

## HOW DO WE READ THE BIBLE? (3)

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### HISTORY AND METAPHOR

We now turn to De Bruijne's second essay, wherein he deals with the question whether it will help Reformed theology if, more so than is normal within the Reformed tradition, some aspects of *historical* passages in Scripture are explained not literally but metaphorically.<sup>1</sup>

In seeking an answer to this question, De Bruijne is still in discussion with his colleague B. Loonstra. One of Loonstra's arguments is that ancient historians (including biblical ones) were not greatly interested in historical accuracy. They wrote their accounts not first of all because they wanted to relate what actually happened, but in order to frame a theological message. In the process they used a variety of conventions, such as metaphors and other non-literal language as well as saga, elements of myth, and pseudepigraphy (the placing of a text on the name of a well-known person who had not in fact written it). They did so not to deceive but because the approach was a normal one at the time, and because no strict distinction between literal and non-literal was required (112-16).

Because he believes this to be the nature of biblical historiography, Loonstra concludes that we can interpret certain historical passages figuratively even when the biblical authors presented them as literal. This means in effect that we can deny their historicity. But because biblical accounts do not have the pretension of being historically exact, such a denial is no real problem, although, as we saw in the previous instalment, an exception must be made for descriptions with a redemptive-historical content.

### **Biblical historicity: a Jewish view**

Having summarized Loonstra's argument, De Bruijne refers to the work of two scholars who have specialized in the study of biblical and other ancient historiography. Both men contradict Loonstra's conclusion, showing that ancient-eastern historians were vitally interested in historicity and truth, and that the same applied to biblical authors.

The first of De Bruijne's witnesses is the Jewish Old Testament scholar and ancient historian Baruch Halpern, who in one of his studies focuses on the historical books of Joshua up to and including Kings (162-7). Halpern shows that these books intend to do justice to the facts, including even the smallest details, and that in this respect they do not differ from modern-western historiography. An investigation of the sources the biblical historians used, as well as a comparison with what we know from extra-biblical sources, are among the factors that lead to this conclusion.

Halpern distinguishes between "what happened" and "history." The former term refers to the endless number of occurrences that we experience from day to day, often without being able to make connections. "History" is the discipline which organizes (some of) these facts into a coherent whole. It is a means of *representing* the past. As such, history necessarily has a literary dimension. It needs a narrative structure to show connections, deal with cause and effect, offer interpretations, and also to bring a message; for history always has an ideological or didactic or tendentious component. All this means that the writer concentrates on some facts, rather than on others. There is no true historian who does not select. Sometimes he focuses on political data; at other times he leaves such data out and restricts himself to facts dealing, for example, with religious matters. In historical narratives, Halpern continues, there are also "white spots" – areas where the sources are very limited. The historian tries to fill in these spots as well as he can, but historical accounts necessarily have a measure of probability. They are also apt to contain errors: e.g., an inaccurate date, or a mistake caused by the misunderstanding

of a source. These various elements do not detract, however, from the historian's intention to do justice to the past. They characterize all serious historiography.

### **Narrative conventions**

Although the desire for accuracy is the same, Halpern states that there are differences between the historiography of biblical times and of today. Far more so than their modern counterparts, ancient historians presented their history in story form. They also made use of narrative conventions that were current in their times. These were well known to their readers, but they are unfamiliar to us and their usage must therefore be explained. One of these conventions is the symbolic meaning of numbers, which I mentioned before. Another is the use of dialogue and direct speech. When a modern historian has to give the words of a historical figure he does not usually have an exact text before him and reports indirectly. That is, he gives a summary or a paraphrase of what was said. But in the same situation historians in the ancient orient (and also in classical Greece) often used direct speech, and so left the impression that they were quoting literally. This was done also when it concerned words spoken in secret, and even when the historian referred to a person's unspoken thoughts. The fact that we cannot take such direct speech as literal does not mean that it is historically unreliable. The convention served the goal that all proper historians pursue, namely to give a faithful presentation of what was actually said and thought.

