historical apologist), it is possible to answer this objection by augmenting historical evidence with an experiential component. While the historical evidences alone can only render the resurrection highly probable, the experience of the risen Jesus could provide a higher degree of conviction. A second response to Plantinga's objection is to argue that 'probable' belief is epistemically sufficient. Habermas, for example, agrees that providing apodictic *certainty is clearly impossible. The goal of the historical apologist is to show that a miracle (such as the resurrection) is highly probable *and* to argue that the evidence excludes viable rational or factual *doubt.

Ultimately, many (if not all) of the objections to historical apologetics as an apologetic method reflect contentious debates over the nature of belief, rationality, knowledge and history. Since these disagreements are not likely to be resolved anytime soon, the debate over the utility of historical apologetics will also continue.

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J. Beilby

HISTORICAL DIFFICULTIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Readers of the NT may have problems believing that what is recounted as history actually happened just as it is described.

Examples of difficulties

Such difficulties may be of various kinds:

1. Contradictions between two or more accounts in Scripture of what are purportedly the same events. For example, in Luke 24 the ascension appears to have taken place immediately after the resurrection, but in Acts 1 it happened forty days later, and the accounts of the meeting of Paul and the apostles in Acts 15 and Gal. 2 differ considerably.

2. Contradictions between the scriptural account and the evidence from other archaeological or literary sources. For example, the census of Quirinius (Luke 2:1) took place well after the death of Herod, and the order of events in Acts 5:36–37 (Theudas and Judas) and in *Josephus is different.

3. Insufficient external evidence to substantiate the scriptural account of an event. For example, the alleged custom of the governor releasing a prisoner at Passover time is otherwise unattested (Mark 15:6; Luke 23:25).

4. The scriptural account contains impossible or unlikely events. These difficulties may be connected with natural or supernatural events. For example, the number of soldiers who accompanied Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea seems disproportionately high (Acts 23:23). Of course, *miracles in general fall into this category.

5. It is not possible to see how the author could have known what had happened. For example, in Acts 26:30–32 Luke relates what was said behind closed doors as if an observer had been present.

6. It may be easier to account for the contents of a narrative in terms of literary considerations. For example, it is often argued that various features of the Pentecost story are literary motifs rather than actual events (Acts 2:3).

Categories of problems

Whatever their nature, historical difficulties may cause problems for the readers of the NT, because they call into question the historicity of the narratives in which they occur. Where the difficulties are comparatively minor and merely affect details of the narrative and not the basic account (e.g. differences in the names or number of people present on a particular occasion) there is no need to dismiss the whole account as fictitious. However, the discrepancies may be on such a scale that they raise substantial doubts as to whether the incident happened in the way that it is described, or indeed whether it happened at all. This may relate to a single incident or a series of incidents and cast doubts on the historicity of a person's life story.

The existence of difficulties of this kind also raises questions as to the historical reliability of the author, such as: Did he have reliable sources? Was he capable of evaluating the sources? Was he attempting to be reliable? It may even cause us to ask whether what we have before us is a narrative of what happened or a work of deliberate fiction and invention.

While questions of this kind, regarding the historicity of the events described and the reliability of the author, arise with any text that purports to record what happened, in the case of Scripture there is a further implication. According to the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, the writings (or the writers) of the NT were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and so they will be free from error. Does this include historical errors and inaccuracies? Would the established existence of even a single, incontrovertible error be sufficient to cast doubt on the doctrine of *biblical inspiration?

Analysing the difficulties

If we were dealing with 'ordinary' writers as opposed to 'inspired' writers, there would be no great problem, in principle, with recognizing their fallibility and taking it into account in evaluating the historicity of their accounts. Nobody is worried by minor errors in a historical work, and we learn to make due allowance for them, but major errors, or errors at key points, are a different matter. Similarly, when we come to Scripture, it would make no real difference to the story in Acts if there were minor inaccuracies in (let us say) the itinerary of Paul, but there would be serious consequences if the evidence for the resurrection of *Jesus could be shown to be unreliable.

