

## *Introduction*

# A QUESTION OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

This book explores a historiographical issue, but it is not a treatise on historiography. It does not explore historiographical questions that may arise or have arisen regarding history in general or the Bible as history. Even if such a thing were possible, a study of all conceivable or existent historiographical phenomena would not be necessary to reach the goal the present work hopes to reach.

Before stating that goal, it is important for me to note one assumption that informs this work, since no work is without assumptions. The present work assumes the historical accuracy of those things the Bible presents in a straightforward way as records of actual events and what the people involved in those events did or said. With respect to biblical history (and moreover to all biblical genres) I affirm the inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this monograph is to understand how Genesis 2:17 and 3:2–3 stand in relation to one another. A comparison of the

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1. Biblical inerrancy is understood to mean the original autographs of the Bible were without error. For a classic presentation of the doctrine, see “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” online.

verses raises one issue in biblical historiography: the phenomenon of laconic reporting of an event by a third-person omniscient narrator (the historiographer) followed by a first-person retelling of the same event (also recorded by the historiographer) that adds further information not provided in the first account.

### THE PURPOSE AND GOAL

A longstanding question about Genesis 3:2–3 vis-à-vis Genesis 2:17 motivates the present work. Most writers in the history of biblical interpretation have thought the woman added (in Gen 3:3b) to what the Lord had said (in Gen 2:17b) when she told the serpent that she and her husband were forbidden not only from *eating* the fruit of the tree that stood in the middle of the garden but also from *touching* it. The present work proposes a different view: the woman did not add to what the Lord said, but rather she gave further information not supplied by the historian in the earlier, laconic account in Genesis 2.

### THE METHOD

This study logically entails three avenues of approach:

1. Genesis 2:17 and 3:2–3 should be compared in their own right.
2. The woman's response to the serpent should be considered in light of any New Testament comments on her behavior.
3. We should compare the proposed understanding of the relationship between the two passages with other cases of what may be similar historiographical phenomena in the Old and New Testaments.

These three avenues of approach inform the present work. Along with the exemplars, the history of scholarship regarding each case

will be germane to our discussion. Although it would be almost impossible to locate and interact with every scholarly comment ever made on the issues encountered in the pages that follow, it has been my goal to take into account representatives of the views generally held—and repeatedly and even traditionally held—regarding Genesis 3:3 vis-à-vis Genesis 2:17 during their long history of interpretation.

### THE CASE STUDIES

The proposed exemplars are: (1) the Genesis 2 and 3 accounts already mentioned, (2) the Genesis 12 and 20 accounts of Abram and Sarai and Abraham and Sarah (respectively), (3) the Lord's statement to Isaac in Genesis 26:5 vis-à-vis the Abrahamic material spanning Genesis 12 through Genesis 22, and (4) the three accounts of Paul's Damascus road experience in Acts. The study will consider whether each exemplar or set of reports demonstrates the same historiographical phenomenon: laconic reporting of an event by a third-person omniscient narrator (the historian), followed by a first-person retelling of the same event (also recorded by the historian) that adds further information not provided in the first account.<sup>2</sup>

### HISTORIOGRAPHIC OBJECTION

Once one sees what exemplars are proposed, one might easily make an objection: historiography in New Testament days was different from historiography in Old Testament days. Moses and his contemporaries did not write history in the same way Luke and his contemporaries wrote history. This objection actually entails two parts: (1) the way biblical writers wrote history, and (2) the way their contemporaries wrote history.

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2. Or, in the case of Saul/Paul, *two* first-person retellings.

To take the second part first: the ancients in different cultures wrote history differently. Anyone who has read ancient history knows that, e.g., Thucydides (c. 460–c. 395 BC) or Polybius (c. 200–c. 118 BC) did not write history in the style or with the goals of, say, the annals of Thutmose III (1481–1425 BC) of Egypt or the annals of Tiglath-pileser I (r. 1114–1076 BC) of Assyria. The assumptions and expectations were different. However, it is also true that the ancients did not write history in the same way the biblical writers wrote history. The Assyrians, Hittites, and Babylonians unabashedly wrote history as propaganda, and they included, *mutatis mutandis*, accounts of supernatural intervention on behalf of the emperors. Their historical writing took the form of historical prologues in treaties and of royal annals.<sup>3</sup> There was nothing close to what later people would call “objective” history in those documents. Greek and Roman historians, on the other hand, wrote something closer to what we would call “history,” and, especially after the work of Thucydides, history concerned itself more with politics and war reported and evaluated on the human plane and less with supernatural elements.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Cf. discussion in *BT* 1, 3–6; cf. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “The Warrior and His God: The Covenant Foundation of History and Historiography,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard and James K. Hoffmeier (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 299–312.

