

HISTORY, THEOLOGY, POLITICS
On Eliminating the "And"

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INTRODUCTION

The question I have been asked to answer is whether the early church was concerned with the historical Jesus. My answer, unapologetically, is that it was. My answer is “unapologetic” for two reasons: (1) those who claim in one way or another that Christian faith is not or cannot be held up by certain historical events have always been with us, and Christian faith has remained historical in character despite them; (2) in my opinion countless historians, theologians, and philosophers have already answered the many challenges of gnosticism and docetism in its recurrent forms.¹ I am not, therefore, concerned to take up that line again.

The burden of this brief essay, rather, will be to demonstrate the ways in which the concerns of early Christian historiography differ from those of ancient Greek — and, by way of extension, modern Western — historiography. The question I want to ask is *how* the early church

¹ Examples of those who have tried to separate Christian faith from history include Rudolf Bultmann, “Christian Faith and History,” in *God, History, and Historians: An Anthology of Modern Christian Views of History*, edited by C. T. McIntire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 97–111; idem, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); idem, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, translated by R. H. Fuller (New York: Living Age Books, 1956); idem, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth*, vol. 1, edited by H. W. Bartsch, translated by R. H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1964); Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1935); idem, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1949); idem, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1952); idem, “The Foolishness of the Cross and the Sense of History,” in *God, History, and Historians: An Anthology of Modern Christian Views of History*, edited by C. T. McIntire (New York: Oxford University, 1977) 68–80; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991); Robert W. Funk, *A Credible Jesus: Fragments of a Vision* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2002); Marcus Borg in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1999), esp. 129–142.

Examples of those who have countered the above with arguments for the unity of faith and history in Christianity include Paul L. Holmer, *Theology and the Scientific Study of Religion*, The Lutheran Studies Series, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison & Co., 1961) 173–194; Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*, translated by R. W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996) 215–225; Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview, 1997) 48–61; idem, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001) 87–140; Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, Second Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 42–57; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996); and, timelessly, C. S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” in *The Collected Works of C. S. Lewis: The Pilgrim’s Regress, Christian Reflections, and God in the Dock* (New York: Inspirational, 1996) 279–289, esp. 284–285.

was concerned with the historical Jesus. I.e. what is “history” according to the early church, and how is this particular conception of history handled?

Purely for chronological reasons I expect that if the early church did have an interest in the historical Jesus it could not have been the same kind of historical interest that stimulates the modern social scientist. This may seem like a patent observation, yet much of the discourse among conservative evangelicals about the historical reliability of the gospels continues to perpetuate, in one form or another, the enlightenment myths of objectivity and neutrality. The New Testament’s concern (if that is the appropriate word) for historical accuracy is frequently cast in a post-Cartesian, neo-positivistic light; basic questions concerning the form and function of early Christian historiography are left unanswered, if in indeed such questions are entertained at all.²

The issue, then, is not whether the early church was interested in the historical Jesus but rather what is meant by “history” when one talks about the early church’s memory of Jesus. The argument here will be that history as done by the early church is not something that can be abstracted from theology and politics. Put differently, *the function of first-century Judeo-Christian historiography is not to construct an impartial record of the past but to render the present and the future more intelligible in light of the past, thus empowering the church to live in friendship with God’s will.*

² It should be noted that much of the critique in this essay is not directed at Christian historians in general but specifically at those who attempt to use the tools of modern Western historiography to underwrite an apologetic of the evidentialist sort. Such a use of historiography I think is misguided, not least because any truth that is demonstrable purely by rational argumentation can hardly qualify as scandalous truth, which is precisely what Paul claims his truth-claims are. Moreover, as N. T. Wright suggests in *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), very often attempts to prove the historical accuracy of the Bible are underwritten by a fundamentalist desire to “go on thinking what we’ve always thought.” According to Wright, “There is a great gulf fixed between those who want to prove the historicity of everything reported in the Bible in order to demonstrate that the Bible is “true” after all and those who, committed to living under the authority of scripture, remain open to what scripture itself actually teaches and emphasizes” (95).

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

There is no space here for a proper treatment; nonetheless, I will contend that despite ostensible parallels between Greco-Roman and early Christian historiography the latter falls more precisely within the tradition of ancient Jewish historiography, even in the case of Luke's gospel. To demonstrate this, first, I will look at a cursory level at both the Greek and the Old Testament historiographical traditions, drawing crucial distinctions between them. The main course of the argument will run that the Jewish historian, quite unlike the Greek historiographer, is simultaneously the voice of tradition, the theologian, and the politician. If this template coheres, a pattern will have been established in light of which the historiography of the New Testament may be understood.

Turning to the New Testament, I will not deal directly with the gospels of Matthew, Mark, or John, since ostensibly Luke poses the biggest problem for my thesis. With the features of Jewish historiography immediately in the background, I will argue that indications of Greek influences on Luke's gospel are superficial at best, that the substance and the function of Lukan history remain thoroughly Hebraic. That is to say, history, theology, and politics in the Lukan narrative constitute an indivisible unity: the past is always selectively exhibited in a manner that serves the purposes of the present. In conclusion I will try to suggest some ways forward for contemporary Christian historians in light of our findings.

GREEK HISTORIOGRAPHY

There are three critical distinctions between the Hebrew and the Greek understanding of history. The points of distinction can be characterized as (1) the classification of historical

knowledge, (2) the meaning or the course of history itself, and (3) the function or aim of historiography.

