

Ricoeur on History, Fiction, and Biblical Hermeneutics

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Introduction

Jean-François Lyotard's volume, *The Postmodern Condition* and its 'incredulity toward metanarratives',¹ broke open a large fissure of uncertainty in many disciplines. The rising force of such postmodern ideas is having a profound impact on the discipline of history. In recent years debate among historians has taken new directions. At present, serious challenges pertaining to the truth of written history and the knowledge of the historian are in evidence.² While controversy concerning the truth-value of history has a long tradition, postmodern theories argue for new ways of viewing and doing history. Historical truth, objectivity, facts, events and knowledge are all targets for revision.³ Marc Trachtenberg expresses his concern in the following manner:

¹ Lyotard, *Postmodern*, xxiv.

² See K. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking*, 12-32. 'We know that such truths are really "useful fictions" that are in discourse by virtue of power (somebody has to put and keep them there) and power uses the term "truth" to exercise control.' (parenthesis his). Also, Jenkins, *Postmodern*, 1-30, and see the discussion of historiographic metafiction in Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 87-120, where it is argued that the problematic we face today is not so much that of a historiographical external reality, but of a loss of faith in our capacity to know that reality.

³ Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling*; Southgate, *History*, have excellent discussions of these matters.

Increasingly the old ideal of historical objectivity is dismissed out of hand. The very notion of 'historical truth' is now often considered hopelessly naïve.⁴

For Trachtenberg, and others, postmodern proposals represent a contemporary crisis in the discipline of history.⁵ What is viewed as a radical scepticism and a virulent relativism are considered to be an assault on traditional forms of all that history stands for, including, objectivity, knowledge, clarity and evidence.⁶ Facts and truths that are objectively discovered and conveyed were assumed to be the emblem of historical accounts, but this view of history is changing.⁷

The postmodern reply to these assumptions is that new ways of thinking about history are essential. The old Enlightenment fantasies of certainty and objectivity that were thought to be at the center of a writing of history are no longer taken into account. Keith Jenkins states:

.... the attempt to pass off the study of history in the form of the ostensibly disinterested scholarship of academics studying the past objectively and "for its own sake" as "proper" history, is now unsustainable. In fact history appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions.⁸

⁴ Trachtenberg, 'The Past,' in: *Reconstructing*, 9-11.

⁵ Zagorin, 'History,' 1-24, includes this in a list of several responses by historians to postmodern ideas.

⁶ Ibid., 2. See also, Southgate, *History*, 1-11.

⁷ Ibid., 5, 'In place of grand narratives of this kind, so it is held, have come a multiplicity of discourses and language games, a questioning of the nature of knowledge together with a dissolution of the idea of truth, and problems of legitimacy in many fields.'

⁸ Jenkins, *Postmodern*, 6. (emphasis his).

Writing history, for Jenkins and others, is merely a subjective enterprise, exclusively based on literary construction without objective grounding.⁹ As such, getting the story straight has little to do with the events of the past.¹⁰ Under the template of postmodern theory 'new wave'¹¹ historians argue that a discovery of an accurate recounting of historical events in time is an impossible task.¹² In this scenario, writing history has more to do with inventing meaning, than finding facts. Any pursuit of the truth of historical occurrence in the past becomes highly dubious. How then are we to understand written accounts of past events as 'new wave' historians influence and re-shape the discipline of history? Does the discipline face a growing crisis?

The contemporary debates over history writing and historians also have enormous repercussions for biblical truth, which in some sense, claims to be connected to real events in history. In addition to historical questions, there is another related dimension to our present context that merits consideration. Biblical interpretation is much influenced by the contemporary interest in literary criticism and narrative.¹³ The narrative turn has drawn the attention of literary theorists, philosophers, biblical exegetes, theologians and historians,

⁹ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking*, 12-32.

¹⁰ Kellner, *Language*, xi, 3-25, 273-293, argues that as a result of the blurring of distinctions between historiography and literature, we find ourselves needing to get the story crooked. 'To get the story crooked is to understand that the straightness of any story is a rhetorical invention and that the invention of stories is the most important part of human self-understanding and self-creation.'

¹¹ Munslow, *Deconstructing*, 19, refers to 'new wave' historians, such as Hayden White and Keith Jenkins, who emphasize the form - content relation and the inescapable relativism of historical understanding.

¹² D. Carr, 'Life', in: *Hermeneutics*, 108-121, refers to this pejoratively as the 'standard' view today.

¹³ Alter in *Art*, 15, remarks that a more marked interest in a literary perspective of the Bible begins to arise in the 1970s. See also, Blocher, 'Biblical,' 102-122.

becoming the object of intense debate.¹⁴ What is the relation, or lack thereof, between history and historical accounts of the past? How might narratives recount something about the real world? In the light of contemporary literary theories promoted by 'new wave' historians, how are we to view the biblical narratives?

The present essay will reflect on and evaluate recent proposals that are at the heart of these questions. I will focus on three major issues: history and historical discourse; historical discourse and fictional literature; historical discourse, fictional literature and the Bible. My purpose in what follows is to interpret and apply the reflections of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur to these issues and to draw out several implications for biblical hermeneutics.¹⁵

¹⁴ Kermode, *A Sense of Ending*; Ankersmit and Kellner, eds., *A New Philosophy*; White, *Metahistory and Content*; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*; Ricoeur, *Temps et récit I - III*, (*Time and Narrative*, I - III, ET); Carr, *Time*; W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative*; P. Bühler and J. F. Habermacher, eds., *La narration*; Marguerat and Bourquin, *How to Read*; Stenger, *Narrative Theology*; S. S. Lanser, *The Narrative Act*; W. Harris, *Literary and Interpretive Acts*; Frei, *Eclipse*; Hauerwas and L. G. Jones, eds., *Why Narrative?*; Ellingsen, *The Integrity*; Sternberg, *Poetics*; V. P. Long, *Art*; Longman, *Literary*; Vanhoozer, *Biblical, and Is There a Meaning?*; Stiver, *Philosophy, and Theology*; Laughery, *Living*; Bartholomew, Greene and Möller, eds., *Renewing, and After Pentecost*; Jeffery, *People*; offer a variety of different perspectives and orientations.