4. As Christopher A. Baron, “Greek Historiography” in *Oxford Bibliographies* (online: <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195389661/obo-9780195389661-0078.xml>) notes: “First, the very term ‘history’ derives from the Greek word *historiē* (‘inquiry’) which Herodotus uses to describe his work, and the subject of historical inquiry decided upon by Herodotus and his successor Thucydides—description and explanation of political and military events in the past—remained standard for many centuries.” Gunkel no doubt had the Greek historians in mind when he classed the sources of Genesis as primitive and asserted: “Uncivilized races do not write history. They are incapable of reproducing their experiences objectively, and have no interest in leaving to their posterity an authentic account of the events of their times. Only at a certain stage of civilization has objectivity so grown and the interest in transmitting national experiences to posterity so increased that the writing of history becomes possible. Such history has for its

One thing that ancient Near Eastern historiography and biblical historiography do have in common, however, is the covenantal foundation that informs both.<sup>5</sup> The history recorded by ancient suzerains had to do with conquering and making new vassals or reconquering rebellious vassals and restoring them to the empire. Because God made covenants with people in the Bible, it turns out that the same covenantal idea—with God, and not merely a mortal king, as the suzerain—forms the foundation of all biblical historiography.<sup>6</sup> All biblical historiography has to do with God's covenantal relations with people. That is what establishes a commonality between Old Testament historiography and New Testament historiography and thus begins to address the first part of the objection noted above, that “historiography in New Testament days was different from historiography in Old Testament days”—or, more specifically, that historiography in the Old Testament was different from historiography in the New.

### UNIQUENESS OF BIBLICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Addressing the most important aspects of historiography in either the Old or New Testament includes two aspects: the covenant-centered nature of biblical history and historiography, and the reality of divine providence and intervention in shaping the historical events and the records of those events. I have written elsewhere about the covenant-centered or covenantal nature of biblical history and historiography and argued that the Bible may be aptly

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subjects great public events, the deeds of popular leaders and kings, and especially wars.” Cf. Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis*, trans. W. H. Carruth (Chicago: Open Court, 1901), 1–2.

5. Cf. Niehaus, “The Warrior and His God,” 299–312.

6. See *BT* 1, 3–6.

characterized as the “annals of the Great King.”<sup>7</sup> Extrabiblical historiography in the ancient world barely comes close to such a concept and only insofar as it always assumes a divine background to human events. Mostly, the Egyptians, Assyrians, Hittites, and Babylonians wrote history that was centered on the king.

Although pagan historiographers assumed a divine background to—as well as divine involvement in—human events, the degree of divine providence and intervention that shaped biblical history, and the detailed interaction between the Lord and his people reported in that history, constitute the most glaring difference between biblical and ancient Near Eastern historiography. The Bible records God’s active and, most importantly, miraculous intervention to a degree that is unparalleled in the ancient world. The fact that Moses predicts what signs and wonders the Lord will do before he does them is unique in ancient Near Eastern historiography. The contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel is nonpareil. No pagan prophet ever said such words as Elijah did: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again” (1 Kgs 18:36–37). No pagan prophet is on record for doing what Elijah did—calling fire down from heaven. The Hittites and Assyrians rarely recorded divine intervention on behalf of the king, and when they did, they did not tell us that anyone foretold what the god was going to do: rather, they reported some weather phenomenon that was militarily helpful to the king, and then, subsequently, interpreted that phenomenon as a divine intervention on the king’s behalf.

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7. See *BT* 1, 3–6; *BT* 2, 278; *BT* 3, 343, 345.

