as the dominant branch of narrative discipline by the end of the 20th century. This shift in emphasis occurred not only as a consequence of the changes associated with mass reading habits but also as an increasing realization and recognition of the cultural significance of the narrative genre by narrative scholars and cultural theorists. They argue that narratives or stories are an instinctive and distinctive way in which humans in most cultures recount and interpret the progression of past events. Pure scientific records and descriptions of causality that link and organize events logically simply fail to resonate satisfactorily with our existential realities. In contrast, a story narrated from a point of view with characterizations and a development of plot in time and space

humanizes and earths the chains of events thus giving connection, direction and shape to our past, present and future existence.

Following this recent trend within the field of narrative scholarship, biblical scholars have, particularly in the last couple of decades, begun to recognize the narrative features of the OT narrative and have borrowed liberally the analytical tools of narrative theory to analyse the OT narrative as masterfully constructed Hebrew literature. The former disappointing and unfruitful preoccupation of historical criticism with the genetic and pre-historic “behind the text” issues have now given way to the “new orthodoxy in biblical studies” that is set on analysing how the flow of the narrative and how the different narrative components of the “text as it is” impinge and interact with one another to achieve effective communication of meanings. Features such as focalization, repetition, discontinuity, dislocation, etc in the OT narrative, once dismissed during the era of historical criticism as editorial intrusions or clumsy redactions, are now recognized and exalted as creative and sensitive manipulations of words and phrases of artistic biblical writers. As the result, biblical scholars today are less inclined to amend apparent contradictions and incoherence in the OT narrative. This new narrative perspective has not only reversed decades of fragmentation and atomization of the narrative texts by exponents of historical criticism, it has also recovered and restored the appreciation for the artistry, unity and integrity of the final form of OT narrative. With academically credible and esteemed figures such as Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Shimon Bar-Efrat, David Gunn, Danna Fewell and Meir Steinberg at the helm of this narrative approach, confessing the OT narrative as a perceptively crafted and well-structured piece of literature is now no longer considered as an act of intellectual martyrdom in academic circles.

However, the elevated sensitivity to the aesthetic and narrative features that reclaimed the integrity of the OT narrative has not secured

a greater affirmation, confidence, and emphasis in its historical trustworthiness. Despite explicit references to geographical sites and historical individuals, for many scholars, the stories of the OT narrative are simply too artistic or good to be accurate or historical. For example, Robert Alter, while not discounting the historicity of biblical characters such as David and Solomon and biblical events such as the civil war between the houses of Saul and David, nevertheless redefines the OT narrative as “historicized prose fiction.” Alter considers the OT narrative not as historiography but a narrative construct of authors with strong ideological biases who liberally embellished the historical figures with fictitious verbal intercourses and internal thoughts to create artificial characters. Alter concludes that “the author of David stories stands in basically the same relation to Israelite history as Shakespeare stands to English history in his history plays.” Similarly, Shimon Bar-Efrat, considering the narrative element of characterization, concludes that it is immaterial whether the characters are imaginary or otherwise. A quick survey shows that apart from Meir Sternberg, who clearly believes that the OT narrative is “neither a product of fiction nor historicized fiction nor fictionalised history, but historiography pure and uncompromising,” recent narrative analyses of the OT narrative by the other major narrative exponents such as Alter, Berlin, Bar-Efrat, Gunn, Fewell and Licht are acutely silent on the historicity of the narrative. In general, what pervades the biblical narrative movement is an agnostic attitude towards the historicity of the OT narrative and the unwillingness to trespass beyond the boundary of the OT as literature.

Even those engaged in the quest for historical ancient Israel are reluctant to admit the historical reliability of the OT narrative. The central dispute in this arena pertains to the relationship between narrative or biblical Israel and historical Israel. Is the biblical text, particularly the narrative corpus with its focus on individuals, events and nations,

historiography i.e. a narrative representation of selected aspects of ancient Israel's history, and therefore, a reliable source for historical reconstruction? Is it predominantly an artistic fictional construct and therefore, an unreliable historiography? For example, Phillip Davies, while not discounting the possibility that the OT "might be historical," nevertheless understands the patriarchal period not as "chronological but genealogical and ideological" and that it is "an epoch in the narrative, biblical story but not in the history of the ancient world." Not surprisingly, considering the cyclical plots of Judges, he labels the judges period as "the most obviously artificial features of the collection of judge story." Agreeing with the dominant conclusion of the biblical narrative criticism, Davies further asserts that the narrative shape of the OT narrative "has virtually everything to do with narrative artistry and virtually nothing to do with anything that might have happened." Similarly, Thomas Thompson who sees the Bible as a corpus of stories reflecting the philosophies and worldviews of its authors writes:

the Bible doesn't deal with what happened in the past. It deals with what was thought, written and transmitted within an interacting intellectual tradition....The tradition gave not Israel but Judaism an identity, not as a 'nation' among the goyim, but as people of God: an Israel redivivus in the life of piety...the Bible relates hardly at all to historical events, to anything that might have happened. It rather reflects constitutional questions of identity.<sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, the debate in the arena of OT historiography is heated and complex but what is notable from this brief survey is that story and history

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past* (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. 34-35.