¹⁵ Ricoeur's work is one of the most prominent enterprises to peruse for an investigation into the questions of history, narrative and biblical hermeneutics as his writings for the last two decades clearly evidence. Ricoeur, *Temps*, I-III, (*Time*, I-III, ET). 'Philosophies,' 139-201, in: *Philosophical Problems; La Mémoire; Essays; Figuring the Sacred; From Text to Action*; Ricoeur and LaCocque, *Penser, (Thinking, ET)*.

1) History and Historical Discourse.

One response to postmodernism and its influence on historical questions has been for some scholars to claim that the text *is* history. Daniel Marguerat, in a discussion of postmodernism and historiography, argues that there is no history without the written plots and interpretations of the historian. He maintains that any distinction between history and written accounts of history has now been destroyed.¹⁶ A somewhat similar view is advanced by Paul Veyne, who proposes a narrativist model of history that is plot centered; there is no history without the writing of a plot.¹⁷ History, Veyne contends, is made by the written construction of plots.¹⁸

Such notions of history and writing history are useful in pointing out the role of the historian as interpreter and the importance of narrative configurations, but they have the severe disadvantage of reducing history to interpretation and emplotment, hence devaluing any distinction between historical discourse and history.¹⁹ How do we arrive at historical discourse, a selectively written account of history? There has been much discussion on this issue and it is impossible to cover the wide diversity of views here.²⁰ I shall closely follow

¹⁶ Marguerat, *First Christian*, 5-7.

¹⁷ Veyne, *Comment*. Kellner, *Language*, 305-307, esp. 306, has a brief discussion of Veyne's work. He is appreciative of Veyne's position as 'it is couched in terms that are *moral* and *aesthetic*.' (Italics his)

¹⁸ See Ricoeur, *Temps*, I, 239-246 (*Time*, I, 169-174, ET) for a critical interaction with this perspective.

¹⁹ I will be using the term historical discourse to refer to written accounts of the past. My hope is that the different terminologies used by myself and others will be clear enough for the reader to discern the meaning of the terms 'history,' 'historiography,' and 'historical discourse,' which all may refer to written accounts.

²⁰ For further discussion see R. J. Evans, *In Defence*. Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling*. Jenkins, *Rethinking*. McCullagh, *Truth*, and Southgate, *History*.

Paul Ricoeur's work and commentary on this controversial aporia.²¹ Ricoeur suggests a critical three-fold historiographic operation that comprises, at each level, enrichment and problematization.²²

First, Ricoeur argues, we begin with an investigation of what we find in sources and documentation. These *detail* sources, for example, traces, testimony, and chronicles can be evaluated and to some degree verified as to their reliability. Sources are not, at this stage, what Ricoeur refers to as 'la connaissance historique' (historical knowledge). According to Ricoeur, on this level, historical occurrence has a twofold epistemological status: it brings about statements of details that can be affirmed or negated by testimony, trace, or documentation, and it plays a role in the overall explanation and narrative configuration, where it passes from the status of a verifiable occurrence to an interpreted occurrence. In spite of the instability of the relation between the occurrence and its documentation there is no reason to assume that the occurrence was not an *actual* event in the world prior to its documentation.

Second, there is an explicative/comprehension level, which concerns not just 'who', 'where', and 'when', but 'why', 'to what effects', or 'results.'²³ This level comprises such elements as social, political or economic considerations that ripple out from an occurrence in the past. On this level, as Ricoeur points out, there are conflicting models of the *erklären* (explanation) and *verstehen* (understanding) of past occurrences as historical knowledge: some *explain* by subjecting the past to laws or regulations, others *understand* by connecting

²¹ Especially, but not exclusively, Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 139-201; and *La Mémoire*.

²² Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 140, views this enriching as the capacity of one level to bring greater clarity and precision to the other, while at the same time there remains epistemological problems that pertain to each level. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 170, also stresses that the three-fold operation is not to be understood as a chronological succession.

²³ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 169.

the past to a teleology. The notions of epistemological value are attached to one or the other of these models of cultivating and articulating the past. In effect both attempt, albeit in different ways, to establish something of a scientific dimension of historical discourse through centering on understanding (Dilthey) or explanation (Hempel). However, in Ricoeur's view, the problematic is that explanation without understanding or understanding without explanation results in a truncated epistemology. In the debate between these models, Ricoeur highlights the work of G. H. von Wright in *Explanation and Understanding*²⁴ (who situates the conflict in Plato and Aristotle). Wright attempts to synthesize the regulatory and the causal or teleological in connection with human action. In finding such a point of view promising, Ricoeur ponders the following question: does a narrative ordering assure the unity of a mixed model?²⁵ This question leads us to the next stage of the historiographic operation.

Third, the interpreted sources and the explanations and understandings are configured in (re) writing a grand historiographical narrative,²⁶ which aims to be a representation of the past. This (re) writing representation is connected to memory, the intentionality of the historiographer, and the target of recounting truth about the past in dependence on the previous levels. At this point, the historiographical operation is brought to closure.²⁷ Ricoeur prefers the term 'représentance'²⁸ for the combined three level operation in order to emphasize that historical representation is working towards bringing

²⁴ G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*.

²⁵ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 154.