A distinction must be drawn between historical accuracy and infallibility. Historians deal in probabilities and improbabilities, not in certainties, and therefore all that a historian can do is to state to an appropriate degree of probability whether a purported difficulty is real or otherwise, or whether a historical account is accurate or otherwise. No historian can prove absolutely whether an account is historical or otherwise. It is always possible that new evidence or a new interpretation of the evidence may be produced. The explanations given by historians are consequently always provisional. It follows from this that the historical infallibility or fallibility of Scripture is something that cannot be proved absolutely. Acceptance of historical infallibility is a matter of faith, i.e. it is a decision that rests on something other than historical evidence. Certainly, there are considerations that may make it appear very reasonable or very unlikely, but the task of apologetics remains on the level of establishing the probabilities of the situation.

Two kinds of difficulties arise when we come to the supernatural. There is the problem of events taking place that are by ordinary standards incredible (such as a miraculous healing) and cases where the cause of an event is understood as divine (e.g. when the death of Herod is attributed to God in Acts 12:23).

In the case of extraordinary events there are two considerations. The first is that acceptance or rejection of a miraculous event rests in part upon whether the critic has a world-view that allows for the miraculous or not. If he or she does not, then all stories of miracles will be held to be fictitious or based on a mistaken understanding (i.e. either the alleged healing did not occur or it can be accounted for in some non-miraculous way). If he or she does accept the possibility of miracles, then the account may be accepted if the evidence is otherwise satisfactory.

Secondly, even if a historian considers it appropriate to allow the miraculous as part of his or her world-view as a historian, in any given instance it will still be incumbent upon him or her to ask whether the 'miraculous' explanation is more probable than some other kind of explanation. A decision on the likelihood of the miracle must be made, but it will not be dependent on a biased decision that the category of the miraculous is unacceptable.

In the case of how to 'explain' an ordinary event, it is again a question of whether a 'religious' account is acceptable, and much the same considerations apply as in the former case. To say that God struck Herod Agrippa down (Acts 12:23) is perfectly compatible with giving a 'natural' interpretation of his fatal illness, but whether it is an appropriate verdict would appear to be beyond the competence of a historian to decide.

Problems also arise with accounts that on the face of it are historical. According to some contemporary scholars, the Acts of the Apostles should be understood as historical fiction rather than as history. The early church, on this view, created an entertaining story of its

beginnings, based, to be sure, on history, but taking great liberties with the story in order to make it both interesting and edifying.

Here again we have a situation where the historical difficulties are swept away by the claim that what we are reading is fiction rather than history (even if there is a modicum of history at the root of it). In this case, the question to be tackled is the broader one of whether the evidence is being correctly read. In the case of Acts it can be strongly maintained that Luke declares his intention of writing history, that the onus of proof is on those who would dispute this, that the alleged evidences of fiction rather than history are inconclusive and that the account can be understood as historical. To affirm that Acts is a historical work, of course, means that the historical difficulties found by critics are still there and have to be dealt with.

When we come to the area of historical errors, it is important to consider just what we would count as such. Inexactness is not necessarily error, and in many situations approximations are acceptable. A historian may recount what was said by somebody without striving for the precise wording, and may use abbreviation or paraphrase. This is particularly obvious in the parallel accounts of sayings of Jesus in the Gospels.

In this connection reference must be made to the problem of harmonization. A traditional method of dealing with different versions of a saying of Jesus is to add together the various forms so that each individual version can be seen as a selection out of a longer version of what Jesus said. Stories of incidents may be dealt with in the same way. This procedure is very risky (the *reductio ad absurdum* is in the reconstruction of Peter's denial, according to which he actually denies Jesus six times, but each of the Gospels records only a [different] selection of three of the occasions). Not all harmonization is so obviously flawed as this example, and there are certainly cases where it is an appropriate procedure, but often it makes better sense to recognize that the evangelists edited their accounts for their own purposes. In other words, some apparent historical discrepancies between parallel accounts are to be ascribed to the freedom of editors rather than to actual historical differences. A conspicuous example in Acts is the fact that the three accounts of Paul's conversion vary among themselves, but the fact that they are all the product of one author shows that he did not regard them as discrepant. Luke was too careful a writer for us to say that he simply did not notice the differences.