(and ideology) are clearly played off against one another. On the basis that the past does not present itself in a narrative form, the OT in narrative form is used as a sufficient testimony to its own a-historicity. In other words, any OT narrative plot with a beginning, middle and end cannot correspond with reality and therefore, must be imaginative or fictive.

The hermeneutical impact of the narrative movement is not insignificant. Once the historiographic dimension of the OT narrative is neglected, various narrative concerns inevitably move in to monopolize and dictate any interpretive endeavours of the narrative. Fuelled partly by the appetite for novelty and partly by the postmodern fever, biblical narrative critics have liberally adopted various philosophical perspectives, e.g. feminism, structuralism, deconstructionism, materialism, etc as reading strategies. This a-historical, if not anti-historical, orientation of the narrative approach, coupled with the obsession with the reader freedom concerns, has produced a barrage of interpretations that are not only bizarre and counter-intuitive but also dangerously non-theological and alarmingly detached from any ecclesial concerns. Narrative artistry and aesthetic concerns have finally eclipsed the theological and historical witness of the OT narrative.

In the midst of this historical impasse, Philip Long is right to observe that much of the current confusion and misunderstanding with regard to terms like “history”, “historiography”, “fiction”, “literature”, and “story” stemmed from the lack of proper and careful definitions when employing those terms. The predominant unarticulated assumption shared among the narrative exponents is the history and narrative dichotomy. At one extreme end of the spectrum, history may be conceptualized as the actual past events themselves or, more commonly, as a scientific discipline whose task is to objectively describe and reconstruct past events. At the other end of the spectrum, literature is set in opposite to history as a pure artful and aesthetic

construction totally devoid of any historical content. Defined in this manner, history-as-science is concerned with facts while story-as-literature is concerned with pure fiction. With this, not only are story and history wrenched poles apart, historical accuracy and narrative artistry are also cordoned off as conflicting genres. This dichotomic assertion implies that the artful verbal reconstruction of the past events necessarily compromises, if not eclipses, the accuracy of the historical representation. It is, therefore, not surprising that the identification and elevation of the narrative dimension of the OT narrative have undermined and underplayed the text as historiography.

### **IS THE OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE AS HISTORIOGRAPHY IN CRISIS?**

We have briefly observed above that recent debates on the historical character of the OT narrative continue to polarize history and story without any proper and careful definitions of the two. This means that “story is played off against history” by the narrative movement within the arena of biblical studies. This dichotomization or differentiation, however, did not exist before the dawn of the Enlightenment. The wedge is the legacy of the institutionalization of the intellectual endeavours during the Enlightenment era that deposited the present compartmentalization, specialization, and insulation of the academic disciplines. Before we attempt to define the character of the OT narrative as a historiography, we need to consider the major shifts in the methodological approaches to history as an academic discipline since the Enlightenment, that have contributed directly and indirectly to the attenuation of the confidence in the historical testimony of the OT narrative. This excursus will provide a context for us to refine a more robust understanding of the OT narrative as historiography literature in the next section.



The first of these shifts came predominantly from the impact of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment paradigms on the continental European intellectual consciousness. As reason began to overshadow faith as the sole arbiter of truth, the European academic community was endowed with an elevated sense of epistemic confidence in human objectivity and rationality. Within this intellectually optimistic sphere, modern historical studies was established and professionalized as a scientific-orientated academic discipline poised, with its array of scientific methodologies, to reconstruct and represent objective knowledge of the historical past. Subsequently, the famous dictum of Leopold von Ranke, the father of modern historiography, “only to show how things really were (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)” became the predominant paradigm for the nineteenth-century modern historiographic programmes. The ripple from the impact of the Enlightenment scientific objectivity began to radiate beyond the boundary of the historical discipline. Eventually, scientific methodologies became established as the only means by which direct knowledge of reality, whether past or present, can be accessed. In time, biblical scholars also began to gauge the historical value of the biblical text by applying the rationale of the historical-critical approach. Not only did its characteristic insistence and persistence to impose definitions and categorizations fragment and atomize the biblical text, but historical criticism also found itself in conflict with the text it sought to evaluate and scrutinize. This inevitable clash of worldviews resulted simply because the historical-critical notion of reality, conceived and constructed on the assumptions and philosophies of the Enlightenment and therefore predominantly rationalistic and naturalistic, is essentially foreign to the biblical notion of reality that is fundamentally theistic and supernaturalistic. The relentless uncritical employment of the scientific methodologies by biblical scholars within an increasingly secular environment eventually collapsed the biblical or theistic worldview into the deistic or naturalistic worldview in the field