Another convention Halpern mentions is that of hyperbole or exaggeration. The original readers recognized this convention and interpreted it properly, whereas we have to be alerted to it. A report, for example, that a tyrant "ripped open all pregnant women" does not necessarily imply numerical exactness, but may simply be a means the author used to indicate that great cruelties were visited upon the tyrant's victims. In the same way, we must assume that hyperbole is used when we read that a city was destroyed "to the last man" when later it appears that there were still men present. And various other examples could be given.

Halpern also believes that sometimes fictional elements were inserted into the narrative. He himself disbelieves in miracles and therefore considers a text like 1 Kings 13 (which relates the story of the man of God who in the days of Jeroboam I came from Judah to prophesy at Bethel) as fictional. Halpern thinks that this story may have been consciously inserted as figurative, although he also considers the possibility that the author mistakenly believed that the events had actually taken place. But generally, this type of story, he believes, was recognized as figurative and inserted to throw light on the total message; and while we have difficulty distinguishing such fictional stories from the historical ones surrounding them, this was not the case with the immediate readers, who were familiar with the convention.

To summarize: Halpern rejects the view that biblical history as a whole is metaphoric, that it serves as nothing more than a means of conveying a message, and that it does not claim true historicity. He esteems the reliability and professionalism of biblical witnesses much higher than many critical scholars do. He also makes clear that, if we want to understand the biblical message, it is essential that we keep in mind the different narrative conventions. At the same time he criticizes confessional scholars for trying to explain all claims as historical and factual and so ignoring the possible figurative aspects of a story. Their belief in the historicity of 1 Kings 13, which he himself considers fictional because it contains miracles, serves him as an example.

Halpern's attitude toward the supernatural makes clear, De Bruijne concludes, that we can make only a critical use of his work, while nevertheless admitting its value for a biblical hermeneutics. Especially valuable are his arguments in support of the Bible's historicity and his explanation of ancient-oriental narrative conventions (168).

## **An evangelical voice**

The second expert De Bruijne introduces is the Old Testament scholar V. Philips Long, an evangelical theologian who, unlike Halpern, believes the Bible to be the infallible word of God. De Bruijne concentrates on Long's study *The Art of Biblical History*, 1994. In this book Long builds on Halpern's work but, because of his Christian convictions, comes with additional information that can help Reformed hermeneutical reflection (168-83).

Like Halpern, Long distinguishes between history as the totality of past occurrences on the one hand, and history as it is told and written (historiography), on the other. Again like Halpern, he points out that written history does more than simply recount facts. It is a composition, which means that it takes the form of a narrative wherein events of the past are presented in a coherent and ordered manner, so that their significance becomes clear. History as the totality of past occurrences and written history, Long points out, are both part of God's revelation. His work of salvation is *established* in his historical deeds. The significance of these deeds He Himself *explains* by means of the historian's selection, ordering, description, and explanation of the historical facts.

Unlike Halpern, Long does not believe in automatically assigning supernatural elements like miracles and divine revelations to the domain of the non-historical. He suggests a method for determining whether a certain passage in the Bible is meant historically or not. Among the things that he suggests the exegete has to keep in mind are the following two:

(1) The exegete must determine what type of truth claim the historian makes. Does a certain book have the intention of giving historical information or not? The claim for the book as a whole affects the parts according to a "top-down" structure. If it appears that the author presents his entire text as history, then this applies also to the parts, unless these are clearly meant figuratively. The fable of Jotham in Judges 9 and the parables of Jesus have characteristics which distinguish them from the surrounding passages and are clearly not meant to be taken literally. In the case of the speaking donkey of Balaam (Numbers 22) such distinguishing characteristics are absent, and therefore this section must, with the book of Numbers as a whole, be taken as historical.

(2) The exegete must apply the test of internal consistency (i.e., are there contradictions which give rise to doubt as to the text's historicity?) and of external consistency (i.e., does the passage come into conflict with what we know from other sources?).