The Classification of Historical Knowledge. Greek metaphysics made a distinction between proper knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and opinion (δόξα). The former is a universal and an atemporal kind of knowledge, based on demonstrative reasoning, often achieved by dialectical criticism.³ Mathematics and analytics come under this category. History, on the other hand, was the “science of human action” whose proper object belonged to “a world of change, a world where things come to be and cease to be.”⁴ Historical knowledge could not be *true* knowledge because it did not meet the prior criterion of determinate universality.⁵

Nonetheless, it was considered useful, if for no other reason than that historical knowledge was a collection of general observations about that which befalls humankind.⁶ In that sense historical knowledge was like poetics, only not as palpable. “The former’s object is that which has been,” determines Aristotle, “while the latter’s object is that which may be.”⁷ Hence, for Aristotle, poetry is superior to history, in both philosophical rigor and moral fecundity, for “poetical statements constitute universals, while those of history are mere particulars.”⁸

³ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 20.

⁴ Collingwood 20.

⁵ Consequently history could be done only within the span of a single lifetime. Anything further back is tradition, not history. According to Collingwood, “one might almost say that in ancient Greece there were no historians in the sense in which there were artists and philosophers; there were no people who devoted their lives to the study of history; the historian was only the autobiographer of his generation and autobiography is not a profession” (26).

⁶ Collingwood 22–23.

⁷ *De poetica* 1451b [5 ff], translation mine.

⁸ *De poetica* 1451b [5 ff].

Put differently, historiography's greatest disadvantage is its own proper object, namely, *the past*. Historiography is research, performed by an "analytical I"⁹ (the Greek historiographer) who in order to begin his task must first distinguish himself from the history he writes. This "past" must be broken off from the historiographer's "present" to make room for the production of intelligible discourse.¹⁰ This "analytical I" sits in judgment on that which has been, to distinguish between *what was* and *what was not*, only to name *what was*, "that which has been." Thus the poet outstrips the historian precisely in his capacity to name *what was*, but also *what was not*, "that which may be." Poetics, then, is "the distilled essence of the teaching of history."¹¹

The Meaning of History. We have already hinted that history's limited value is "based upon the observation that history repeats itself."¹² The Greeks viewed history as the playground of the destructive, almost infantile, force of fate. Infantile but not arbitrary, for the repetitiousness of history indicates some kind of intentionality, though intentionality does not imply personality. It is cold fate, classically conceived. Yet this "fate that broods over human life is, from this Greek point of view, a destructive power only because man is blind to its workings."¹³ The heroic man is the one that is able to circumvent the destructive schemes of history. Not that he can comprehend the nature of these schemes, but that he can have "right opinions about them, and in so far as he acquires such opinions he becomes able to put himself in

⁹ Peter Machinist, "The Voice of the Historian in the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean World," *Interpretation* 57.02 (2004) 120.

¹⁰ As such, modern historiography may trace its genealogy back to Greek metaphysics' distinction between universals and particulars. See "Appendix A: Reflections on Historiography and Tradition."

¹¹ Collingwood 24.

¹² Collingwood 23.

¹³ Collingwood 24.

a position where the blows of fate will miss him.”¹⁴ So *history*, in its natural manifestation, is the tragic cycle of the downfall of men. According to Collingwood, “the Greeks had a lively and indeed a naïve sense of the power of man to control his own destiny, and thought of this power as limited only by the limitations of his knowledge.”¹⁵ Historiography is thus the educated man’s flight from history.

The Aim of Historiography. It is clear, then, that the proper object of historiography is not τὰ θεῖα but τὰ ἀνθρώπινα.¹⁶ Greek historiography is utterly humanistic in both subject matter and import. It is the study of man for the sake of man. More precisely, it is the study of the signs of man’s destruction,¹⁷ in the hope that such a study will yield knowledge capable of delivering men from the misfortunes of fortune. Yet we must remember that the discourse of history itself is not sufficient to deliver men from evil. History is inherently limited to statements about that which is past. For the Greeks, as we have seen, the lessons of history must be translated from particular to universal truths. Historiography falls short of its aim. The historian’s task, it turns out, is only critical description. The power to emancipate belongs to the poet.

OLD TESTAMENT HISTORIOGRAPHY

While the distinction between Greek historiography and Old Testament historiography is located precisely at these three points — (1) the classification of historical knowledge, (2) the

¹⁴ Collingwood 24.

¹⁵ Collingwood 24.

¹⁶ Collingwood 18.

¹⁷ I say “signs” and not “causes” because, as Collingwood reminds us, there is yet no “theory of causation; the thought does not resemble that of seventeenth-century inductive science with its metaphysical basis in the axiom of cause and effect; the riches of Croesus are not the cause of his downfall, they are merely a symptom, to the intelligent observer, that something is happening in the rhythm of his life which is likely to lead to a downfall” (23).

meaning or the course of history itself, and (3) the function or aim of historiography — it is not that the two historiographies are at opposite ends of a single spectrum; rather they represent two separate spectrums entirely.

