

The Implications of New Historicism for Evangelical Bible Interpretation: An Evaluation

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Abstract

The twentieth century has seen a rise in recognizing the Bible not only as historical or theological work but also as a piece of literature, and the natural progression of this idea is to apply the same methods used for literary texts to the biblical text. However, many movements in literary studies seem antithetical to evangelical ideas of interpretation, as the goal of evangelical interpretation is always to find God's intended meaning for the text. This thesis will explore the features of one literary theory, New Historicism, as presented in *Practicing New Historicism*, and ask if this theory can be made compatible with evangelical presuppositions, or even offer any unique insights for biblical interpretation.

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Introduction

The Bible is a work of literature. This simple yet profound idea has come to dominate scholarly work on the Bible not only among liberals but even and especially among evangelical Christians who hold that the Bible is the Word of God to humanity. This is not to say that the Bible, its stories, and its truths are fictional, but rather to say that they are presented using a variety of literary genres and techniques. Leland Ryken argues that, like literature, “The Bible is an experiential book that conveys the concrete reality of human life” and “is filled with evidences of literary artistry and beauty” (30). The Bible draws on literary genres and literary language alike to convey its truths (30), and to neglect studying the Bible as literature is to ignore key aspects of its structure and history of composition. In order to understand the message God communicates through the Bible, one must understand how its message is communicated uniquely through its various generic categories.

Of course, the Bible is not only literature, as Ryken acknowledges when he says that “the literary parts [of the Bible] can and should also be approached as history and theology” (12). The biblical accounts are grounded in historical realities and contexts, and they have theological implications not only for the lives of its subjects but in our own lives as well. Ryken even argues that, in order “to recover the original, intended meaning of the biblical text,” students of the Bible “must begin with the literal meaning of the words of the Bible as determined by the historical setting in which the authors wrote,” a biblical hermeneutic known as the historical-grammatical or grammatico-historical method (12-13). This approach, perhaps the most widely used hermeneutic among evangelicals, embraces the historical nature of the Bible and requires

reading the Bible in its historical context in order to understand what God is communicating to the original audience and thus to us. Yet Ryken argues that a literary approach to the Bible is actually “a logical extension” (12) of this method. Rather than deemphasizing the necessity of studying the Bible historically, he advocates for studying the Bible as literature in addition to as history. In fact, literary analysis can actually be somewhat historical in nature, as it requires a study of historical literary genres and techniques that modern readers may be unfamiliar with. However, because the Bible displays literary characteristics, and because literature communicates its truth concretely and affectively rather than propositionally (13-15), “the methods of literary scholarship are a necessary part of any complete study of the Bible” (11). Thus, the movement among evangelical scholars like Ryken to study the Bible as literature is not rooted in an attempt to redefine the Bible as a literary rather than historical work but an attempt to better seek meaning in the text by correctly identifying and then studying the nature of the Bible as literature, among other genres.

Of course, the potential direction of this movement in biblical studies is for “biblical scholars [to turn] to the methods of literary criticism as a way of understanding and discussing the Bible” (Ryken 31). To study a work of literature, one must use literary tools, and so if the Bible is a literary work, it too must be studied using literary tools. Perhaps one of the most important uses for literary tools in biblical studies are hermeneutic in nature, for, as Ryken notes, “Literature always calls for interpretation” because “[i]t expresses its meaning by a certain indirection” (22). Because literature does not communicate propositionally but experientially, the meaning of a story or poem is not always clear, and so interpretation is needed to transform the experiential truth of literature into a meaning that can be explained clearly in words. The discipline of literary criticism essentially performs this act of interpretation on literature.

However, the twentieth century saw a massive revolution in the practice of literary criticism as scholars rethought the purpose and goals of interpretation, developing well fleshed-out theories as a result. One literary approach that rose to the forefront of literary criticism in the 1980s and has remained prevalent in recent years is New Historicism, and it would seem to have relevance to biblical studies. At the crux of New Historicism is an interdisciplinary approach that studies literature with a dual focus on its literary nature and its identity as a historical text, profoundly yet complexly tied to its cultural and historical context. With evangelicals recognizing the necessity of using literary tools in their interpretation of the Bible, and with both evangelicals and New Historicists emphasizing the dual literary and historical natures of the texts they study, one might expect New Historicism to enrich the evangelical approach to Bible interpretation. However, evangelicals have often operated in tension rather than in tandem with the ideas in literary studies on interpretive theory and practice. Nevertheless, there are rich potentials for applying New Historicism to biblical studies in spite of perceived conflicts between New Historicism and evangelical biblical interpretation. Thus, this thesis will examine the presuppositions, ideas, and practices of New Historicism, consider the differences between New Historicism and evangelical interpretation, and attempt to resolve these conflicts in order to lay out a vision for New Historicism's practical use in biblical studies.