²⁶ While it is true that there is also non-narrative historiography it is narrative historiography that has recently created the greater amount of discussion.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 169-170, 303-304.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 304, 340-369.

to light the targeted reference. These three distinct, yet related levels of operation, offer a critical knowledge of the past.²⁹

Ricoeur's threefold notion of the historiographical operation shows that history and historical discourse are not to be equated. For Ricoeur, there is a behind the text or an outside the text that merits consideration in historical inquiry. Trace, testimony, and représentation, stand for something that took place outside the text.³⁰ While the behind or outside the text are not the only concerns in the interpretation of historical discourse, they nevertheless remain valid interests.³¹ Historical occurrences only become historical discourse when they are written, while history remains history even though it is not written down.³² Thus, we are not merely interested in texts, but in a reliable interpretation of the historical character of the events which the texts represent.

²⁹ Ibid., *La Mémoire*, 168-169, 323.

³⁰ It is true that what interpreters have is the text, but the text has the capacity to point, beyond itself, to who and what are behind it.

³¹ Ricoeur has stressed that the interpretation of a text is concerned with the world that unfolds in 'front' of the text, but this does not mean that he refuses an appropriate emphasis on a historical referent behind the text. See his discussions in, *From Text*, 75-88, *Interpretation Theory*, 'Du conflit,' 35-53 and 'Esquisse de conclusion', 285-295.

³² Bebbington, *Patterns*, 1-2, points out, 'In the English language the word "history" can mean either what people write about time gone by, that is historiography; or else it can mean what people have done and suffered, that is the historical process.'

2) Historical Discourse and Fictional Literature: The Turn to Literature.

The disciplines of literature and modern literary criticism are having a marked impact on the discipline of history.³³ One important reason for this is the contemporary emphasis on literature inaugurated by both French and Anglo-Saxon theorists.³⁴ The main goals of this section will be to examine Ricoeur's response to recent perspectives that attempt to transform historical discourse into fictional literature and then to map out his own proposals for preserving a distinction.

Louis Mink, frequently understood as a pivotal figure in this discussion was one of the first in recent times to pose the problematic of the relation between historical discourse and fiction. Mink noted that both types of narrative literature 'recount.'³⁵ His point is well taken, however, it brings with it the following query: if both types of narrative recount is there any difference between a historical and fictional recounting? Mink warns of an impending disaster if the distinction between historical discourse and fiction disappears, although he remains somewhat perplexed as to how one might preserve the contrast.³⁶ How have postmodern theories in the discipline of history attempted to respond to this problem? This vexing question merits further investigation.

I will now sketch out an analysis of the literary turn in the discipline of history, following Ricoeur's work on two postmodern 'new wave' scholars: Hayden White, and

³³ See Long, 'Historiography,' 161-165, for an explanation of the difference between modern and an older styles of literary criticism.

³⁴ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 159, 168-177. Ricoeur discusses these schools of thought, drawing out both the convergences and divergences in a useful manner.

³⁵ Mink, *Historical*.

³⁶ Mink, 'Narrative,' in: *History*, 211-220. For a fecund discussion of this issue see, Sternberg, *Poetics*, 1-57, and Long, *Art*, esp. 54-87.

Hans Kellner. White's enterprise has had a profound impact on this discussion, and thus is important to peruse.³⁷ He states:

.... there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.³⁸

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding", "identifying", or "uncovering", the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations.³⁹

White's complex taxonomy cannot be fully developed here. My purpose in what follows is to present briefly something of its trajectory.⁴⁰ Two of White's major presuppositions are that the historian invents as much as finds, and that narratives are a mode of recounting, not a mode of discovery.⁴¹ He views the historian as working with disordered and

³⁷ H. White has sent shock waves through, and had a tremendous influence on, the discipline of history. See Jacoby, 'A New,' in: *Reconstructing*, 94-118. Munslow, *Deconstructing*, 140-162.

³⁸ White, 'Historical,' in *History and Theory*, 15-33, esp. 16. (Italics his)

³⁹ White, *Metahistory*, 6-7. For White, in a 'chronicle' an event is merely 'there', whereas in history writing events are assigned different functions in the story.

⁴⁰ See Munslow, *Deconstructing*, 140-162 for a fuller introduction to White's views.

⁴¹ White, 'Afterword,' 315--324, argues that it is an illusion that "facts" are discovered not constructed. N. Carroll, 'Interpretation,' in: *History*, 246-265, esp., 251, usefully points out in respect to White's view, 'The notion of *invention* here is a bit tricky and open to equivocation. In one sense, historical narratives

unrelated chronicle type data. The writer then imposes a sequential order, - beginning, middle, end, and an emplotment strategy, which may take the form of a romance - tragedy - comedy - satire. By virtue of this imposition of a form, which is the mode of explanation, moral meaning or content is attached to the narrative.⁴² In White's point of view, a plot form or structure functions as a control model, a sort of pre-encoding, a metahistory.⁴³ This is because emplotting presides over and is that through which the historian is obliged to recount the story. White observes:

History-writing thrives on the discovery of all the possible plot structures that might be invoked to endow sets of events with different meanings. And our understanding of the past increases precisely in the degree to which we succeed in determining how far that past conforms to the strategies of sense-making that are contained in their purest forms in literary art.⁴⁴

On the narrative level, the historian constructs narrative meaning through the chosen plot form or typology as a literary endeavor. This literary configuring gives the narrative a

are inventions, viz. in the sense they are made by historians; but it is not clear that it follows from this that they are *made-up* (and are, therefore, fictional). (Italics and parenthesis his)

⁴² White, 'Narrativization,' in: *On Narrative*, 249-254, esp. 253, narrativization teaches about 'moral wisdom, or rather about the irreducible moralism of a life lived under the conditions of culture rather than nature narrative has the power to teach what it means to be *moral* beings (rather than machines endowed with consciousness).' (Italics and parenthesis his).