### **"If Jericho was not razed..."**

Long considers also the question whether, in attempting to establish the historicity of certain texts, we can distinguish between the central message of the Bible and what would appear to be more peripheral or marginal information. We have seen that Loonstra makes this type of distinction when he insists that certain presentations in the Bible can be taken figuratively (even though presented as literal) but that this may not be done with texts that have a redemptive-historical content.

Long questions the validity of such a distinction. In this connection he refers to the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 6), an event that liberal historians have often presented as non-historical. He borrows from another author, who quoted Paul's confession, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor. 15:14) and who paraphrased it by asking, "If Jericho was not razed, is our faith in vain?" Long believes that we have to take that question seriously. The book of Joshua, he points out, claims to give history, and this claim is compromised if we should conclude that the destruction of Jericho did not take place. That would have consequences for our trust in the Bible's central message. We accept that message as true for the same reason that we accept the account of Jericho's razing as true, namely through the witness coming to us in the Bible. If we conclude that the account of Jericho's razing is not to be taken literally, although it is clearly presented as such, then our confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture as a whole cannot remain unaffected.

De Bruijne appears to agree with this point of view. He further remarks that in any event it is difficult to establish precisely which texts are "central" and which "peripheral." The so-called

redemptive-historical facts are not restricted to what we confess, for example, in the Apostles' Creed. As several of the Psalms show, the category also includes elements not mentioned in the Creed, such as the flood, events occurring in the times of the patriarchs, the exodus, the desert experience, the conquest of Canaan, the history of David, and so on. Often it is impossible to distinguish between biblical Fact and fact (179f.).

### Some applications

Applying the arguments of Halpern and Long, De Bruijne shows how they correct a number of Loonstra's conclusions, and also how they can help us with various problems in biblical interpretation. As examples of the latter he mentions, *inter alia*, elements in the accounts of the beginning of Saul's kingship and of the conquest of Canaan, as well as the fact that in the New Testament the first three gospels place the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry whereas John places it at the end (172-6, 180, 181f.). An awareness of narrative conventions and the application of literary analysis enable us, he shows, to eliminate what have long been considered inconsistencies or contradictions in biblical history. By ignoring these conventions, and in general by attempting to explain literally what is intended figuratively, we do not uphold the Bible's truth claim but in fact obscure its message. De Bruijne therefore stresses once again the need for greater openness among us for the presence of narrative conventions and other figurative elements in the Bible (184f.).

While rejecting Loonstra's conclusion that all biblical language is metaphorical, de Bruijne emphasizes once again that a text can have a literal as well as a metaphorical meaning. We had an example of this in his explanation of the biblical account of Christ's resurrection (see the previous instalment). Returning to the same Bible passage, De Bruijne mentions the cloud that, according to Acts 1:9, hid Jesus from the disciples' sight when He ascended. In the light of Long's criteria there is no reason, he writes, to believe with Loonstra and others that the cloud may not have been literally there. We must regard it, however, as a literal element which has *at the same time* a metaphorical "surplus value." The cloud was there, and by its very *physical* presence it *symbolized* the divine glory (178).

De Bruijne sees a similar metaphorical message in some of the direct speech we find in Scripture. Agreeing with Halpern that the use of direct speech was an ancient-eastern narrative convention, he mentions the difficulty some Reformed believers have in accepting it as non-literal. In many instances the Bible itself, however, claims no absolute literalness for direct speech. The differences among the evangelists in their rendering of human words, and even of the words of Jesus Himself, make this clear, as do other parts of Scripture.

As to the possible metaphorical "surplus value" of direct speech, De Bruijne draws attention to the words of Rahab to the two spies (Josh 2), and suggests that the narrator (that is, the Holy Spirit) used the convention here to reveal the *meaning* of the episode. Rahab's speech repeated promises that God had given to Joshua with respect to the conquest of Canaan. What Rahab actually said and what is recorded is materially the same; but the specific form served to underline the specific promises given earlier. These promises required faith. Rahab's message confirmed that God's promises were indeed reliable (183).