The Rise of Literary Theory and the Evangelical Response

In order to consider New Historicism's relationship to evangelical Bible interpretation, it is necessary to understand the landscape of literary theory in general and the evangelical reaction to this discipline of study. The twentieth century saw a rise among literary scholars who sought to examine the theoretical underpinnings of the act of interpretation, leading to an explosion of new theories and approaches to literary interpretation. One literary approach that rose to the

forefront of literary criticism in the 1980s and has remained prevalent in recent years is New Historicism, and it would seem to have relevance to biblical studies. At the crux of New Historicism is an interdisciplinary approach that studies literature with a dual focus on its literary nature and its identity as a historical text, profoundly yet complexly tied to its cultural and historical context. With evangelicals recognizing the necessity of using literary tools in their interpretation of the Bible, and with both evangelicals and New Historicists emphasizing the dual literary and historical natures of the texts they study, one might expect New Historicism to enrich the evangelical approach to Bible interpretation. However, evangelicals have often operated in tension rather than in tandem with the ideas in literary studies on interpretive theory and practice. While this may seem antithetical to the newfound evangelical interest in using literary methods in their study of the Bible, understanding the development of interpretive theories in literary studies makes sense of this suspicion and pushback.

The shift in interpretive methods in literary criticism began in the early twentieth century with the rise of New Criticism, a literary movement that rejected traditional methods of studying literature through the lens of historical background that sought to find the author's meaning in his work. Instead, the New Critics "argued that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (Wimsatt 468). Rather, they viewed the literary text as autonomous and as the source of its own meaning—in other words, by carefully examining the literary text, the reader discovers the meaning that is contained within the text, without recourse to the author. This was a dramatic turn from previous literary methods that focused on the author as the exclusive source of meaning.

In reaction to New Criticism, a new approach to literature called reader-response criticism developed, which placed emphasis on neither the author nor the text but on the reader

in establishing meaning. Some reader-response critics argue that it is the interpretive strategies employed by readers that give texts their meanings, and that communities of people form “interpretive communities” that all employ the same methods, which is why a given group of people interpret the same work similarly, and why other groups may interpret it in radically different ways (Fish 482-485). More moderate reader-response critics, such as Wolfgang Iser, argue not that the reader is the sole arbiter of meaning, but rather that the reader and the text interact in transactional ways to create meaning together.

Next, literary theorists began applying linguistic theories to literary criticism, resulting in the development of theories like structuralism. Eventually, however, thinkers like Derrida began to question language’s stability in communicating meaning, instead arguing that language is continually evolving and thus unstable. Not only is language unstable, but it constructs reality rather than merely describing it, making what humans conceive of as reality in a constant state of flux (1967). Derrida’s ideas were applied to literature in his theory of deconstruction, which closely examined the text for inconsistencies in language to break down and demystify traditional interpretations of texts. In addition to theories like New Criticism, reader-response, and deconstruction are theories with clear ideological bent like feminist and Marxist criticism, as well as New Historicism, which combines historical-cultural studies and literature with ideas about culture and power structures that are closely allied with the premises of postmodernism.

Despite the variety of literary approaches to interpretation and meaning, all these developments in literary theory have clearly operated to destabilize the idea that a text’s meaning derives exclusively from the intent of the author or that there is a knowable meaning to a text at all. Of course, this would seem antithetical to evangelical goals in interpretation, which reads the Bible in order to hear God’s authorial voice clearly in the text. Many evangelicals recognize the

influence of literary theory in biblical interpretation, and in their discussions, there is a consistent acknowledgement of the problems caused by these theories, as well as a grappling with how to make them compatible with evangelical goals of seeking God's meaning in the text. For example, Vanhoozer seriously charges "Derrida's deconstruction of the author" as "a more or less direct consequence of Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God" (48). Vanhoozer then spends the fifth chapter of his book attempting to "resurrect the author." Thus, for Vanhoozer, the removal of authorial intent from modern literary theory is a threat to evangelical Christianity in that, without authorial intent, there can be no way to access God's communication to humanity, leaving evangelicals foundationless.

Similarly, Duvall and Hays address the implications of literary theory on biblical interpretation but then conclude that interpreters must "seek to discover the meaning that has been placed there by the author" (195), demonstrating the conflict they perceive between insights of literary theory and the goals of evangelical Bible interpretation. Osborne also acknowledges the problem that literary theory and the death of authorial intent creates for evangelicals. On the one hand, he says that reader-response theories challenge the goal of understanding the text's independent meaning. At the same time, he believes these challenges are valid, as all readers do indeed bring their own understandings to the text and can thus impose their own meaning on the text. Throughout the remaining chapter, Osborne adopts a mediating position in which he affirms some aspects of reader-response approaches to the Bible while supporting the author as the source of meaning and integrating the reader and author together, demonstrating that he still believes there must be some role for the author in order for evangelicals to access God's message.