The Jewish Historian as Voice of Tradition. Where the Greeks distinguish universals from particulars and thus knowledge from opinion, “in the Hebraic vision, history . . . is the vehicle of God’s presence.”¹⁸ Historical knowledge cannot be relegated to mere opinion precisely because history is *the* medium through which God makes himself known to Israel. For that reason it is not the “analytical I” that writes history but the authoritative voice of tradition. “Both facts and judgment,” Machinist points out, are constantly “communicated without any indication of the persona of the historian. The effect is one of authoritative certainty: this is the way things are or were, and one should accept that.”¹⁹ God’s revelation of himself to Israel is not subject to the critical analysis of the human scientist. Thus, unlike in Greek historiography, the reflections of the Jewish historian “do not involve, at least explicitly, the analytical discussion of evidence and the need to make choices when the evidence is conflicting. They are presented, rather, as the authoritative statement on what the tradition has to teach.”²⁰ Likewise, G. A. Klingbeil displays how “unabashedly interpretive” Jewish historiography is:

Most events are commented on from the perspective of Yahweh. Noah finds favor in Yahweh’s eyes in a time when the earth is ripe for judgment (Gen 6:8). Yahweh sees

¹⁸ John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 237.

¹⁹ Machinist, “Voice of the Historian” 122. Cf. 2 Chronicles 34:1–2 for one example.

²⁰ Machinist, “Voice of the Historian” 126. Here Machinist refers specifically to the author(s) of Deuteronomy, but this observation might as well have been made about every historical book in the Old Testament. See also Collingwood on the religious history of the ancient east: “It lacks the character of science: it is not an attempt to answer a question of whose answer the writer begins by being ignorant; it is merely a record of something the writer knows for a fact” (11).

from heaven the intention and performance of the tower builders of Babel and, speaking in the royal plural, introduces the strategy to counter their efforts (Gen 11:7–8). . . . The reader—ancient and modern—is somewhat drawn into the story and looks at events and the processes leading to these events through the eyes of the author of the text, who describes reality from God’s perspective.²¹

These and other traditional interpretations of history represent the experience of the community as passed on from one generation to the next through acts of remembrance. The *writing* of history understood in this context is only one such act.

The Jewish Historian as Theologian. Moreover, where the Greeks see history as an endless cycle of destruction and despair without any discernible meaning, Israel’s conception of history is inseparable from its experience of God. Because YHWH is the author of history, history has a beginning, middle, and end. It is teleologically ordered toward the climactic resolution of the problem of evil.²² History, then, cannot be distinguished from that movement of God toward resolution. It is not cyclical but linear, because it is not humanistic but theological.²³ In fact, in the Jewish conception, history only indirectly concerns humanity.²⁴ History and theology are not two different things, for history is a matter of cause and effect. That is not of

²¹ Gerald A. Klingbeil, “Historical Criticism,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2003) 405.

²² Genesis 3:15 and 12:1–3 are some of the earliest and the clearest manifestations of this central theme.

²³ Ironically, the Greek conception of history is cyclical but its memory of history is linear, while the Hebrew conception of history is linear but its memory of history is cyclical (cyclical because the past is not so much remembered as it is reenacted in rituals, rites, feasts and holy days, the reading of Torah, etc.). In the former case the linearity can be understood in terms of attempted escape: historiography, together with poetics, is the way out of the trappings of history. For a fascinating discussion of the cyclicity of Jewish historical consciousness in two periods (the Middle Ages and post-Holocaust) see Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time,” *History and Theory* 41.2 (2002).

²⁴ “It is clear that this history is theological in nature,” Klingbeil writes, “since it is mainly interested in describing the relations of Yahweh, the covenant God, with his people” (404).

course the mechanistic “cause and effect” of scientific naturalism or deism, but cause and effect in the creational sense that YHWH moves and is sometimes moved by his creation. Such movements of God are understood by Israel as new acts of creation — YHWH is always making the world *good*, despite the world, and that is the meaning, the direction, and ultimately the end of history.²⁵

The Jewish Historian as Politician. At this point there is some similarity between Greek and Jewish historiography, for the function of both is a kind of moral instruction. Yet this initial resemblance only sharpens the distinction between them. Greek historiography is in the service of that *heroic individual* who, with the help of historical insight, escapes the clutches of history. The ideal is absolute neutrality and detachment, creating the possibility of transcending the vicious cycle of history that is the dialectic of destruction and despair.²⁶

Jewish historiography, on the other hand, orients the *polis* by narrating Israel’s present in light of its past, thus encouraging participation in the movement of history — the movement of YHWH — toward resolution. Political neutrality is not an option, certainly not if Israel is YHWH’s elect. On the historian’s mind is not the question of what *really* happened over against

²⁵ Collingwood calls this kind of history “theocratic history.” Theocratic history, according to Collingwood, “although it is not primarily the history of human actions, is nevertheless concerned with them in the sense that the divine characters in the story are the superhuman rulers of human societies, whose actions, therefore, are actions done partly to those societies and partly through them. In theocratic history humanity is not an agent, but partly an instrument and partly a patient, of the actions recorded. Moreover, these actions are thought of as having definite places in a time-series, as occurring at dates in the past.” Theocratic history is not myth, however. For myth “is not concerned with human actions at all. The human element has been completely purged away and the characters of the story are simply gods” (15). Collingwood of course calls theocratic history a “quasi-history” (16) which means that its refusal to limit its discourse to empirical observation, critical categorization, and creative re-imagination disqualifies it from being suitably demonstrable. If only the author of Genesis had had access to Collingwood!