⁴³ White, *Metahistory*. See Kellner, *Language*, 193-227, esp., 197 for a discussion of *Metahistory*. Kellner reads White's worldview as centered on humanism. Historiography is about human choice and a fortification of human mastery, connected to rhetorical language power. Also, Dray, 'Narrative,' in: *History*, 157-180, for an insightful discussion of White's views.

⁴⁴ White, 'Historical,' 15-33, esp. 24.

fictional content, while a reliable representation of events in the world pales into relative obscurity on the referent register of the grand narrative.⁴⁵

The fact that narratives are constructed is not in dispute, yet there are questions concerning White's views. Why should narrative construction, which many scholars acknowledge, banish historical occurrence, sense and reference? Does narrative construction exclude a credible representation of the past?⁴⁶ Furthermore, why should one presuppose there is no narrative structure (beginning, middle and end), which a narrative may reflect, prior to its literary construction?⁴⁷ While appreciative of White's emphasis on the structured imagination and its correlation to creativity and form, Ricoeur remarks:

On the other hand, I deplore the impasse in which H. White encloses himself in treating the operations of emplotment as explicative modes, at best indifferent to the scientific procedures of historical knowledge, at worst a substitute for these. There is a real *category mistake* here which

⁴⁵ White is correct to reject a naïve realism found in a positivist notion of historical discourse, but his reclassification seems to do away with the problematic of the referential dimension of such a literature. See Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 324-333.

⁴⁶ See A. P. Norman, 'Telling,' in: *History*, 181-196, esp., 191, who argues, 'A good historian will interact dialogically with the historical record, recognizing the limits it places on possible construals of the past. Of course historians select their facts, and obviously the stories they tell are incomplete. But by itself this does not mean that the result is distorted or false.'

⁴⁷ White, *The Content*, 192-193, strongly argues that there is no narrative structure in life, prior to a literary construction. Carr, *Time*, 49-50, 59-60, esp. 49, maintains that White and other theorists treat structures, 'as if they were imposed on meaningless data by the act of narration itself, as if the events of life, experiences and actions, had no structure in themselves and achieved it only at the hand of a literary invention.' Carr challenges White's perspective, contending that life itself has inherent structures that are reflected in narrative.

engenders a legitimate suspicion concerning the capacity of this rhetorical theory to draw a strong line between historical narrative and fictional narrative (récit historique et récit de fiction.)⁴⁸

White's theory includes further drawbacks. He both neglects the realist dimension of fiction and stresses an almost exclusive focus on the choice of pre-narrative strategies and emplotment, to the detriment of a concern for the fidelity of a representation of the past.⁴⁹ One of the marked results of this strategy is that it becomes necessary to view historical discourse as constitutive of, rather than connected to, historical occurrence and life.⁵⁰

Historical investigation and the view of historical discourse today have been strongly influenced by White's work. He has made a forceful contribution to moving historical discourse from the domains of history, literature, science and epistemology, and locating it exclusively in the realm of literature. White relegates or reduces historical inquiry to a third level (in Ricoeur's operation) literary quest.⁵¹ In so doing, White's views render it extremely difficult to draw distinctions between historical discourse and fiction.⁵² The major aporia that such an incapacity creates is that it puts in question the reality of the past. Ricoeur states:

⁴⁸ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 327-328. (Italics his). *La Mémoire* has not, to my knowledge, appeared in English. The English translations for this work are mine.

⁴⁹ White, *The Content*, 192-196 and 'Historical,' 15-33.

⁵⁰ W. V. Harris, *Literary*, esp. 157-174, argues that if historical discourse is merely a narrative construction, fictionality reigns.

⁵¹ See the development of Ricoeur's notion of historical discourse above. For Ricoeur, the third level is the last in a sequence which depends on sources (trace, testimony, documents) and explanation and understanding.

⁵² Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 328, notes that it is urgent to 'specify' the referential moment which distinguishes historical discourse and fiction.

..... it is the relation between the organizing paradigms of the discipline of history and those which control the composition of literary fictions which has provoked a declassification of history as knowledge with a scientific pretension and its reclassification as literary artifice, and in relation to this caused a weakening of epistemological criteria of differentiation between history proper and the philosophy of history.⁵³

Another contemporary scholar who has had a marked influence on the field of history is Hans Kellner. In his work on language and historical representation,⁵⁴ Kellner points out that he does not believe there are 'stories' of the past out there waiting to be told or that there is any 'straight' way to write a history.⁵⁵ No historical discourse is straight, regardless of the methodological rigor or honesty of the historian. Any historical text, in spite of its straight appearance, is to be understood as rhetorical invention: crooked. Historical epochs or events represented in the text are literary creations that have more to do with self-understanding, than with something that happened in the past. Recounting invented stories, according to Kellner, is how humans understand themselves. There is always a human language story outside the narrative that demands our attention. Getting the story crooked, for Kellner, equally amounts to something of a reading strategy. This means reading a historical text for the areas of concern and decision, no matter to what degree concealed, that have forged particular tactical writing schemes. On

⁵³ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 171-172. 'Philosophies,' has not, to my knowledge, appeared in English. The English translations for this work are mine.

⁵⁴ Kellner, *Language*. See also, Kellner, 'As Real,' in: *Meanings*, 49-66, on Ricoeur and narrative.

⁵⁵ Kellner, *Language*, 24, 'Historians do not "find" the truths of past events; they create events from a seamless flow, and invent meanings that produce patterns within that flow.'

his account, underlying rhetorical constructs tell the real story, hence, the need to read stories crooked.