Given the goals of evangelical interpretation, it is no wonder that so many find many contemporary theories problematic, and one should expect that New Historicism, another literary school that has developed in the wake of these movements, would appear just as problematic to evangelicals. New Historicism presupposes materialism, deprioritizes authorial intent, rejects metanarrative, and, similar to deconstruction, actively looks for contradictions in texts. Yet the problem remains that, in order to interpret the Bible literarily, it is necessary to use literary tools of interpretation. At the same time, New Historicism offers a tempting interdisciplinary approach, one that draws on the tools of both historical and literary analysis, and that would seem to be helpful given the Bible's own dual historical and literary nature.

Should evangelicals consider New Historicism at odds with their own goals in interpreting the Bible, as they often do with other literary movements? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider the ideas and practices of New Historicism and to examine the presuppositions of both evangelicals and New Historicists regarding literature and interpretation. To do so, we will examine the text *Practicing New Historicism* by giants of the New Historicist movement, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, and then compare their ideas and practices to those of evangelicals in order to consider their compatibility.

Practicing New Historicism: Summary

Gallagher and Greenblatt were among the pioneers of New Historicism, which came to dominate literary criticism at the end of the twentieth century and still influences literary studies today. With its popularity came the need to elaborate on the underlying assumptions and methods of New Historicism, and so Gallagher and Greenblatt composed *Practicing New Historicism*, as they explain in the introduction. However, immediately the authors explain their

problem in clearly outlining the shape of New Historicism: “above all . . . [New Historicism] resisted systematization” in that “[they] had never formulated a set of theoretical propositions or articulated a program; [they] had not drawn up for [themselves], let alone for anyone else, a sequence of questions that always needed to be posed when encountering a work of literature in order to construct a new historicist reading” (1). Indeed, here the authors not only express the problem they encountered when setting out on the project of *Practicing New Historicism*, but also articulate what later will become a defining characteristic of New Historicism, an inability to be categorized. Gallagher and Greenblatt explain their rationale in this endeavor by saying, “We doubt that it is possible to construct such a system independent of our own time and place and of the particular objects by which we are interested, and we doubt too that any powerful work we might do would begin with such an attempt” (2). Thus, the difficulty Gallagher and Greenblatt encounter in defining New Historicism is not, in their view, a downside of New Historicism but is actually a positive development that makes New Historicism unique among other schools of criticism.

The authors then, in New Historicist fashion, tell the story of how their ideas about literature, culture, and history developed, beginning with a group of friends that met to discuss a wide variety of intellectual questions and that eventually sparked the creation of the journal *Representations*. This narrative of the development of their thoughts helps clarify the central tenets of New Historicism and how they relate to each other. One of the most basic assumptions to their approach to literature in particular is that works of literature, in contrast to the assertions of New Critics, are indeed influenced by their culture and history. Rather than a transcendent work that operates outside its cultural milieu, literary texts cannot be removed from their

contexts; as Gallagher and Greenblatt note, “The writers we love did not spring up from nowhere and . . . their achievements must draw upon a whole life-world . . . this life-world has undoubtedly left other traces of itself” (13). In making this assertion, they are careful to note that their “project has never been about diminishing or belittling the power of artistic representations” (9). In other words, they do not emphasize the cultural embeddedness of texts in order to attack the significance of literary works of art or the awe they are capable of inspiring in those who enjoy them. However, they further add that they “never believe that [an] appreciation of this power necessitates either ignoring the cultural matrix out of which the representations emerge or uncritically endorsing the fantasies that the representations articulate” (9). In saying so, Gallagher and Greenblatt acknowledge the uniqueness of texts while also emphasizing the importance of understanding their cultural context and not taking these works to embody universal experience or even prescribe for the reader the way things should be. Texts are not autonomous, and they are not infallible.

Before New Criticism, literary critics had studied the history and culture of a text in understanding the meaning of the text; New Historicists, on the other hand, part company with such critics in their understanding of history itself. The foundation for all their assumptions about history is a view that “[t]here is no longer a unitary story, a supreme model of human perfection, that can be securely located in a particular site” (5). Instead, Gallagher and Greenblatt see human experience as incredibly diverse, as underscored in the everyday experience of living people: “Do we not have overwhelming evidence, in our own time and in every period we study, of an odd interlaying of cultural perspectives and a mixing of peoples, so that nothing is ever truly complete or unitary?” (7). As they deconstruct a sense of shared unity and universality to history,

they instead prioritize “fascination with the particular, the wide-ranging curiosity, the refusal of universal aesthetic norms, and the resistance to formulating an overarching theoretical program” (6). Related to this emphasis on the diversity of human experience represented by history is a view of culture itself as a kind of text, open to interpretation and to inspiring the same kind of awe and wonder as a literary text. Historians’ attempt to create a unifying narrative of history, a concept rejected by New Historicists, is in fact an interpretation of history. Yet always this kind of interpretation that emphasizes the universality of a given time period ignores the particular—the exceptions and instances of dissent to that narrative. New Historicists, instead, actively look for these exceptions, these particulars that fall outside of the norm, in their interpretations of history and culture. In addition, the view of culture itself as a text opens up a wide variety of artifacts available to interpret, rather than just what has been considered high art and worthy of study in the past.