²⁶ Collingwood notes that through a process of painstaking questioning of an eye witness, “Herodotus was able to elicit ἐπιστήμη from his informant’s δόξα and thus to attain knowledge in a field where Greeks had thought it impossible” (28). Whether any Greek historian ever actually achieved such detachment is another question. I think it patent that none did, but the possibility of neutrality is not our concern; only that Greek historiography held it up as an ideal — there’s the rub. Detachment as a kind of virtue stems from the idolization of determinate knowledge as *true* knowledge. Thus theological knowing is looked upon as a sort of venerable opinionism.

opinion about what happened, but rather the question of how what happened is to be understood in light of present circumstances. Thus the historian acts as a kind of politician, shaping the political consciousness of Israel by shrewdly reshaping Israel's historical consciousness.²⁷ Present-day political authorities can be either endorsed or denounced with (re)creative reference to the past.²⁸ Yet the Jewish historian is not the propagandist.²⁹ He tells the truth; and not only the truth of "what happened" but the truth of YHWH's unique election of Israel out from among the nations.³⁰ In fact the concept of a "what happened" abstracted from theology and politics is unintelligible to the Jewish historian.³¹ Indeed, neither "history" nor "theology" has been invented yet. The question is not whether and in what way history and theology are related but when and in what way Israel — and thus Israel's God — will be vindicated. That is the overarching question of Old Testament "historiography." The task of the Jewish storyteller is first to answer and then to continue to ask that question. The question for our purposes is whether *that* question will continue to govern the work of the Christian historian, *after Herodotus*.

²⁷ So James K. Bruckner, "Ethics," *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2003) 229: "The promises to Abraham are repeated and the story of Sinai is retold in Deuteronomy and Joshua, creating a particular view of reality that shapes identity." This reality that the narrative both points toward and, in a sense, *creates* has "the power to transform a community" (231).

²⁸ See my "David: Subject-King," *Thomeric Online* 12/04 <http://thomerica.com/essays/stark_david.pdf>.

²⁹ Susan Niditch, "Historiography, 'Hazards,' and the Study of Ancient Israel," *Interpretation* 57.02 (2004) 145.

³⁰ For example Peter Machinist observes in "Biblical Traditions: The Philistines and Israelite History," *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment*, edited by E. D. Oren (Philadelphia: University Museum, 2000) 64–69 how the portrayal of the Philistines as "other" in the Old Testament serve the political purposes of "differentiation" and "identity formation."

³¹ Klingbeil reminds us that "the fact that ancient societies and cultures were more holistic and less compartmentalized (as compared to modern Western society) does not automatically indicate a lower level of historicity" (404). Yet even to call attention to the fact that "historicity" need not suffer on account of "theology" is to continue to privilege the Western categorization over the Jewish holism.

LUKAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The introduction to Luke's gospel³² is conventionally understood to be an indication that Luke stands in the tradition of Greek historiography.³³ By and large, the theological aspects in Luke are conceived as just that, i.e., *aspects* — the theology is something necessary to but distinct from Luke's straightforward historiographical task. As we have seen, however, this distinction will not hold up. Greek metaphysics distinguishes between knowledge and opinion, and then again between historical and theological opinion. Historiography is interested in what men thought about the gods and not in the gods themselves. But in the Jewish scheme the distinction is unintelligible. History is the coherent forward motion of YHWH's creative activity. The historian is describing YHWH's activity, and thus he describes humanity only as a corollary of that parent description.

So where does Luke stand? Is he firmly established in one of these two options, or does he represent a third synthetic option? Does Luke, in other words, maintain a Jewish view of *history as divine activity* while espousing a Greek conception of historiography as critical inquiry into matters about which the historian is initially ignorant? How does Luke conceive of (1) the classification of historical knowledge, (2) the meaning or the course of history itself, and (3) the function or aim of historiography? I will now argue that Luke stands firmly within the Jewish tradition on every point, and that all indications of a Greek conception of historiography in Luke are either superficial or based on a misreading of the text.

³² I will not bother with such banalities as "the writer of the Gospel according to Luke." I am going to be innovative and call Luke Luke.

³³ That this view is widespread enough to merit my not referencing it here is evidenced in an encounter I had with Professor Chad Ragsdale. I was describing the thesis of this essay to him, that I intended to argue that Luke stands within the Jewish historiographical tradition over against the Greek tradition, and Prof. Ragsdale responded with surprise. His exact words were, "I've never heard that. I've always been told that Luke was a Greek historian." To which I replied, "I know, Chad. I know."

Luke as Voice of Tradition. “Appendix B” is a chart detailing what are some of the definitively non-Greek characteristics of Lukan historiography.³⁴ One of those features I have labeled “Political Bias,” and it refers to statements in Luke that indicate not only a presupposed political context, but also Luke’s bias in favor of the claims of that political context. We must not forget that Luke is writing to a Christian (or Christians) already instructed in the apostolic traditions (1:4). Moreover, Luke expressly associates himself with this movement (1:1–2). Thus when Luke writes that “John exhorted the people and preached the εὐαγγέλιον to them” (3:18), there is no need for him to justify why the message of John (and again in 8:1 of Jesus) gets to qualify as the announcement of the political victory of the Hebrew God, nor does Luke need to posit any alternative appellations for this message, i.e., from Pilate’s or from Caiaphas’s perspective. Unlike Herodotus, Luke does not present all sides of the matter, leaving the conclusion up to the reader.³⁵ Given his bias, Luke does not need to offer any explanation here of how he came to his conclusion. He can simply offer as his conclusion, relayed in factual terms, that what Jesus came preaching merits the politically turbulent word εὐαγγέλιον.