In Kellner's view a rhetorical interest drives historical investigation. Rhetoric and discourse are the other (real) sources of history, not found in past occurrences or archives.⁵⁶ Kellner's presupposition is that historians are lacking knowledge of the reality of the past and that this lack perpetuates anxiety. Historians, as a result, turn from inadequate historical evidence and endeavor to construct the past through language and rhetorical conventions, which attempt to bring order to the potentially terrifying and disordered chaos. On this understanding, rhetoric and language construction are a reality construction. In challenging what he terms, the 'ideology of truth,' Kellner asserts that we are obliged to face the constructed nature of the human world, and to accept that meaning is always reduced to human purpose. Narratives and narrative order constructions are oppressive weapons used by historians in the attempt to mask anxiety and the fear of anarchy concerning the past. Acknowledging a language - rhetorical construction of reality, Kellner argues, amounts to the 'deepest respect for reality'⁵⁷ in that the reality of the past is merely a product of the historian.

⁵⁶ Ibid., vii and 1-25, esp. 7, 'Crooked readings of historical writings are beginning to abound;...'

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 178-179. Kellner, *Language*, 25. In my view, Kellner's work clearly represents a postmodern shift of emphasis in the discipline of history. Historical inquiry into what happened in the past recedes in importance, while literary or ontological concerns (the nature of the historian) flourish. I believe the latter may be the allure of Heidegger's philosophy influencing Kellner. Heidegger's move away from any interest in epistemology to ontology is noticeably marking the disciplines of literature and history. There is no doubt that this change of direction was necessary. In contrast to Heidegger however, Ricoeur attempts to acknowledge the significant import of the turn to ontology, without undermining epistemology. The latter remains a crucial and critical participant in the interpretation of the self, world and texts. See also, Kellner, 'As Real,' in: *Meanings*, 49-66; Ricoeur, 'Existence et herméneutique,' in: *Le*

Historical investigation, for Kellner, is not interested in sources, explanations and understandings of historical occurrences in time, but in rhetoric. According to Ricoeur, when the search for rhetoric becomes the sole driving force of the discipline of history, other legitimate historical interests are ignored. If one accepts Kellner's view, truth disappears, and with it, historical reality.⁵⁸

This brief examination of Ricoeur's interaction with two contemporary scholars should not be read as merely a critique of their thought, but also as a means of conveying his own positive proposals. There is a clear indication of how, in Ricoeur's opinion, an over-determined literary focus has the tendency to reduce historical discourse to fictional literature and rhetorical strategies. Ricoeur strongly argues for maintaining the distinction between historical discourse and fictional literature in that historical discourse has different concerns, referents and targets. The reductionism of White and Kellner brings with it an epistemological dilemma with respect to the fidelity of a *representation* of the past.⁵⁹ Ricoeur's conflict with such scholarship has been underscored in showing that the literary - narrative turn, in this school of thought, is now more often concerned with literature and literary criticism, than it is with epistemology and scientific inquiry.⁶⁰ Ricoeur has forcefully contributed to the move towards narrative as a literary vehicle for recounting events of the past,⁶¹ but he also aims to alert interpreters to the perils of a declassification of historical discourse into fictional literature and appeals for a vigilant

conflict, 7-28 ('Existence and Hermeneutics,' in: *Conflict*, 3-26, ET), Laughery, *Living*, 28-42, and Zagorin, 'History,' 1-24, for fuller discussion.

⁵⁸ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 179.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 170, argues that in the domain of history as a human science, the intentional direction of the historian is to credibly, not completely represent the past.

⁶⁰ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 163-168.

⁶¹ Ricoeur's work in, *Time and Narrative*, is one major example of this contribution.

epistemology.⁶² Historical discourse is indeed literature, yet in Ricoeur's view, it is essential that we not abandon scientific investigation or critical analysis with respect to sources, explanations, and understandings, that pertain to questions of the past.⁶³

In addition to the value of Ricoeur's proposals and his critique of White and Kellner, it is important to elucidate further something of his response to the aporetic character of *representation* of the past and then to reflect on his views regarding the problem of distinguishing historical discourse and fictional literature. Several of his personal reflections give rise to thought. Ricoeur affirms the spontaneous realism⁶⁴ of the historian implicated by what he refers to as 'l'intentionnalité de la conscience historique' (the intentionality of the historical conscience). Ricoeur's presupposition here is that,

the historian has for an ultimate object people like us, acting and suffering in circumstances that they have not produced, and with desired and non-desired results. This presupposition links the theory of history and the theory of action.⁶⁵

People of the past are different, yet this difference is not so great that people of the present have no capacity to understand them. The creative connection model here is language, combined with the presupposition that all languages can be translated into our own.

⁶² Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 223-226, views a vigilant epistemology as also guarding against a naïve realism, the notion that historical occurrence and historical discourse amount to the same thing.

⁶³ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 167-168. Also, Evans, *In Defence*, 73. See also, Bebbington, *Patterns*, 5, who writes that history is a science in that it is comparable to, '*Wissenschaft*: the systematic quest for ordered knowledge.' (Italics his).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 190. See below. This is a critical as opposed to a naïve realism.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

Furthermore, a historian is linked, in a practical, spatio-temporal manner, to the object of study. This schema, chronological in focus though it may be, provides the essential condition of *dating* an historical occurrence.⁶⁶ In Ricoeur's perspective the value of this linking goes beyond merely formal chronology. In dating an occurrence the historian is able to connect past actions to calendar time, a mixed time between lived present time and cosmological time.⁶⁷ Ricoeur aims to show that historians are indebted to those who came before them and that they receive an inheritance from those of another time. There are others, from the past, who contribute to making us who we are.