Combining this approach to history with a dedication to the cultural embeddedness of texts leads to a unique approach to literary texts, one that is distinctively New Historicist. In studying literary works, New Historicists look for how a text has been formed by its culture and its historical moment, but it also looks for those instances of particularity and of dissension: “we seek to place an emphasis on the tension between certain artifacts . . . and their cultures. That is, our work has always been about resistance as well as replication, friction as well as assimilation, subversion as well as orthodoxy” (16). In the moments of conformity to cultural narratives as a whole, literature reflects its context, yet these moments of dissent become crucial moments in which literary texts also help shape the text of the culture as well. Studying works of art, then, enrich one’s understanding of the unities and tensions in a given culture. In this way, New

Historicism is also attempting to “deepen our sense of both the invisible cohesion and the half-realized conflicts in specific cultures by broadening our view of their significant artifacts” (14). Thus, New Historicism becomes about studying how the cultural text shapes the literary text as well as how the literary text shapes the cultural text. It furthermore examines not only the sense of unity in these texts but also the conflicts under the surface in these texts. With this overview of New Historical ideas, the authors then spend the rest of the book detailing their ideas. Because the final four chapters offer an illustration of New Historical practice in relation to various non-biblical texts, we will limit our discussion to the first two chapters of the book for the sake of relevancy to the current topic.

The first chapter of the book, entitled “The Touch of the Real,” introduces New Historicism’s primary goal in interpretation: to interpret both literary texts and culture in light of each other. In these aims, the New Historicists were most influenced by Clifford Geertz and Erich Auerbach. Geertz mainly affected New Historicism through his conception of “thick description,” which Gallagher and Greenblatt describe as “an account of the intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions their meanings” (23). In studying actions or objects, Geertz finds a significance that goes beyond the object or action itself and that stems from the cultural context surrounding it, and he indicated that literary “interpretive strategies provided key means for understanding the complex symbolic systems and life patterns that anthropologists studied” (21). In this way culture becomes “itself an ‘acted document’” (27). Geertz’s application of literary tools and studies to anthropology inspired New Historicists to apply cultural and historical insights to their own work on literature, as well as to expand their understanding of what constituted texts and literature. They wanted to study works

that normally had been excluded from the literary canon in concert with other, more traditional works of literature and study how they simultaneously were affected by and affected in turn their cultural and historical context. Their ultimate goal, then, became to “put literature and literary criticism in touch with that elsewhere” (28) and to “[make] the literary and nonliterary seem to be each other’s thick description” (31). New Historicists sought to interpret literature through the lens of historical culture, and by doing so they then sought to interpret culture itself as text.

To accomplish this goal, New Historicists turned to the anecdote. For New Historicists, “that both the literary work and the anthropological (or historical) anecdote are texts, that both are fictions in the sense of things made, that both are shaped by the imagination and by the available resources of narration and description helped make it possible to conjoin them” (31). Using anecdote, then, could become the method through which New Historicists would join the text of culture and the literary text. Geertz used anecdote in his own historical writing, but to truly find a method for their goals, the New Historicists drew on the ideas of Auerbach, who applied a consistent close analysis of a small piece of literary text to reveal the history and culture surrounding the work it came from. This method had a dual effect: “the isolation of a resonant textual fragment . . . revealed, under the pressure of analysis, to represent the work from which it is drawn and the particular culture in which that work was produced and consumed,” but “that culture in turn renders the fragment explicable, both as something that could have only been written in a moment characterized by a particular set of circumstances, structures, and assumptions and as something that conveys the life-world of that moment” (35). Auerbach was interested in the anecdote’s ability to represent the essence of a culture in microcosm and thus to help the reader to glimpse an entire world lost to the past. Thus, Auerbach’s method was two-

fold: it used the text to reveal the culture it was written in, and it used the culture in which the text was embedded to better understand the text. Yet, while Auerbach used anecdotes from literary texts, the New Historicist desire to expand beyond the literary canon led them to turn to the use of historical anecdote and noncanonical anecdote instead.

The New Historicists, then, drew on the ideas of Geertz and Auerbach to develop a unique understanding of representation. History and culture themselves become representations, ones that can be studied by literary critics. Literary works too become part of this representation known as culture, as they themselves represent the cultural texts in which they are a part of. With this conception of what a literary text is and how it interacts with its context, New Historicists sought a method that put literature in touch with the reality that so fascinated them. They found such practices in Geertz's historical anecdote and Auerbach's use of very short passages from literary works. New Historicists developed a form of analysis that paired historical or noncanonical anecdotes with passages from a major work of literature that sought to disclose complex historical-cultural worlds as they entered into dialogue with one another, thereby giving literature "the touch of the real." This foundation laid the groundwork for the interests and practices of New Historicists. However, a conception of the nature of this culture and history still needs to be developed, as how one conceives of history affects its interpretations. The authors explore those thinkers who most influenced their conceptions of history in the following chapter.