From his vantage point, also, Luke can make judgments about the motivations of members of rival political factions (e.g. 11:53–54). Much like the Old Testament historian who forms or reaffirms Israel’s identity with his depiction of the other *as* other, Luke here can reaffirm Christian identity by casting Pharisaic opposition to Jesus in a negative light. Whereas a

³⁴ The data are not exhaustively selected and there is some overlap between my artificial categories, but the chart serves its purpose. I have only included specific statements from Luke’s narrative commentary, never quotations of Luke’s characters or Luke’s summaries of the beliefs of those characters. In other words, the data only include what seem to be Luke’s beliefs. Moreover, I take no consideration of the possibility that Luke’s narrative itself might be an argument, though if I were to do so I have no doubt it would make my own argument stronger. As it is, I have only included isolated statements that seem to indicate what Luke considers to be “the facts.”

³⁵ For example, “The Phoenicians, however, as regards Io, vary from the Persian statements. . . . Whether this latter account be true, or whether the matter happened otherwise, I shall not discuss further” (*Histories* 1.5).

Greek historian would be compelled to present the Pharisaic point of view in its own terms or at least to acknowledge that it is from the Christian perspective that the Pharisees are thus portrayed.³⁶ For the Greek, the “truth of the matter” is discovered through a critical process in which every point of view (or at least the pertinent ones) on the matter are examined for signs of accuracy or inaccuracy, bias and exaggeration.³⁷ Moreover, as A. W. Mosley points out, when Herodotus “had two versions of what happened and was not sure which was correct he gave both and reserved judgment [e.g. *Histories* 2.3; 2.46–47]; when there was insufficient evidence he sometimes offered conjecture [2.24; 4.11–12; 7.22].”³⁸

Clearly, then, Luke’s style of relaying history in factual terms without a presentation of conflicting points of view pits him squarely against the Greek historiographers and their critical sensibilities. Nor is Luke’s use of the first person in his introduction the same thing as the Greek “Analytical I,” since in the same breath Luke uses the first person plural, the “us” among whom the events he is about to relay have transpired (1:1). With Herodotus and Thucydides in view, Machinist reminds us that

³⁶ For example, Herodotus, as a Greek, presents the Persian perspective and labels it as such: “but in what followed the Persians consider that the Greeks were greatly to blame” (*Histories* 1.4).

³⁷ So Thucydides writes, “The way that most men deal with traditions, even traditions of their own country, is to receive them all alike as they are delivered, without applying any critical test whatever” (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.20). Contrasting himself with this naïve approach, Thucydides boasts confidence in his critical analysis of the evidence. He writes, “On the whole, however, the conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied on. Assuredly they will not be disturbed . . . by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth’s expense” (1.21).

³⁸ A. W. Mosley, “Historical Reporting in the Ancient World,” *New Testament Studies* 12.1 (1965) 12. Mosley’s survey determines to show “that the question ‘Did it happen in this way?’ was a question which made sense to the people living [at the time the New Testament was being written], and was a question which was often asked. People living then knew that there was a difference between fact and fiction” (26). In order to show this, Mosley looks at texts by Lucian, Dionysius, Polybius, Ephorus, Cicero, Josephus and Tacitus. The reader is left to wonder whether, before the advent of Greco-Roman historiography, the distinction between fact and fiction was not made. I rather think that Mosley’s framing the question in “fact or fiction” terms is over-simplistic and privileges a humanistic conception of history that conflates history *as it happened* with historiography.

both historians distance themselves from certain things and persons around them, about which they are going to speak. They recognize, in other words, that an “I” can only become an “I” when it is differentiated from a variety of “they’s” and even from the “you” of the audience, who by definition stands out in front.³⁹

Yet the “I” that appears in the introduction to Luke’s gospel simply disappears once the narrative has commenced, never to be seen or heard from again.⁴⁰ Moreover, as already pointed out, this “I” is not critically distinguished from the “we/us” of the Christian tradition, nor, in that sense, from the “you” of Luke’s audience. Luke writes as a Gentile Christian to a Gentile Christian with the express purpose of confirming the Christian tradition. It is difficult to see, with this evidence in view, how Luke can be any kind of representative of Greek historiography. Rather it seems clear that Luke does not write as an “Analytical I” but as the voice of Christian tradition. Thus on this point Luke stands firmly within the Jewish tradition of historiography.

Luke as Theologian. The question here is not whether Luke sees history as the Greeks see it — an endless cycle of destruction and despair without any discernible meaning — or as the Jews see it — the coherent forward motion of YHWH’s creative activity. Luke clearly fits within the latter scheme. The question is rather whether Luke’s historiography can stand apart from Luke’s theology. The answer is simple. “Appendix A” lists no fewer than twenty instances of miraculous activity, including healings and exorcisms, in Luke’s gospel. There are a minimum of thirteen counts of demonic activity and six counts of angelic activity. At least four times in his gospel narrative, Luke records explicit divine activity, including an audible voice from heaven

³⁹ Machinist, “Voice of the Historian” 119.