of biblical studies. With this mindset entrenched, any biblical discourses that are irreconcilable with the Enlightenment paradigms, particularly biblical narratives that contain accounts of divine causality where God is portrayed as the divine creator, carer and actor in history, are invariably deemed as unhistorical. With various permutations of these scientific-orientated anti-supernatural grids erected in the field of biblical studies, the supernatural elements of the OT narrative were either filtered out and discarded as unhistorical or reconceptualized to bring it in line with the Enlightenment notion of reality. The OT was further devalued by the narrative insensitivity of historical criticism.

The second of these shifts came as the result of the preference for the social-scientific approach to history. Where the historiographic focus was once on historical individuals, events, and nations as the significant driving forces of history, historical studies eventually turned its focus on the macro-driving forces of history. Industrialization, scientific advancement, and technological development are seen as driving and steering the course of history. With this social science orientation, the testimony of OT narrative – which instead focuses on individuals, events, and nations – declined as a historical source for the reconstruction of Israel's history. However, the negative impact of the alleged driving forces identified by various social scientific theories such as Marxism and the influence of previously ignored forces has done much to debunk the social approach to history as the dominant perspective on history.

Finally, we must also note the postmodern challenge to the historical discipline. The historian Edward Carr, writing in the 1960s, was still able to say: “the belief in a hard core of historical facts existing independently of the interpretation of the historian is preposterous fallacy, but one which is very hard to eradicate.” However, the emergence of the postmodern consciousness in the latter half of the twentieth century has significantly and successfully challenged and discredited the

philosophical foundations of historical criticism. By arguing that all historical discourses are inevitably coloured by the historians' subjectivity and biases since all attempts to represent the actualities and realities of the past by appealing to documentary evidences invariably involve the interpretive processes such as the selection and arrangement of past facts, postmodernism exposes the objective quest of modern history as unrealistic, if not unattainable. From this perspective, all historiographies are past facts refracted through the historians' minds.

However, this scepticism regarding the viability of objective historical enquiry was taken a step further by the postmodern development within the field of narrative and linguistic studies. Ferdinand de Saussure severed the relationship between a word and the object or the idea to which the word refers. For de Saussure, languages do not refer to reality but rather create reality. This was later taken to the extreme by Jacques Derrida whose idea is crystallized by his infamous dictum "there is nothing outside the text." This act of liberating the text from the authorial intention allows the number of reading or interpretation of the text to become boundless. The historical text, therefore, can now be read and interpreted in innumerable ways. Since "there is nothing outside the text," all histories are, by implication, created and fictional. Positively, this perspective has brought the awareness that historians are also necessarily narrative artists. Negatively, with fact and fiction no longer distinguishable and with the need to distinguish them also vanished, all historiographies can now be scrutinized as narrative works. The distinction between history and fiction is no longer apparent through the postmodern grid.

From this short survey, we see that not only is historical knowledge a debated and complex matter, the pursuit of history itself is also in crisis. The continual rejection of past understandings, obsession with categorizations, definitions and novel interpretations, and the ever

widening interest of historians have only added confusion to the discussion and compounded the current impasse. The problems we have with the historical testimony of the OT narrative stem from our failure to acknowledge its uniqueness and its claims. The crux of the matter is that neither the extreme modern scientific objectivity and historical certainty nor the extreme postmodern subjectivity and flight to the imaginative are desirable. Both fail to encapsulate satisfactorily the human experience of reality. Historiography devoid of any didactic purposes, ideological biases, and aesthetic elements as propounded by the scientific critical approach, is as nonsensical as the alleged historiographic impossibility of the extreme postmoderns. The illusive reality lies somewhere in between the extremes. The historical testimony of the OT cannot be understood in terms of our presuppositions. It must be considered based on its own unique characteristics and claims.