Chapter Two, "Counterhistory and the Anecdote," connects the anecdotal method developed in Chapter One with the New Historicist conception of history. While traditional conceptions of history generally discouraged the use of anecdotes in historical analysis because they interrupt "comprehensive historical narratives" and because "any *petit récit* would puncture

the historical *grand récit* into which it was inserted” (49), New Historicists sought to “interrupt the Big Stories” along with “the disruption of history as usual” (51). While traditional historians have viewed history as a unified narrative, a “Big Story” or “*grand récit*,” New Historicists see history not as an overarching story but as a series of “outlandish and irregular” stories with “seemingly ephemeral details, overlooked anomalies, and suppressed anachronisms” that contain “a vehement and cryptic particularity” (51). This view of history as a series of events that disrupt the overarching historical narrative told by many historians is what New Historicists call “counterhistories.” The anecdote, then, is representative of the New Historicist understanding of history, as it tells a brief, self-contained story of something so real and particular that doesn’t necessarily fit the overall historical narrative.

The New Historicists applied this understanding of counterhistories through anecdotes to their understanding of literature. While past use of history in literary interpretation “create[ed] embrasures for holding texts inside of established accounts of change and continuity” (52), the New Historicist application of anecdote and counterhistory “would cease to be a way of stabilizing texts” when applied to literature but “would instead become part of their enigmatic being” (51). The goal of applying history to literature was not to make sense of literature but rather to bring the instability of both history and literature in conversation with each other and in some way to make them one. As Gallagher and Greenblatt say, “Perhaps texts would even shed their singular categorical identities, their division into ‘literary’ and ‘historical’” (51). Literature becomes an account of the warring histories of real life that in turn shape the histories that then develop.

New Historicists' understanding of history was largely shaped by the work of Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault. Williams had the most profound impact on New Historicism, for he applied these understandings of counterhistory directly to literature. Williams did not look for traditional historical narratives in literary texts, nor did he look for alternative but equally "seamless, coherent, and articulable worldview[s]" in texts (62). Instead, he looked for hints of resistance to overarching structures and worldviews that never went fully expressed or that had even been repressed, "reading literature as the history of what hadn't quite been said" (62). He also conceived of literature as a place "where 'hegemony' collided with what he called 'experience,'" thus "turn[ing] literature itself into a form of counterhistory" (62). For Williams, "The study of literature, therefore, allows us to extrapolate the unthought, the unfelt, from the tensions in the constraining structures of feeling" (64). The New Historicists adopted Williams' understanding of history—or, rather, counterhistory—and literature in their own interpretations. Similarly, Foucault conceived of anecdotes as the "residues of the struggle between unruly persons and the power that would subjugate or expel them" (68). Thompson brought a focus on the subjectivity of the historian, the competition of voices speaking to communicate their own perception of history, and the use of history to advocate for those who have been traditionally suppressed. Influenced by these major thinkers, New Historicism developed its central tenets: history as counterhistory, anecdotes as a major key to unlocking the struggle present in history, and literature as the ground where these subconscious struggles could play out beneath the surface.

New Historicist counterhistories, while undermining traditional views of the past, are not intended to do away with history or knowledge of history. Gallagher and Greenblatt write, "[W]e

used anecdotes instead to chip away at the familiar edifices and make plastered-over cracks appear. However, because we also hoped to learn something about the past, the cracks themselves were taken to be recovered matter” (52). New Historicists do not tear down historical interpretation but rather seek a richer, more complex interpretation, one that takes into account those stories and individuals who do not fit into the traditional narrative. Furthermore, New Historicists do not take their own interpretations as conclusive: “New historicist anecdotes might . . . provoke new explanations, but these were not taken to be exclusive, uniform, or inevitable” (52). Thus, while New Historicists question traditional interpretations of history, they are not against questioning even their own interpretations and do not try to set up their counterhistories as new, overarching historical narratives.

Thus, the New Historical enterprise was born. The New Historicists viewed texts as a place where many contradictory structures, powers, and ideologies meet and interact beneath the surface, which both reflect and inform their own cultural milieu. New Historicists used historical and literary anecdotes to access this counterhistory, creating a richer understanding of the complexities of human occurrences—and ~~in~~ human artistic creations—throughout history. In this way, New Historicists truly found in literary texts “the touch of the real” (74).