### Summary

To summarize what we have covered so far: With reference to the work of experts like Baruch Halpern and V. Philips Long, De Bruijne has argued convincingly that biblical authors were as much concerned with historical accuracy as are modern historians. Rather than considering historicity of only secondary interest, biblical historians knew that the truth of their message depended on that historicity. Texts that were clearly intended as literal and literally accurate must therefore be interpreted as such.

At the same time De Bruijne has made clear that figurative elements do play an important role in historical accounts. Such elements the author has *consciously* incorporated in his historical narration. In various cases they form a second layer on top of the literal meaning of the text and depend on that

meaning. In addition, there is the matter of ancient-oriental narrative conventions. An awareness of these conventions and their nature makes it possible, De Bruijne has shown, to resolve a good many “problems” in historical accounts in the Bible. Elements that used to be labelled “discrepancies” or “errors” make perfect sense when the narrative conventions are kept in mind. This applies not only to the symbolic use of numbers, the use of dialogue and direct speech, and the use of hyperbole, but also to apparent repetitions, “gaps,” and other literary usages in narrative accounts. Another function of narrative conventions is that they allow the author to show the meaning of the events he narrates and explain them as acts of God.

## Questions

The insights related above have been quite widely accepted as positive among De Bruijne’s Reformed colleagues. His essay on biblical history contains, however, a number of controversial elements as well. They include the following:

1. Although he rejects Halpern’s view that accounts of the supernatural are necessarily figurative, De Bruijne agrees that ancient-eastern narrative conventions allowed for the inclusion of *fictive* elements in historical accounts, and that we may meet this convention also in the Bible. Referring to Halpern’s idea of “white spots,” he suggests that this may apply, for example, to the book of Genesis – especially to the first 11 chapters, but to a lesser extent also to the history of the patriarchs (187-90). For these early events there were few literary sources available. Although it is possible that God revealed directly much of what happened, it is also possible, he argues, that the historian was forced to make use of popular traditions, which, as he will have realized, will have contained facts as well as fiction. It will have been necessary for him, moreover, to paint lengthy and complex periods with simple brush strokes. De Bruijne believes that in such cases the possibility of inaccuracies in the account increases. Rather than implying direct revelation, inspiration means that, here as elsewhere, the Holy Spirit led the historian’s work in such a way that the outcome gave a reliable account of the period in question. “The special guidance of the Spirit did not replace the historian’s normal craft but directed it to God’s special goal” (187).

I should add here that De Bruijne later qualifies the above by stating that the sources the historian used may well have contained divine revelation to earlier believers. A case in point is Abraham. In Genesis 18 God revealed to Abraham his plans for the future. It is to be expected, De Bruijne writes, that God will have given his prophet information about his work in the past as well. On the same occasion De Bruijne also comes back on his statement that in the use of his sources the historian may have been inaccurate and made errors. He now calls that “a useless and groundless speculation.” Although such errors are theoretically possible, one can assume them only if one meets a concrete problem. General statements on the matter are speculative and should be avoided.<sup>2</sup>

(2) Another controversial element concerns De Bruijne’s proposed explanation of Genesis 6:1-4, where we read about the “sons of God” who married “daughters of men” (190-93). Although he does not want to give a definitive interpretation, he considers the possibility that the biblical author made use of well-known pagan myths according to which gods had sexual relations with human beings, and that he consciously applied these myths in an *antithetical* manner, namely in order to denounce them. We may have an account here, he suggests, of humankind before the flood trying to establish a connection with heaven on its own conditions – specifically by the creation of idols. The flood would then be God’s judgment on human idolatry.

More about these issues, and about the discussion to which they have given rise, in the next instalment.

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<sup>1</sup> Page references within the text are to *Woord op schrift*.

<sup>2</sup> *De Reformatie*, May 31, 2003, p. 644.