A concluding reflection on the aporia of representation of the past is an appeal to trace. Trace is something that someone has left in passing through a place in time. Ricoeur points out:

Two ideas are involved here: on one hand, the idea that a mark has been left by the passage of some being, on the other, the idea that this mark is the sign 'standing for' ('valant pour') the passage. The significance of the trace combines a relation of causality between the thing marking and the thing marked, and a relation of signification between the mark left and the passage. The trace has the value of effect-sign.⁶⁸

The representation of the past, Ricoeur argues, is not a copy or projection, a correspondence of mental image and something absent, but rather a something represented *standing in place of* that which once was and no longer is. In this sense, the trace does not belong to some form or expression of a naïve realism or idealism, but to what

⁶⁶ Ibid., 192.

⁶⁷ See Ricoeur's extensive discussion of this in *Time and Narrative*.

⁶⁸ Ricoeur, 'Philosophies,' 196. (emphasis his - parenthesis mine).

Ricoeur refers to as a 'critical realism' based in a 'profound analysis of what constitutes the intentionality of historical discourse.'⁶⁹

At this juncture, we return to the vexing question that Mink was so instrumental in raising: as historiographical and fictional narratives both recount, is it possible to maintain any distinction between them? In response to this question, Ricoeur has forcefully argued against White and Kellner for this distinction. He appeals to the truth of 'représentance' in that it comprises the expectations, requirements and problems of historical intentionality. A représentation of the past is expected to be connected to reconstructions of actual occurrences, real people, and factual circumstances.⁷⁰ This historical narrative articulation can be said to constitute a 'pact' between author and reader.⁷¹ Historians, on this view, are not mere narrators, but argue a case for the actual occurrences and real people they attempt to represent. Historical discourse has a target - a reliable representation of the past. Ricoeur states:

It is in no way my intention to cancel or to obscure the differences between history and the whole set of fictional narratives in terms of their truth-claims. Documents and archives are the 'sources' of evidence for historical inquiry. Fictional narratives, on the other hand, ignore the burden of providing evidences of that kind.

I should want to stress that as 'fictive' as the historical text may be, its claim is to be a representation of reality. And its way of asserting its claim is to support it by the verificationist

⁶⁹ Ibid., 196. See also, Lemon, *Discipline of History*, 4-41, for a fecund discussion of history.

⁷⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, III, 142, points out, 'Unlike novels, historians' constructions do aim at being reconstructions of the past ... historians are subject to what once was.'

⁷¹ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 359-369. See also Steiner, *Real*, 89-97, who writes of a 'semantic trust' without which there would be no history as we know it - a trust between word and world - a necessary covenant between word and object that calls us to respond. He argues for 'real presence' versus 'real absence.'

procedures proper to history as a science. In other words, history is both a literary artifact and a representation of reality. It is a literary artifact to the extent that, like all literary texts, it tends to assume the status of a self-contained system of symbols. It is a representation of reality to the extent that the world it depicts - which is the 'works world' - is assumed to stand for some actual occurrences in the 'real' world.⁷²

In fictional literature, there is equally a 'pact' between author and reader, but there is no expectation, nor demand, for the same level of an extra-linguistic *referent* on the narrative register. While historical discourse and fiction are story, in that both are configured through the imagination and emplotment, historical discourse cannot be reduced to fictional literature. The field of operation for historical discourse is obliged to include other considerations than merely the imagination, plot and a literary form.

As Ricoeur has pointed out, there are major distinctions between historical discourse and fictional literature. First, the goal and expectation of the author and reader are different. Second, historical discourse aims to represent past occurrences in the real world. Furthermore, in historical discourse as opposed to fiction, every effort must be made to work back from the third level grand narrative,⁷³ to explanation and understanding, to documentation in traces and testimony, in order to critically evaluate the third level narrative claim.⁷⁴ Historical discourse claims to represent an actuality behind or outside the text.

3) Historical Discourse, Fictional Literature, and the Bible.

⁷² Ricoeur, 'Fictional,' 3-19, esp. 4-7.

⁷³ See Section 1 above.

⁷⁴ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 363. Also, Chartier, 'History,' 26-30.

Postmodern theories have not only had an impact on the disciplines of history and literature, but they are funding much of the discussion in biblical studies, biblical hermeneutics and theology.⁷⁵ It has been suggested that theological modernists may be left longing for the nostalgia of presence, while theological postmodernists play with juxtaposition in the absence of sense and referent.⁷⁶ George Aichele Jr. states:

Postmodern thought centers upon a fantastic, generic indeterminacy, the non-identity and self-referentiality inherent in language, which makes decisive truth claims impossible. Insofar as one can continue to speak of reality at all, it is generically indeterminate, fantastic.

We never escape from the literal alphabetic surface and its endless dissemination to an ideal, conceptual realm; the fantastic fictionality of language undercuts every attempt to refer to an extratextual reality.⁷⁷

In addition to this form of postmodern scepticism towards a reality outside ourselves and textual reference, the recent flourishing of narrative criticism in literature has contributed to raising a number of questions for the interpretation of the Bible. Does the biblical text have the capacity to have extralinguistic referents? Is there anything 'behind' the text? Do we interpret the Bible as 'historicized fiction' or 'fictionalized history'?⁷⁸ There are claims

⁷⁵ S. Moore, ' "Post Age," Stamp,' 543-559. Heelas, ed., *Religion*. Ward, ed., *Postmodern God*. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, are all examples of an awareness of the influence of postmodernism on these fields.

⁷⁶ Aichele, 'Postmodern Theology,' 323-337.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, esp., 328.