Evaluation: Applying New Historicism to the Bible as Evangelicals

With a richer understanding of what New Historicism is, we can now proceed to ask the question of its relevance to biblical studies and particularly to evangelicals who view the Bible as God’s definitive act of communication to humanity. New Historicism has become a *de rigueur* way of studying literary texts, giving it an automatic relevance to biblical studies when we

understand the Bible as literature. In addition, the historical dimension it brings to literary studies is compatible with the Bible as a work of history as well as a work of literature. Finally, there have already been studies on the Bible conducted through a New Historicist framework, giving the question a time-sensitive importance. The appropriateness of New Historicist work on the Bible is not a hypothetical but an existing situation that evangelicals must consider.

While there are clear points of contact between New Historicism and biblical studies, there are also strong deviations in the presuppositions of evangelical biblical interpretation and New Historicism that evangelicals may find hard to reconcile. In order to answer the question of whether New Historicism can in good conscience be applied by evangelicals to traditional biblical interpretation, it is necessary to understand differences between these hermeneutical approaches and ask if they can be made compatible with evangelical presuppositions.

Of course, the most obvious presuppositional difference between evangelical and New Historicist interpretation is their opposed understandings of the nature of the text. Evangelicals assume that the Bible is more than a material document: it is a document directed and inspired by God even as it was composed throughout history and cultures by many different human beings, and thus it has a divine, transcendent, spiritual origin. New Historicists would dismiss this notion out of hand, assuming that the biblical text is solely material. Given their assumption regarding the materiality of all texts, New Historicists have different goals in interpreting than do evangelicals. An evangelical believes that God communicates a divine message through the Bible, and so she seeks to understand the author's meaning when she comes to the biblical text. In contrast, New Historicists approach literary texts—and the Bible by extension—not seeking the author's intent but rather desiring a better understanding of the powerful forces at work in

history and culture that manifest themselves indirectly in the text, whether or not the author intended their presence. Gallagher and Greenblatt explain this when they say, “To be sure, we could continue to acknowledge the special character of each author, and yet the individual author’s achievement seemed less monumental, less unique, precisely to the extent that this achievement led to the uncovering of a dense textual and material field” (46). In this way, New Historicism and evangelical interpretation have separate motivations and goals driving their interpretations.

New Historicist interpretations of the Bible that have already been performed attest to the this rejection of authorial intent, which comes from focusing solely on the materiality of the text. For example, Yvonne Sherwood’s “Rocking the Boat: Jonah and the New Historicism” studies the various interpretations of the book of Jonah made over the past few centuries and how the foci of these sermons and commentaries were shaped by their cultural context. Rather than interpreting the book itself and trying to find God’s communication to humanity, she discusses how “the Bible negotiates its position in society by internalizing and transforming anxieties, and giving back to society an idealized picture of itself” (398). While having different interests of study does not delegitimize her approach, her goals in interpretation do differ strongly from those of evangelicals. Harold C. Washington’s “Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach” also makes no mention of authorial intent in his analysis. He argues that the Hebrew Bible consistently uses masculine language in its discussion of violence, making the female the subjugated victim of violence and the male the regular practitioner of violence. In this way, Washington focuses instead on how the text reinforces a cultural construction of gender, choosing to focus on history and culture rather than authorial

intent. Furthermore, he connects this gendering of violence to today's world, following Sherwood's example in connecting texts and their histories to the present time. Clearly both studies have a materialistic conception of the world and consequently de-emphasize authorial intent in favor of other considerations.

Similarly, Robert Carroll discusses the "empty land myth" in the Old Testament, in which biblical discussions of the Babylonian takeover and exile of Israel are conducted as if the land were completely emptied of people. Carroll's discussion makes no mention of what a Divine Author may have intended to communicate in this passage. Instead, he asks how such a myth—which he believes is factually inaccurate—promotes pro-Babylonian politics while excluding Egyptian or Palestinian Jews, and he also considers how the myths make possible the return of the Jews to Palestine, since there are presumably no other people there. Additionally, he believes this myth still informs modern politics in the discussion in Israeli-Palestinian debates and foreign policy (309). This New Historicist framing makes no mention of divine authorial intent. While it does consider human authors' intent, it does so only to the extent that the author both reflects and contributes to political and historical movements of the time. In placing emphasis on politics, Carroll indirectly places the materialistic world above a spiritual one.

In addition, in his chapter on New Historicism and postmodernism in biblical scholarship, Carroll also discusses works that, while not calling themselves New Historicist, can be flagged as such. Among them, Carroll includes many works that are part of a movement that sets out to find "the histories of ancient Israel," many of which read "the biblical narratives . . . as textual productions of a period much later than normally claimed for them" and as "a product from the Persian, or more especially, the Greek period than from the earlier Assyrian or Babylonian

periods” (54). Like Carroll’s own work, these studies do not concern themselves with authorial intent but examine how these biblical accounts were created by political ideology and then in turn how they informed later political developments. No Divine Author is considered, and the question of any author is dismissed in favor of examining the conflicting historical and political implications of the work.