We should remember that discrepancies between biblical and non-biblical sources are not always due to error in the biblical version. Josephus was not always correct, but had his own biases, misinformation and carelessness. Also, new discoveries have been shown to confirm the biblical narrative or resolve apparent contradictions between narratives; e.g. from W. M. Ramsay to C. J. Hemer evidence has been compiled that eases many of the problems with the background and setting of the story in Acts.

A particular problem for the Gospels is the way in which scholars have tended to lose Jesus behind a web of developing traditions of what he said and did, and attempt to reconstruct the way in which the traditions changed and evolved in transmission. Here there is the danger of thinking that if we can give an explanation of why a writer may have said something in a particular way, this is sufficient to show that he invented it rather than that he recorded it in that way because that is how it actually happened. In such cases, there has to be painstaking examination of the evidence. It can, however, safely be said that to a very considerable extent equally competent scholars have been able to demonstrate good grounds for arguing that the accounts in the Gospels give a substantially reliable account of what Jesus actually said and did.

We can see now that the types of problem outlined at the very beginning of this article do not negate the historical reliability of the NT documents in which they are found: Luke could have condensed his narrative in one account for literary reasons and expanded it in another (1); Gamaliel may have got the order of incidents wrong but this is not a mistake that affects the force of his argument (2); fresh evidence or new interpretation may yet surface to deal with the problem of Quirinius (e.g. should we translate 'the census before Quirinius was governor'?) and the Passover release (opinions differ on whether a Mishnah regulation reflects it) (3); a force of 300 men is perhaps not excessive if an ambush of forty terrorists was expected (4); there is nothing wrong with Luke using his skill and knowledge to reconstruct the gist of what was said behind closed doors in the palace (5);

nor is it impossible that there are elements of symbolism in the way that a narrative is told, and frankly the historicity of the descent of the Spirit is far more important than whether there were literal tongues of fire on the heads of the disciples (6). We do well with *Calvin to recollect that the Holy Spirit was not too worried over trifling matters.

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I. H. MARSHALL

HISTORICAL DIFFICULTIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Literary-critical studies of the historical narratives of the OT, and historical-critical studies utilizing other historical sources, have revealed various discrepancies which, in the view of some scholars, cast serious doubts on the historicity of the biblical accounts. Such scholars tend to see the OT narratives as late and tendentious, and their value for a modern, critical *history of ancient Israel as consisting only in the information they contain regarding their authors and what may be deduced from them concerning the circumstances and interests of their day.

For some, the OT is simply a source of religious ideas, to be either moralized or spiritualized. The OT, however, does not merely present us with religious ideas, any more than it just records events. It presents us with theological history, combining both the record of events and the theological interpretation of those events, expressed in terms of the outworking of God's redemptive purposes for his people in history. This being the case, Christian faith, as V. P. Long remarks, 'can never entirely insulate itself from the findings of historical study'. He goes on to point out what is at stake in the debate regarding biblical history: 'Faith does not require that the factuality of the biblical events be proven (such proof is, at any rate, seldom possible). On the other hand, should it be conclusively shown that the core events of redemptive history did not happen, not only would the veracity of the Bible be seriously undermined, but the fall of historicity would inevitably bring down Christian faith with it.'

A supposed lack of literary congruence or coherence in OT texts is sometimes taken as grounds for questioning the historicity of the events they record, e.g. the account of Saul's rise to power in 1 Sam. 8 – 12 seems to contain discrepant attitudes towards the monarchy and multiple and contradictory accounts of Saul's accession to the throne of Israel, which supposedly prevent us from taking it seriously as history. Difficulties of this kind, however, can often be resolved by careful and patient exegesis of the text. Long's detailed treatment of this particular passage (*The Art of Biblical History*, ch. 6) offers an exegesis which reconciles the discrepant attitudes towards the monarchy and argues successfully for the literary coherence of its multiple accession accounts.