⁷⁸ Alter, *Art*, 1981, 34, 41 uses these terms without a great deal of clarity or identification as to whether they are the same or different modes of narrating. See Long, *Art*, 59-62, for an insightful perspective and clarification of such terminology. Also, Sternberg, *Poetics*, 1-57.

by some that the Bible is fictional in character, while others argue that biblical history and any notion of fiction are in total conflict.⁷⁹ My interest in this section is to explore how Ricoeur's views might respond to these questions and forms of postmodern incredulity.

Ricoeur has given us helpful insights in the discussion above concerning history and historical discourse and historical discourse and literature, but precisely how these would now apply to his thinking in the context of biblical hermeneutics must remain somewhat tentative. To my knowledge, Ricoeur has not published on this subject post *La Mémoire, L'Histoire, L'Oubli*, 2000.⁸⁰ There are, however, a number of significant earlier works that Ricoeur has written which pertain to this, and I will sketch out several trajectories in dialogue with these texts.

While Ricoeur is frequently understood to be affirming different things on the subject of the Bible and biblical interpretation,⁸¹ his general hermeneutical discussion of historical discourse and literature is of value for maintaining that historical accounts have

⁷⁹ See Long's excellent discussion in *Art*, 58-87 of these two views. Long's own position can be summarized in the following manner. The word fiction may understood in two senses. Fiction is a literary genre and fiction is artistry, creativity, skill. The former may be in conflict with historiography, while the latter need not be. If these two senses are kept in mind, it may be possible to continue to speak of fiction and history as opposites, while at the same time acknowledging that all historiography is fictionalized, while recognising nevertheless that this does not negate the intent to recount historical occurrences in the real world.

⁸⁰ Ricoeur, post 1994 when 'Philosophies,' was published, has co-written with LaCocque *Penser la bible (Thinking Biblically, ET)* which appeared in 1998, but this work deals with other relevant matters. To be more precise, a philosopher, Ricoeur, reads the work of an exegete, LaCocque, and comments on it. Ricoeur does not often, in this volume, deal with the matters before us.

⁸¹ See, Vanhoozer, *Biblical*; Fodor, *Christian*; Stiver, *Theology*; and Laughery, *Living*, for recent evaluations of Ricoeur's work.

referents outside the text.⁸² Working from a general hermeneutical perspective, one must not automatically reduce the biblical text to simply fictional literature. Does this equally hold true for Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics?

Ricoeur strongly argues for an intertextual approach to the biblical text.⁸³ This means that biblical narrative must be interpreted in relation to other biblical genres such as wisdom, hymn, prophecy, and so on.⁸⁴ Whether it be Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, a Gospel, or letter, each text has a temporal dimension and message that needs to be put into a historical, literary, and theological dialogue with the other. This hermeneutical perspective orients the interpreter towards an investigation and evaluation of each text on a case by case basis in order to determine the author's literary act as expressed in the genre of the text.⁸⁵

Several biblical texts, including Exodus and the Gospels, vehemently announce that there is a theological dimension to history. As a listener to that which is recorded in the Scripture,⁸⁶ Ricoeur may be open to a view that the God who is named by the text, does something outside the text, which is now a représentation in the text. Ricoeur states:

... the naming of God in the resurrection narratives of the New Testament is in accord with the naming of God in the deliverance narratives of the Old Testament: God called Christ from the

⁸² Ricoeur, 'Philosophical,' in: *From Text*, 89-101. Stiver, *Theology*, 123-136, esp., 124 and 'Ricoeur,' in: *After*, 50-72, argues that Ricoeur's position is 'much more historical than some believe,' while including the caveat that he is emphasizing that Ricoeur's philosophical views allow for diverse theological appropriations.

⁸³ Ricoeur and LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically*.

⁸⁴ Ricoeur, 'Naming,' 217-235 and 'Herméneutique,' 27-51, esp. 35.

⁸⁵ See Long, *Art* and 'Historiography,' in: *The Face of*, 145-175, who has insightful suggestions on the importance of genre and the various methods of investigating the first Testament.

dead. Here, too, God is designated by the transcendence of the founding events in relation to the ordinary course of history.

In this sense, we must say the naming of God is first of all a moment of narrative confession. God is named in 'the thing' recounted. This is counter to a certain emphasis among theologies of the word that only note word events. To the extent that the narrative genre is primary, God's imprint is in history before being in speech. Speech comes second as it confesses the trace of God in the event.⁸⁷

Ricoeur does not abandon the historical character of the Gospels. The testimony to the Resurrection,⁸⁸ for example, requires the historical status: *something happened*, which left a trace, and was recorded in the narratives as an event in time. The Gospel writers' interpretations concern that *which actually happened*.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ricoeur, 'Naming,' 217-235, esp., 224.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 225, (emphasis his).

⁸⁸ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 457-480, shows the devastating result of the death of metanarratives is the metanarrative of death. He argues that for Heidegger the future is under the sign of *being towards death*, and as such the indefinite time of nature and history are subsumed to mortal finitude. In contrast, Ricoeur contends that death is an interruption and proposes *being towards life* as the desire to be (to live) and the power to act, which gives the historian a remembering voice in time. See also, 604-656, where Ricoeur has a detailed discussion of the notions of love, pardon, memory, and gift frequently connected to the two Testaments.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur, 'Reply,' *Essays*, 43-44. At this juncture, 1979-1980, Ricoeur is wrestling with the question of whether testimony can preserve the connection between sense and referent. It would appear, from his more recent work in *La Mémoire* and 'Philosophies,' the response would be yes. See also Vanhoozer, *Biblical*, 140-141 and 275-289; Fodor, *Christian*, 226-289; Stiver, *Theology*, 123-124 and 188-250; Laughery, *Living*, 105-148 and 151-162 for more extensive development of this question.