## GOD'S INTERVENTION AND GENRES

God's intervention produced historical events, and the reportage of those events constitutes some very unique historiography. Two genres may be cited as illustrations: what has been called the theophanic *Gattung*, and the gospel genre.<sup>8</sup>

### THE THEOPHANIC GATTUNG

In *God at Sinai*, I explored what has been called the theophanic *Gattung*.<sup>9</sup> That *Gattung*, or genre, reports the Lord's appearance to a human being with good and revelatory purposes. Because no other god exists and consequently no other god ever appeared theophanically to a human, the biblical *Gattung* is unparalleled in the ancient Near East.<sup>10</sup> The *Gattung* is as follows:

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8. The phenomenon of theophany and the attendant *Gattung* had been explored, before the publication of my own work on the topic, by J. Jeremias, *Theophanie: die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), and by J. K. Kuntz, *The Self-Revelation of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967). My observations on the gospel genre had been adumbrated but not as fully developed by Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

9. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

10. For a rare account of such an appearance in a seer's vision on behalf of Ashurbanipal, see Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 34–35, 37–38. I have argued that the first storm theophany in Genesis 3 is the background even for pagan theophanic concepts and representations: the memory of divine presence and power coming in storm theophany was handed down from the beginning, and theophanic advent was subsequently (though rarely in historical writings) attributed to some pagan deity or other. Cf. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "In the Wind of the Storm: Another Look at Genesis III 8," *VT* 44.2 (1994): 263–67; the article argues, on the basis of Akkadian and biblical evidence, that what has traditionally been translated "in the cool of the day" or the like (Heb. הַיּוֹם לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם in Gen 3:8) would better be translated "in the wind of the storm." The resultant understanding would be that, after the fall, the Lord came in a storm theophany to find Adam, his wife, and the serpent and bring them into judgment. See the subsequent adoption of this translation in John Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 32, and in David J. A. Clines and John Elwolde, eds., *Yodh-Lamedh*, vol. 4 of *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 185.

1. Introductory description in the third person
2. Deity's utterance of the name of the (mortal) addressee
3. Response of the addressee
4. Deity's self-asseveration
5. Angel's quelling of human fear
6. Assertion of his gracious presence
7. The *hieros logos* addressed to the particular situation
8. Inquiry or protest by the addressee
9. Continuation of the *hieros logos*, with perhaps some repetition of elements 4, 5, 6, 7, and/or 8
10. Concluding description in third person<sup>11</sup>

The *Gattung* reports an actual event in the Bible and is thus a historical genre; the same *Gattung* appears, for instance, in the report of a conversation (royal audience) between David and Ish-bosheth, son of Jonathan, in 2 Samuel 9:6–11.<sup>12</sup>

Because God or sometimes one of his angelic messengers does show up and address chosen humans, and because he does so with beneficial purposes, and because human nature in its sinfulness naturally reacts with fear at such an event, the *Gattung* that documents these advents can portray them accurately whether they occur in the Old Testament or the New. Two examples will serve: the Lord's appearance to Isaac at Beersheba, and Gabriel's appearance to Mary.

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11. Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 31–32.

12. Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 39–41.



*THE LORD'S APPEARANCE TO ISAAC AT  
BEERSHEBA*

J. K. Kuntz has outlined the account of Yahweh's nocturnal appearance to Isaac (Gen 26:23–25) as follows:

	<i>Gattung</i> Element	Genesis 26:23–25
1	Introductory description	23 From there he went up to Beersheba. 24 That night the Lord appeared to him and said,
2	Divine self-asseveration	“I am the God of your father Abraham.
3	Quelling of human fear	Do not be afraid,
4	Assertion of gracious divine presence	for I am with you;
5	<i>Hieros logos</i>	I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham.”
6	Concluding description	25 Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord. <sup>13</sup>

13. Cf. Kuntz, *The Self-Revelation of God*, 59; also cited in Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 32.

## GABRIEL'S APPEARANCE TO MARY

I have outlined the account of Gabriel's appearance to Mary (Luke 1:26–38) as follows:

	<i>Gattung</i> Element	Luke 1:26–38
1	Introductory description in the third person	1:26–27
2	Deity's utterance of the name of the (mortal) addressee	1:30
3	Response of the addressee	1:34
4	Assertion of gracious divine presence	—
5	Angel's quelling of human fear	1:30
6	Assertion of his gracious presence	1:28
7	The <i>hieros logos</i> addressed to the particular situation	1:31–33
8	Inquiry or protest by the addressee	1:34
9	Continuation of the <i>hieros logos</i> with perhaps some repetition of elements 4, 5, 6, 7, and/or 8	1:35–38ba
10	Concluding description in third person	1:38β <sup>14</sup>

The *Gattung* is an established genre, and it reports both human encounters, as in the case of David and Ish-Bosheth, and divine-human encounters, as in the two cases shown above. It reports historical appearances of the Lord or one of his angels to humans with beneficial intent.

The cardinal concern in the present study is this: the historical reports take the same form in both Old and New Testaments

14. Cf. Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 355–56.