Yet understanding a fundamental similarity between New Historicism and evangelical interpretation may provide a way for some part of New Historicism to be leveraged for biblical interpretation, in spite of the obvious conflict regarding the centrality of authorial intent and the divine nature of Scripture. While affirming that the Bible is divine and has a divine message that can be accessed, evangelicals also affirm the materiality of the text. Evangelicals emphasize that the Bible was composed by human authors in human cultures and times. Moreover, its contents were written in response to specific, historically-bound circumstances. We see this emphasis especially in those who hold to the historical-grammatical hermeneutical method, which “is a method of biblical interpretation that uses the tools of historical and grammatical research to discover the meaning of a biblical text” (Odor 26). *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* acknowledges that the historical-grammatical method is the most prevalent method among evangelicals (21). Those who practice a historical-grammatical hermeneutic hold to “the concept that the Bible is historical in nature: it is a text written in a particular time and place with a particular historical audience in mind” (Odor 27). Similarly, Duvall and Hays note, “God . . . spoke through the human writers of Scripture . . . to address the real-life needs of people at a particular time in a particular culture. This is how God chose to speak” (116) and, “Since God spoke his message in specific, historical situations . . . we should take the ancient historical

situation seriously” (116-117). Thus, those who practice the historical-grammatical method, including many evangelicals, certainly affirm the historical nature of the Bible and even believe it is a necessity to view the Bible in this way. Of course, these evangelicals who practice grammatical-historical method also believe that the Bible is God’s communication to us and in some way transcends our material world. In this way, the Bible has a dual nature, but its historical, material nature allows and even requires it to be interpreted in light of, and with methods related to, this nature.

Evangelicals believe in using history to interpret God’s Word, which potentially opens up a way to use New Historicism in biblical studies. Perhaps a renewed emphasis on history can help evangelicals better discern God’s meaning. Evangelicals point out that understanding the context of what was happening in events recorded in biblical texts as well as comprehending the importance of critical cultural practices can help readers better understand God’s Word and the message God intended to communicate. New Historicism seeks to offer a richer understanding of all the complexities of history and culture, and employing such insights could better inform evangelical interpretations and help them arrive at the divine meaning of the text as communicated through material means. Of course, this will make it not an entirely New Historicist reading, as New Historicism would assume only the materiality of a text and would not apply their methods towards discerning authorial intent. Yet it would be a method of taking the positive potential of New Historicism and applying it to traditional biblical interpretation. However, the question then becomes: can evangelicals accept a New Historicist conception of history? If not, then it cannot be applied to evangelical interpretation.

Perhaps the greatest thing we can say about the New Historicist conception of history is that they do not have a conception of history at all, but rather, of *histories*. They are interested in taking down what they call the *grand reits*, “the Big Stories,” and dealing with counterhistories instead. In the introduction to *Marvelous Possessions*, Greenblatt defines the *grand reits* as “totalizing, integrated, progressive history, a history that knows where it is going” (2). New Historicists question this conception of history, and so they look for evidence of struggle, of difference, of stories that have gone unheard in their studies, and they look to literary texts as evidence and even participants in these struggles. In this way, New Historicism aligns itself with postmodern thought in general, which Lyotard defines as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (qtd. in Smith 63). Again, an interpretation that does not deal with such questions would not be a New Historicist reading. Yet Christianity seems to be the greatest *grand reit* of all. After all, God is the God of history, and what He says about history must be true. The Bible is a story that evangelicals believe makes sense of all human experience. It would seem, then, that New Historicist and evangelical conceptions of history conflict, and that applying New Historicist methods to the aim of understanding God’s intent would be incompatible as a result. After all, New Historicist assumptions would seemingly reject the very interpretations that led to this kind of theology.

Yet James K. A. Smith argues that the postmodern disenchantment with these metanarratives is actually not anti-Christian but instead is something with which Christians should ally themselves. In making this argument, Smith shows that what people usually define as a metanarrative is not what Lyotard and other postmodernists define as metanarratives. Metanarratives are not merely “big stories . . . that tell an overarching tale about the world” (64), but are rather “a distinctly modern phenomenon” that “not only tell a grand story . . . but also

claim to be able to legitimate or prove the story's claim by an appeal to universal reason" (65). However, the problem postmodernists find in this appeal to reason to legitimate a narrative is that this commitment to reason is itself grounded in a narrative: "The appeal to reason as the criterion for what constitutes knowledge is but one more language game among many, shaped by founding beliefs or commitments that determine what constitutes knowledge within the game; reason is grounded in myth" (68). Thus, when postmodernists say they are suspicious toward metanarratives, they mean that stories that ground themselves in reason are themselves just stories and do not have the right to claim universal truth. Rather, like all claims to knowledge, they are grounded in an interested and highly motivated narrative. Interestingly, Smith also notes that "the postmodern critique is not aimed at metanarratives because they are really grounded in narratives; on the contrary, the problem with metanarratives is that they do not own up to their own mythic ground" (69). Postmodernists in this way do not ask that the belief systems and stories told ground themselves in something other than narratives, but that they openly acknowledge the narrative in which they are grounded.