The witness is a witness to things that have happened. We can think of the case of recording Christian preaching in the categories of the story, as narration about things said and done by Jesus of Nazareth, as proceeding from this intention of binding confession-testimony to narration-testimony.⁹⁰

Numerous testimonies in the biblical text are not merely text, but they represent, stand for, are a trace of God's activity in time in the real world.⁹¹ Ricoeur has argued that the mark or trace of God in history is prior to it being recounted in a narrative.⁹² Biblical historical narrative aims to be a representation of what is behind the text. Ricoeur also draws from the prophetic tradition in addition to the gospel narratives for a notion of testimony. Historical occurrences of God's action have taken place and are witnessed to by the prophets. Prophetic moments are connected to historical moments - testimony is bound to confession and narration - in a motion from first Testament prophecy to second Testament Gospel and letter.⁹³

Ricoeur points out, for example, that the christological kerygma is something 'which demands narrative.' In other words, there is something preceding that which is narrativized, something 'behind' or outside the text. Ricoeur appeals to 1 Corinthians 15:3-

⁹⁰ Ricoeur, 'Towards a Hermeneutic,' *Essays*, 134-135. Confession is central to testimony, but this is not merely a confession of faith, but also of meaning. For Ricoeur, there is the dialectic of meaning and fact and confession and narration.

⁹¹ Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 366-367. See also, Ricoeur, 'Philosophical,' in: *From Text*, 89-101. There is a coherence here on the level of general and biblical hermeneutics in that both affirm there is a behind or outside the text that must be taken into consideration in its interpretation. For a discussion of Ricoeur's views of the relation between philosophical (general) and biblical hermeneutics, see Laughery, *Living*, 43-55, and 'Language,' 171-194.

⁹² Ricoeur, 'Toward a Hermeneutic,' 73-118, esp., 79.

⁹³ Ricoeur, 'Hermeneutics,' 135-139.

8, 'that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve,' arguing that the four aorist verbs show a provocation to narration.⁹⁴

As I have already mentioned above, Ricoeur is often interpreted in a variety of ways on the question of biblical interpretation. He has explored the aesthetic narrative interests of the fictional dimension of the biblical text; however, he has also maintained an emphasis on the realism of its historical event character.⁹⁵ One finds in his work an ongoing challenge to a non-referential literary focus on biblical narrative combined with an illuminating historical interest in a representation of times past in the text.

Conclusion

We are now in a position to conclude our reflections. Ricoeur's work on general and biblical hermeneutics gives useful insights for the issues addressed in this essay. First, in contrast to a postmodern uncertainty pertaining to historical discourse and history, Ricoeur affirms there is a real history outside the text and a scientific and epistemological pretension in writing history. His notion of a critical three-fold historiographic operation is carefully crafted to include a diversity of sources, explanation and understanding and a grand narrative. Historians create and construct historical discourse as a *représentance* of something that was there in the world. The distinction between a text and a world outside

⁹⁴ Ricoeur, 'Le récit interprétative,' 17-38, esp. 20-21; 'Herméneutique,' 27-51 and 'From Proclamation ,' 501-512.

⁹⁵ Stiver, *Theology*, 196-219. See also, Vanhoozer, *Biblical*, 282, while not always sharing the view that Ricoeur does enough to distinguish history and fiction states: 'Indeed, I have already suggested that Ricoeur's own prescriptions for mediating history and fiction and preserving the realism of the event are a sufficient cure for the occasional lapses in hermeneutic equilibrium.'

the text is crucial if the discipline of history is to remain concerned with the way it once was.

Second, while Ricoeur has emphasized the literary aspect of historical discourse, he forcefully critiques a postmodern declassification of historical discourse into fictional literature. He maintains a distinction between the two on the grounds of an historical intentionality of representation that targets real people, events, and situations. Historical discourse is marked by the truth of 'représentance' which author and reader expect to be reconstructions of the past. Literary strategies and rhetorical constructs however, which attempt to function as modes of explanation, divert an interest in a knowledge of the truth of the past and are a deficient substitute for critical investigation. Furthermore, Ricoeur underscores the importance of epistemology for historical inquiry. This means that historical discourse does not create the meaning of a past occurrence through a literary endeavor, but that it is concerned with explanation and understanding based on the traces - the marks left in passing - testimonies, and documents, which are connected to a real world outside the discourse. Fictional literature bears no such burden. The discipline of history must remain attuned to the risks of a declassification of its subject matter.

Third, there is a rapport between Ricoeur's general and biblical hermeneutics, in that both argue for a real world outside the text and a distinction between historical discourse and fictional literature. Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics affirm that the Bible is concerned with historical discourse, which aims at recounting events that actually took place. This orientation points to the credibility of a biblical worldview and a theology of history: God is the Creator and Redeemer, the Great Actor of salvation in history. The drama of creation and God's saving action, make a real world and a real history possible.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ See Naugle, *Worldview*, for a thorough investigation into the subject. A biblical worldview affirms that there is a real world that is related to and distinct from the human constructions and productions of

Traces and testimonies of God's activity in the real world filter into the text as a 'représentance,' a targeted *standing for*, which militates against postmodern theories, and their tendencies to reduce the Bible to a text making history or to fictional literature lacking an extralinguistic referent behind the text. Moreover, an intertextual approach to the Bible may open the way towards the historical, theological and literary features of the message of each text in time. The variety of genres in the biblical text have the capacity to point to the living God behind the text. History, as a discipline with scientific, epistemological and literary pretensions must be aware of the problems of reductionism and be open to a consideration of theological insights that offer explanations and new understandings of the real world.

historical discourse, fiction, or language. How could there be fiction if there was no real world from which to measure and evaluate? In other words, the genre of fiction necessarily presupposes the real. On this register, the literary genre of fiction is parasitic in that it must borrow from what is not its own to exist.

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