⁴⁰ In 1:1 and the “we” passages of Acts Luke reappears, but these appearances do not constitute critical analysis.

(9:35) and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus in the form of a dove (3:21). Yet about all of these at least it can be said that they are potentially visible or perceptible events.

Luke is not satisfied, however. There are seven counts of what I have labeled “Divine Causation,” where Luke attributes a historical “effect,” i.e., an event, to a divine cause (e.g. 1:41; 2:27). Furthermore, seven times Luke explicitly gives a theological interpretation of a historical event (e.g. 3:4; 24:16), and no fewer than ten times Luke passes judgment on one or more historical figures from the perspective of God (e.g. 1:6; 2:25). Even if we could grant the first group admittance into the canon of permissible historical data by Greek standards, under the rubric of visible or perceptible events, this second group, consisting of divine causes of human activity, theological interpretations of historical events, and theological judgments of character, represents precisely the kind of “mythicization” or “chronicling” that Greek and Roman historians had determined to leave behind for good.

All in all, neither exhibiting any kind of critical investigation nor demonstrating any process of dialectical reasoning, Luke makes more than seventy statements of “fact” that are theological or political in nature. Not once does Luke entertain the possibility of an interpretation of an event other than the one he has given. Quite unlike the Greek historiographer, and precisely like the Jewish one, Luke writes history authoritatively and theologically. “This is the way things are,” Luke seems to be saying, “and one should accept that.” So it is not enough to say that Luke is a historian with a theological agenda. Demonstrably Luke is one who by virtue of his being Christian has been converted into that tradition in which history and theology are not separate categories of knowledge but constitute an indivisible unity.

Luke as Politician. Now we are perplexed. Why would Luke claim to have made a “careful investigation” (1:3) of the events in the life of Jesus and then fail — in a way that no self-respecting Greek historian ever did — to demonstrate the manner in which his investigation led to his conclusions? If Luke “carefully investigated” these matters as he claims to have, why not once does he present a point of view other than his own? Moreover, how can a “careful investigation” of historical evidence lead Luke to the conclusion that, for instance, Zechariah and Elizabeth were “upright in the sight of God” (1:6) or that the disciples did not understand Jesus’ predictions of his death because “it was hidden from them” (9:45; 18:34)? I am convinced that these questions are contrived and are based upon a misreading of the introduction to Luke’s gospel. In this final section I will propose a reading of Luke 1:1–4 that both makes sense of the thoroughly authoritative and theological narrative that follows it *and* draws out the political motivation and intention driving Luke’s whole project. I wish to propose an interpretive, evocative reading of Luke’s introduction as follows:

(1) I know that many have already taken it upon themselves to compile into a narrative the events that have come to a head among us [Gentiles], (2) and I know that these events have been faithfully recorded exactly as they were handed down to us by those who watched it all unfold from the outset, those in whose charge the Word was deposited. (3) Even so, it seemed like a good idea for me to retrace the whole story, freshly and attentively, and to walk you through it all one step at a time, most noble Theophilus, (4) so you can rest assured that you’re right where you belong.⁴¹

⁴¹ In “Appendix C” I have provided the Greek text as well as several English translations.

My translation is by no means a literal rendering of the text, but I have attempted to evoke the pastoral sense of Luke's introduction, a sense that has long since been lost.

I have interpolated the word "Gentiles" in vs. 1 for several reasons, none of which may stand up in the end, but my overall argument does not hinge upon whether the "us" to which Luke refers is the whole Christian community or specifically the Gentile Christians. My reasons for thinking it is the latter are as follows: (1) Luke is writing to a Gentile or Gentiles. (2) Luke is a Gentile.⁴² (3) Acts 15 and Pauline theology both definitively interpret Gentile inclusion as the restoration of Israel. (4) The overall narrative argument in Luke-Acts is that Gentile inclusion is a main thrust, if not *the* main thrust, of the gospel message. Nonetheless the word is not in the text; hence the brackets around it. The reader may or may not find this reading useful, and is free to proceed evaluating the rest of the argument without regard to this one element.

The NIV translates παρακολουθηκότι as "I myself investigated." Παρακολουθέω appears three other times in the New Testament: (1) "And these signs *will accompany* those who believe" (Matt 16:17); (2) "you will be . . . brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that *you have followed*" (1 Tim 4:6); (3) "You, however, *know all about* my teaching" (2 Tim 3:10). (1) and (2) carry the sense of going hand in hand with, or being faithful to, while (3) carries the sense of immersed familiarity. I translated the word "retrace" which I think takes much better account of its sense in its other uses than does "investigates." The idea is a going over, a following along of the events, a growing in familiarity as one does with a companion along the road. Originally I just translated it "trace" but changed it later to "retrace" to take account of ἄνωθεν.