### **RECONCILING STORY AND HISTORY: TOWARDS A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE**

We will now bring together issues we have left unresolved so far by considering the following points. First, does artful representation of the past in a narrative form compromise its actualities? Not necessarily, for V. Phillips Long asserts that narrative artistry and historical accuracies are not two mutually exclusive categories when speaking of the OT narrative. He argues that although the writing strategies or narrative devices employed in historical and fictional compositions may be the same, to regard historiography and fiction as qualitatively identical however, is misleading. The antithesis is not only artificial but one that confuses form and function. The function may remain constant under the most varied forms. Long helpfully illustrates this by drawing a parallel between the art of biblical historiography and that of a painting. Although

a painter has considerable freedom in depicting his or her subject representationally with brush strokes and paints, his or her creativity is nevertheless constrained by the subject. Similarly, although historians are at liberty to employ a wide range of narrative devices in their historiographies, they are nevertheless bound by the actualities of the past events they seek to represent. The major difference between a writer of history and a writer of fiction is that the aesthetic and creative freedom of the former is constrained by the actualities of the subject matter while the latter is not bound by any hard facts.

This notion of a close relationship existing between historiography and literature is not foreign to historians themselves. For example, the historian John Tosh observes that although

[m]odern historians are less self consciously 'literary', but they too are capable of remarkable evocative descriptive writing...historical narrative can create and entertain through its ability to create suspense and arouse powerful emotions...narrative is also the historians' basic technique for conveying what it felt like to observe and participate in past events...The master of re-creative history have always been the masters of dramatic and vividly evocative narrative.<sup>2</sup>

He adds: "history is essentially a hybrid discipline, combining the technical and analytical procedures of a science with the imaginative and stylistic qualities of an art." The fundamental flaw of the biblical narrative movement is, therefore, its divorce of history from the narrative artistry of the OT narrative – something which historians themselves do not do. Furthermore, OT historiography is delivered not only as succinct

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<sup>2</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 3rd Edition (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 93.

stories but also as genealogies, reports, poems, songs, wisdoms, prophecies, etc. Through the choices of vocabularies, the manipulations of words and phrases, the dechronologizations and symmetricalizations of events, the inclusions of humour and ironies and even the apparent contradictions, the OT historiographers communicate. In other words, narrative artistry is employed not for aesthetic purposes per se but also for communicative purposes.

Secondly, does the involvement of interpretations nullify the testimonies of the historian? John Tosh observes that the “choice of narrative must be recognised for what it is: an interpretative act rather than an innocent attempt at story telling.” Long also admits that as it is impossible to paint without a point of view, the historian inevitably also writes from a vantage point. The historian is, therefore, an interpreter of history. A neutral perspective from which history can be recounted objectively by a detached observer does not exist. If indeed worldviews, prejudices, ideologies, theological and didactic intentions cannot be vacated from any historical discourse, to label the OT narrative as historically unreliable because it is theologically or ideologically orientated is to ignore the fact that all representations of history are interpretations of the past.

Thirdly, does the involvement of the historian’s imagination create a fictive past? John Tosh again helpfully observes that “any attempt to reconstruct the past presupposes an exercise of imagination, the past is never completely captured in the documents which it left behind.” The task of a historian, therefore, is not only to reconstruct the past but also to transpose it. The historian needs to have not only a vision or a grasp of the past events but also the imaginative ability to encode or verbalize his vision of the past so that he can envision others with this past. In other words, if this communication of the past is intended, then an artistic judgment is required by the historians with regard to a suitable genre not only to accurately represent the past but also communicate the

historiographer's intention. As an impressionist painter seeks to depict and represent a scene with selected brush strokes and paints, so a biblical historiographer needs imagination to employ narrative devices to paint a snapshot of history. In this sense, apart from verbal and narrative skills, imagination is also of considerable importance to a historian.

Fourthly, is the representation of a narrow spectrum of past events in a narrative form with a plot, i.e. with a meaningful chain of events, merely a product of the historian's creative imagination and therefore jeopardizes its historical accuracies? Or is narrative an aspect of actuality or reality? Long's historiography-painting analogy is again helpful here. As no sound-minded painter would include all the subject's details, since it is impossible to do so, the writer of history also must decide to suppress or leave out completely certain minor features of the past in order to emphasize its major features. The historian needs to discriminate between relevant and less relevant information. The process of selection inevitably involves simplification for the sake of clarity and emphasis. Long's conclusion is that "historiography involves a creative, though constrained, attempt to depict and interpret significant events or sequences of events from the past." This perspective is again not foreign to the historical discipline. John Tosh explains "the historian has to be able to perceive the relatedness of events and to abstract from the mountains of detail those patterns that make best sense of the past." As a painter of a landscape who views his or her subject from a spatial distant may be able to discern major contours and features of the landscape not apparent to those in the immediate vicinity of the landscape, so a historian writing as one reflecting on past events from a temporal distance is not in a disadvantaged position. The historian possesses the opportunities to discern, locate, and uncover the narrative shape of the past that was not necessarily conspicuous to historical individuals. A presentation of selected events of the past in a narrative form does not necessarily compromise its historical accuracies. Rather, it brings the past

into sharper focus. Long concludes that “the historiographical impulse implies constraint by the subject, the theological impulse implies point of view, and the literary impulse implies aesthetic choices.”