Difficulties at the literary-exegetical level can also arise when different biblical writers appear to offer divergent accounts of the same story. All history writing takes place inevitably from a particular standpoint in time and, consciously or unconsciously, reflects the writer's own ideology and/or purpose in writing. For example, Samuel–Kings addresses the exiles and interprets to them the reason for the disastrous fall of Jerusalem and their exile to Babylon. The Chronicler, however, addresses those who had returned to the land after the exile, and assures them of God's covenant-faithfulness and his continuing care and concern for them as his people. These differences of standpoint in time, audience addressed and theological purpose largely account for the different selection and treatment of material in the two accounts. Long explains the relation thus: 'The Chronicler is not only himself acquainted with Samuel–Kings but apparently assumes a similar acquaintance on the part of his audience. This frees him to present his didactic history in creative ways, sometimes making explicit what may have been only implicit in his sources.'

Historical difficulties of a different kind occur when there are conflicts between the biblical text and other external literary sources, e.g. in chronological or numerical matters. The

nature of this extra-biblical material, its date and its reliability all need to be subjected to careful historical investigation and assessment. For example, the annals of the Assyrian kings, considered a significant historical source in reconstructing the history of Assyria and its adjacent lands, are themselves not lacking in ideology, but served a clear propaganda purpose in their day. We should bear this in mind when we are comparing their account with that recorded in the book of Kings. As Iain Provan points out, 'There are, in fact, no grounds for granting the Assyrian sources any epistemological primacy in principle in our striving for knowledge about Israel's past.'

The same need for careful investigation and evaluation is true also in dealing with archaeological material, and the limitations of this type of evidence need to be borne in mind. By its very nature archaeology is able to give only a partial picture and one that is open to a variety of interpretations. Provan reminds us that 'archaeological remains ... are of themselves mute. They do not speak for themselves: they have no story to tell, and no truth to communicate. It is archaeologists who speak about them, testifying to what it is that they have found and placing the finds within an interpretive framework that bestows upon them meaning and significance.' However, 'The whole business of correlating archaeological finds with the specifics of the past as described by texts is, in fact, fraught with difficulty. Interpretation inevitably abounds as to what has been in fact found.' Long, too, notes that most of what archaeology unearths illuminates 'life conditions in general and not specific events'. Scholars who reject the historicity of the biblical accounts of early Israel on archaeological grounds frequently do so on the principle that 'absence of evidence is evidence of absence'. But Provan observes: 'The absence of evidence on the ground for events described by a text cannot necessarily be interpreted as evidence of the absence of those events, even if a site has been correctly identified.'

In the middle years of the last century, biblical archaeologists like G. E. Wright, W. F. Albright and J. Bright held a generally positive view of the historical reliability of the OT accounts of the Patriarchs, the exodus and Israel's entry into the land of Canaan and subsequent history. They regarded the findings of archaeology, or 'biblical archaeology' as it was then commonly called, as broadly substantiating the biblical account of Israel's history. In the last third of the century, however, many of their conclusions were called into question on archaeological grounds. Scholars such as T. L. Thompson and N. P. Lemche, of the so-called 'Copenhagen School', and P. R. Davies and K. W. Whitelam of the University of Sheffield, propounded instead a radical, more sceptical view of the OT's historical trustworthiness. According to these scholars, the OT historical records are late productions, written for ideological reasons, and are, therefore, to be regarded as mostly fictional. Lemche thus wrote: 'We decline to be led by the biblical account [of early Israel] and instead regard it, like other legendary materials, as essentially ahistorical, that is, as a source which only exceptionally can be verified by other information.' Further, he considered that 'the traditional materials about David cannot be regarded as an attempt to write history, as such. Rather, they represent an ideological programmatic composition which defends the assumption of power by the Davidic dynasty.' And Thompson avers confidently, 'There is no more "ancient Israel". History no longer has room for it. This we do know.'

According to these historians, the biblical evidence must be assessed, not on its own terms, but only in relation to the corpus of historical knowledge established independently of it. Thompson asserts that 'a valid history of Israel's origins must be written within a historical geography of Palestine, based primarily on Palestinian archaeology and ancient Near Eastern studies ... Israel's own origin tradition is radically irrelevant to writing such a history'. Thus, Israel's own historical testimony is regarded as, at best, attesting only to the personal interests or political agenda of the writers, not to the true 'facts' of the matter, the 'real' history. This has been described as 'the hermeneutics of suspicion'.