⁴² This has been debated, but only by scholars whose favorite movie is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

The NIV translates ἀνωθεν “from the beginning.” The word can mean *from above, from the top, from heaven, for a long time, again, and anew*. I rendered it “freshly” which seems to fit best, much better at least than “from the beginning.” The sense is that Luke is taking a fresh look at the apostolic traditions. He is looking back over the material, following along a second time (although in Luke’s case it is conceivable that it would have been the fortieth or the fiftieth time). Notice, also, that Luke never claims to have interviewed eyewitnesses. While it certainly is a possibility that he did carry out his own investigation, the text does not indicate it. Rather, the eyewitnesses handed down traditions from which πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν (*many took in hand to draft a narrative*). Not even this “many” is said to have conducted interviews or investigations. Luke, likewise, goes over again that which has been handed down by the eyewitnesses (i.e. the apostles). He does so ἀκριβῶς, which the NIV renders “carefully” and the KJV “perfect[ly].” I have translated it “attentively” which I feel carries with it a sense of reverence not heard in the NIV’s “carefully” or the NAB’s “accurately.” I am almost certain that Luke’s approach to apostolic tradition would have been something more reverent than the calculated scientific scrutiny we hear in the conventional translations. So I have it rendered, “It seemed like a good idea for me to retrace the whole story, freshly and attentively.”

Why did it seem like a good idea? In order “to walk you through it all one step at a time, most noble Theophilus, so you can rest assured that you’re right where you belong.” Here stands the point of the whole introduction, and perhaps of the whole Luke-Acts narrative.

Καθεξῆς means sequential, or orderly, or chronological (any of these is as good as the next). The question is whether Luke is writing a *chronological* life of Christ, or a chronological *life of Christ*, and I think the latter would be a safe bet. It may be that Luke is interested in

writing chronologically for the sake of chronology, yet there are instances where Luke clearly deviates from a chronological narrative for the sake of theology. So chronology cannot be his main concern. As indicated in my translation, I think it much more likely that Luke is practicing a kind of pedagogy, taking Theophilus through the life of Jesus one event after the next, not — and here is the rub — so that Theophilus will know “how it all went down” (although that is not trivial), but so that Theophilus will know that “what went down” does in fact mean what he was told it means, namely, that Gentiles now have a share in the kingdom of God with Israel. Thus ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν, which the NIV translates, “so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught,” rather has the sense of, “so that you can be sure that the message you have received is sound,” or as above, “so you can rest assured that you’re right where you belong.” Specifically, Theophilus belongs in this startlingly new and very strange coming together of Jews and Gentiles into one πόλις θεοῦ. The rest of the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are Luke’s exposition of this thesis.

This reading of the text coheres quite well with what we already know about Luke. On this reading, Luke, within the first four verses of his gospel, introduces (or hints at) his most prevalent theme — Gentile inclusion. Moreover, this reading allows Luke to be consistent with himself: rather than claiming in his introduction to be a representative of Greek historiography, and then failing to accord with that image from 1:5 onward, here we see Luke siding definitively with Jewish historiography in what we now are able to see as his concern to write a narrative capable of empowering God’s people to go on being God’s people in the right way. Indeed, history, theology, and politics in the Lukan narrative constitute an indivisible unity: the past is selectively exhibited in a manner that serves the purposes of the present.

CONCLUSION

Rather than asking the question, “Was the early church interested in the historical Jesus?” we have asked what “history” itself might have meant to the early church. To answer this question we first compared Greek historiography with Old Testament historiography. We determined that in contrast to Greek historiography, Old Testament historians wrote as the voice of tradition, as theologians, and as politicians, and we gleaned that from the Jewish perspective these three categories were not intelligibly distinct from one another. We then took Luke as our case study for New Testament historiography and demonstrated that on every point Luke stood firmly within the tradition of Old Testament historiography. Rather than as an “Analytical I,” Luke wrote as the voice of the Christian tradition. Rather than writing about the character of men’s belief in God, Luke wrote about God. Finally, rather than attempting to construct an impartial record of the past, Luke set out to render the present and the future more intelligible in light of the past, thus empowering the church to live in friendship with God’s will.

APPLICATION

Evidentialist apologists that have looked to Luke as a model ought to look to Luke again, freshly and attentively. For as we have seen Luke is not concerned to write an account of Jesus that is demonstrable by historiographical standards. He *is* concerned, however, to write a narrative that is intelligible to a church struggling to be the church. I think Luke is indeed a good model to which historians with apologetic proclivities may turn, not, that is, for affirmation but for correction and guidance. Luke’s example reminds us that for Christians, history, theology, and politics are not separate categories, despite what the academy would have us believe. Luke’s example should motivate Christian historians to challenge the assumption of modern

historiography that truth is what the historiographer discovers through unbiased and methodical research. Luke's example should motivate Christian historians to write histories that will be intelligible to a church struggling to be the church, histories that can empower the church to live in friendship with God's will, and thus to be always ready to give an account of the hope that is within her. Such an account of course may not be demonstrable historiographically, empirically, or even philosophically. I think perhaps Luke reminds us that Christianity is not meant to be so demonstrated, and to attempt such a demonstration is often to offer a reductionistic account of God and the world he keeps creating. I think perhaps Luke reminds us that the only kind of demonstration we can offer is this startlingly new and very strange kind of coming together of Jews and Gentiles around one table.