Fifthly, the fundamental defect of the Enlightenment is its arrogant anthropocentric or egocentric perspective that begins with “I” instead of God. From our survey above, the tendency to privilege the perspective of “I”, whether in historical or biblical discipline, was widespread. This error persists to this day and pervades all spheres of the Western intellectual endeavours. Caution, therefore, must be exercised so as not to privilege our own notion of reality over that of the OT narrative. In other words, the biblical worldview characterized by the relationship between the covenantal God YHWH and his covenantal people Israel – captured predominantly with recurring themes of salvation and judgement in the OT narrative – must not be ignored, rejected, or suspected simply on the basis that they do not resonate with our own cherished worldviews. Our foundational assumptions of the scientific, social-scientific, postmodern, etc perspectives of history, insightful though they may be, are foreign to the theistic worldview of the OT narrative. If we are prepared to interrogate the narrative with our reason, we must also allow the narrative and its unique categories to interrogate our reason and perhaps to bring it in line with the biblical worldview. This is not anti-intellectualism but a posture of openness with regard to the claims of the narrative. Long correctly observes that the remedy for this anthropocentric error involves nothing less than a “radical change of heart and mind (what the Bible calls ‘repentance’).”

Sixthly, the fundamental weakness of biblical studies as an academic discipline is its lack, if not dislike, of theological and didactic concerns. The preference for objectivity and neutrality demonstrates that most modern biblical movements today, including the narrative critical movement, remain firmly in the grip of the Enlightenment paradigms.



Iain Provan reminds us that the OT narrative is both a historiographic and a didactic literature. For example, the Chronicler was not merely recounting the historical rise and fall of the Judean monarchy per se but was also re-appropriating selected historical deposits and communicating them artistically and theologically to a didactic end for his contemporaries. Similarly, the historian George G. Iggers observes that “every historical account is a construct but a construct arising from a dialog between the historian and the past, one that does not occur in a vacuum but within a community of inquiring minds who share criteria of possibility.”

Therefore, the purpose of writing biblical historiography includes the reinterpretation, rethinking, reworking, reordering, re-appropriation, and transmission of traditional materials with the intention of making them function as a sacred text within the community of believers. If the OT historiographic agendum is didactic via narrative artistry, to focus on its aesthetic and informing properties without due attention to its theological dimension and transforming intention is tantamount to distorting and misunderstanding the orientation of the text. The Hebrew narrative is not merely a chronicle of occurrences of Israel’s past but it also interprets history from a theological perspective, recorded with the intention to reform the community of faith.

Finally, the OT narrative as historiography is unique. We will consider two major unique features. First, the OT narrative is not merely the narrative and historiographic product of the human enterprise. It claims to be the vehicle of God’s special revelation. It contains a notion of reality not accessible to the human rational enquiry as well as authoritative divine communications. Its claims, therefore, must challenge us to re-examine our perception of reality so that we may adjust it in order to bring it in line with the biblical theistic reality. Secondly, the OT narrative sits within a Canon, the Holy Scripture of the Church. It is just

a portion of a larger corpus of historiography with a grand plot that stretches from the creation narrative in Genesis to the consummation hope in Revelation. If “the characters are the soul of the narrative,” then attention must be paid to the central character of the grand narrative, the God of Israel, who is characterized in a “fragmentary and varied fashion” in the OT, in flesh in the New Testament, and ultimately in glory in Jesus Christ – the one the grand narrative that claims to be the beginning, middle and the end of the story!

## CONCLUSION

The portrayal of the narrative artistry and the historical accuracies of the OT narrative as two contradictory categories have led to the erosion of confidence in the historical reliability of the narrative. We have also considered the evolution of the philosophical foundation of the historical discipline since the Enlightenment as the other major factor contributing to the confusion regarding the OT narrative as historiography. Trouble arises whenever foreign categories constructed on non-biblical assumptions are deployed to evaluate the OT narrative. A fresh understanding that takes the uniqueness of the narrative with utter seriousness is required. The OT narrative must be approached with openness to its claim as a didactic historiography as well as the revelation of God.

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