Provan has argued forcefully, against this prejudicial dismissal of the evidential value of the OT historiography, that the biblical evidence must be counted as forming part of the corpus of historical knowledge, except for cases where it can be shown to be unhistorical. J. K. Hoffmeier, likewise, concurs that there has been too much condescension and suspicion of biblical documents during the past couple of decades by historians and biblical

scholars who have treated the Bible more critically than other ancient literature. The OT should be viewed as a generally credible witness, whose testimony, while open to questioning, is to be accepted as true unless it can be shown to be in error. Much other valuable, detailed work has also been produced in response to the scepticism of the revisionists. A helpful discussion of the evidence relating to the patriarchal period, which takes into account the criticisms of Thompson and J. van Seters, may be found in M. J. Selman, 'Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age' and D. J. Wiseman, 'Abraham Reassessed', in A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, 1980).

W. G. Dever, in *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 2001), has also argued on archaeological grounds against the revisionists. He claims that the 'convergences' between the biblical texts and the archaeological and other extra-biblical evidences support the view that the biblical writers are recording real history, both in outline and in many points of detail, and that they must have had access to historical memories if not historical texts. He notes also, on the basis of these convergences, that if the biblical texts purporting to tell of pre-exilic times were written in the Persian or Greek period (as the revisionists claim), then their authors have made a remarkably successful and accurate job of archaizing their accounts. For Dever, 'While the Hebrew Bible in its present, heavily edited form cannot be taken at face value as history in the modern sense, it nevertheless contains much history.' For his part, he has little doubt that ancient Israel really existed, from at least the thirteenth to the seventh century BC.

K. A. Kitchen argues that there is genuine evidence of Israelite/Jewish culture from 2000 to 400 BC in the biblical texts, and he supports this with an impressive array of circumstantial evidence from Egyptian and other ancient materials confirming the credibility of the biblical history. J. K. Hoffmeier, in *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford, 1996), similarly, has argued that 'in the absence of direct archaeological or historical evidence, one can make a case for the plausibility of the biblical reports based on the supporting evidence'. His extraordinarily detailed discussion of almost every aspect of Israel's presence in Egypt and of the geography and topography of the exodus is a *tour de force*, which draws on a wide range of Egyptian sources – archaeological, geographical, textual and pictorial – to make that case very convincingly.

The sceptics' approach to the evidence is rooted in the *rationalism of the *Enlightenment. Their philosophical/epistemological presuppositions are evident, for instance, when they dismiss any biblical text containing reference to divine, miraculous intervention as having no evidential value in an inquiry into the 'real' history of Israel. The rationalism in Enlightenment thinking, which stems from the old classical *foundationalism, applied to the area of biblical studies, resulted in a divorce between history and *theology and a profound scepticism regarding the historicity of the biblical narratives. This tide of scepticism receded only for a while under the short-lived impact of discoveries made in the field of biblical archaeology. After this interlude, in which the moderating influence of the 'Wright-Albright-Bright' school achieved something of a consensus, P. R. Davies describes a 'paradigm shift', which has recently taken place in scholarly approaches to ancient Israel. 'We are enjoying', he writes, 'a climate in which a non-theological paradigm is beginning to claim a place alongside the long-dominant theological one. The new paradigm emerges by the simple effort of demonstrating that the old paradigm is a paradigm, sustained by consent and claiming a truth for itself to which it is not entitled.' But Davies' new paradigm, for which he implicitly claims a truth to which it supposedly is entitled, is at heart simply a return to the old rationalism.

Certainly, there are historical problems with the OT text that have not yet been successfully resolved. That such difficulties remain, both in interpreting the biblical texts as literature and in understanding them in relation to other evidences, is perhaps inevitable, given the span of history covered, the complexity of the evidence and the distance from us in time of the events concerned. This fact, however, should not be taken as grounds for doubting the reliability of the OT's witness, but should be used as a spur to further study and investigation of the text, both internally and in relation to the external evidences, from the standpoint of '*faith* seeking understanding'.