APPENDIX A:
REFLECTIONS ON HISTORIOGRAPHY AND TRADITION

Michel de Certeau writes that “modern Western history essentially begins with differentiation between the *present* and the *past*.” A patent observation, no doubt. Yet de Certeau displays the ramifications of this distinction:

In this way it is unlike tradition (religious tradition), though it never succeeds in being entirely dissociated from this archaeology, maintaining with it a relation of indebtedness and rejection. This rupture also organizes the content of history within the relations between *labor* and *nature*; and finally, as its third form, it ubiquitously takes for granted a rift between *discourse* and the *body* (the social body). It forces the silent body to speak. It assumes a gap to exist between the silent opacity of the ‘reality’ that it seeks to express and the place where it produces its own speech, protected by the distance established between itself and its object.⁴³

According to de Certeau, these three distinctions, i.e., (1) *past* from *present*, (2) *man’s activities* from “*nature’s*” activities, and (3) *historiography* from *historical experience*, are necessary in order for historiographical discourse to be intelligible. De Certeau’s work is to remind us that these are artificial distinctions, but not in such a way as to suggest that they can be dispensed with. It is only to draw attention to the limitations intrinsic to modern historiography, to draw attention to the need for an interpretive scheme larger than historiography itself can produce. Gabrielle Spiegel describes such an interpretive scheme by way of contrast with modern historiography. “Historians must draw a line,” Spiegel says,

⁴³ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 2–3.

between what is dead (past) and what is not, and therefore they posit death as a total social fact, in contrast to tradition, which figures a lived body of traditional knowledge, passed down in gestures, habits, unspoken but nonetheless real memories, borne by living societies. . . . The chief aim of modern historiography has become that of representing — rather than, as formerly, resurrecting — the past.⁴⁴

Yet the modern task of representation is a transgression (in the Hebrew sense); the distance between the historian and history is something of an illusion. If the historian brings his own interpretive scheme to his task, history belongs to the historian — but only ostensibly so, for the interpretive scheme of the historian is really the interpretive scheme of some history other than the history that is the historian's present object (and by "history" here I mean living tradition). If, however, in the process of historical inquiry, the historian becomes converted to the interpretive scheme of his object, the historian belongs to *that* history, which is to say, the object and the subject are reversed, and history writes the historian. These represent the two outermost points on the spectrum. What is clear is that at no point can there be a clean break between the historian and the history he writes about. If the historian really grasps the interpretive scheme of his object but is not converted to it, he has not really grasped it; he is still grasping some other scheme from some heteronomous history.

The idea that something can be "represented" without being adopted is based in the prior dichotomization of discourse and body, which for its intelligibility requires that propositions can be properly understood apart from their being embedded in the concrete practices of a community. This does not mean of course that discourse between communities is impossible; it simply means that one can only "grasp" or "represent" a scheme to the extent that one has

⁴⁴ Spiegel 161.

learned to operate within its strictures. To represent an interpretive scheme without first being established in the practices that are the grammar of that scheme is like trying to translate good Japanese poetry into Arabic. This may seem too patent to some readers to warrant such extensive consideration, but what this consideration does is to unmask the presumption of modern historiography that it transcends the objects of its discourse. Thus de Certeau writes that “historiography has taken the place of tradition: it is cannibalistic history. It assimilates traditions in order to speak in their place, in the name of a site (of *progress*) authorizing it to know better than do these traditions exactly what they are saying.”⁴⁵

N. T. Wright’s determination to use *emic* rather than *etic* language is a helpful step in the right direction. The quest for understanding culminates not in the ability to translate concepts or expressions of concepts from some heteronomous tradition into one’s own language, but in the ability to speak in terms of the heteronomous tradition without recourse to external configurations.

⁴⁵ de Certeau 346.

APPENDIX B:
NON-GREEK CHARACTERISTICS OF LUKAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Divine Causation	Divine Activity	Theological Interpretation	Theological Judgment
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1:26 2. 1:41 3. 2:27 4. 3:38 5. 4:1 6. 9:29 7. 10:21 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 3:21 2. 9:35 3. 24:51 4. 24:45 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1:1 2. 3:4 3. 9:45 4. 9:51 5. 18:34 6. 24:16 7. 24:31 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1:6 2. 2:25 3. 2:26 4. 2:40 5. 2:52 6. 3:2 7. 4:14 8. 9:30-31 9. 22:3 10. 24:51
Miracles and Healings	Demonic Activity	Angelic Activity	Political Bias
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 4:40 2. 5:13 3. 5:25 4. 6:19 5. 7:15 6. 7:21 7. 8:24 8. 8:44 9. 8:55 10. 9:11 11. 9:17 12. 9:42 13. 11:14 14. 13:13 15. 14:4 16. 17:14 17. 18:43 18. 22:51 19. 24:15 20. 24:36 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 4:2 2. 4:3 3. 4:5 4. 4:9 5. 4:13 6. 4:33 7. 4:35 8. 4:41 9. 6:18 10. 8:32-33 11. 9:42 12. 11:14 13. 22:3 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1:11 2. 1:26 3. 2:9 4. 2:13 5. 22:43 6. 24:4 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1:1 2. 1:2 3. 3:18 4. 8:1 5. 11:53-54

APPENDIX C:
THE INTRODUCTION TO LUKE'S GOSPEL (1:1–4)

Ἐπειδήπερ πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν περὶ τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡγίῳ πραγμάτων, καθὼς παρέδοσαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου, ἔδοξε κάμοι παρηκολουθηκότι ἄνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν.

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightiest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. (KJV)

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (NIV)

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received. (NAB)

The author to Theophilus: Many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have happened among us, following the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the Gospel. And so I in my turn, your Excellency, as one who has gone over the whole course of these events in detail, have decided to write a connected narrative for you, so as to give you authentic knowledge about the matters of which you have been informed. (NEB)

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (NRSV)

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