The New Historicist enterprise clearly parallels Smith's assessment of the general attitude of postmodernism toward narratives. This is seen in their discussion of the anecdote: "the miniature completeness of the anecdote necessarily interrupts the continuous flow of larger histories; at the anecdote's rim, one encounters a difference in the texture of the narrative, an interruption that lets one sense that there is something—the 'real'—outside of the historical narrative" (Gallagher 50). History as traditionally taught claims to tell what has happened in the past, and it often tells this story in a chain of cause and effect events that functions as a narrative. However, Gallagher and Greenblatt argue that the anecdote gives evidence of an event that falls

outside this narrative, in part because its “completeness” does not require it to align with this chain of events. In this way, the anecdote “divulges a different reality, which is behind or beside the narrative surface and composed of things that historians cannot assimilate into typicality or coherent significance” (51). Graham and Moore perhaps explain this idea more clearly when they say that New Historicists “create meticulously staged ‘coincidences,’ ‘impossible’ linkages, startling juxtapositions, and other contingent connections that bypass the causal models of explanation that undergird traditional historical narratives” (445). The goal of anecdotes used by New Historicism is to overcome the traditional understanding of historical narrative that relates events in terms of cause and effect, a practice ultimately founded in the rational method of Enlightenment thinking. Traditional historians tell a story of how history happened, and like all modernists, they appeal to reason to show that their narrative account of history is an accurate representation of reality. Yet the anecdote resists being fit into this narrative, demonstrating that the metanarrative of history is just one narrative among many that could be told.

Thus, evangelical Christians need not look at the New Historicist enterprise of interrupting metanarratives or “Big Stories” with interpretations that explicitly look for counterhistories as antithetical to the Christian faith. In fact, the Christian narrative itself does not claim to ground itself in reason but in faith, giving Christians and postmodern schools like New Historicism common ground. So an attempt to exchange metanarratives for counterhistories in their literary pursuits is not an anti-Christian endeavor. But a New Historicist interpretation of the Bible would necessarily require looking for evidence of struggle among the Bible, rather than looking for a unified narrative told by the Bible. The New Historicist would argue that there are always many narratives being told by all peoples, including those who wrote the Bible, and so a text like the Bible could be read, not as a unified narrative, but as evidence of underlying

narratives that conflict with the overarching narrative being told. Yet does this not fly in the face of evangelical interests? To connect historical-cultural tensions with tensions in the text would suggest that the events it recorded do not fit into a unified story of what God is doing in the world; furthermore, it would suggest that the authors who recorded these literary texts were not informed by one narrative—God’s narrative—but instead by many, preventing us from knowing what parts of the text draw from which narrative frameworks. In this way, a New Historical approach to the Bible would seem to undermine a doctrine of God’s plans in human history and a search for authorial intent in order to understand God’s unified, comprehensive message.

Indeed, the counterhistories identified in the New Historicist studies of the Bible referenced above do seem to conflict with evangelical goals. Even a prominent New Historian like Harold Aram Veesper seems to note this, as Gina Hens-Piazza explains. While evangelicals would probably look at the work of such biblical scholars as too radical, in her assessment of the potentials of New Historicism in biblical criticism, Piazza discusses Veesper’s reaction to work that has been done so far, including the work of Sherwood, Washington, and Carroll discussed earlier. Piazza notes that Veesper castigates the biblical scholars employing New Historicism for failing to “wrestle with . . . the uncertainty of knowledge and truth” that New Historicism must acknowledge with its postmodern bent, just as he also “challenges [these biblical scholars] to grapple with the well-hewn practice of teleological historicizing in which biblical scholarship is entrenched” (71). Thus, while evangelicals would presumably find the New Historicist examples above too radical, Veesper asserts that they are not radical enough for the label of New Historicism. Such comments from a prominent New Historicism surely have the potential to discourage evangelical use of New Historicism.

Yet perhaps the main problem with New Historicism for evangelicalism is not its plurality but its irresolution. As Smith showed, Christians can acknowledge comfortably the diversity of histories and counterhistories upon which New Historicists insist. God works in different ways at different times through different people, as Scripture itself testifies, and His work is not limited but is present in all the multiplicity of human experience. However, while New Historicism recognizes the plurality of narratives, of histories and counterhistories, they cannot move beyond that to a narrative that resolves these tensions while acknowledging and validating many different histories. Christians, though, can also assert that God places all these narratives and histories under His own standard. While He works in diversity, He uses it all to for the same redemptive purpose. It is not a recognition of tensions and contradictions in human experience that evangelicals must take issue with but rather a belief that there is no one, unified purpose for all these many stories that God seeks to share with mankind.

Perhaps, then, evangelical scholars can, like New Historicists, seek evidence of tensions and counterhistories in biblical texts, understanding that God works in spite of and even through these pluralities, while also looking for how the text resolves them. In its discussion of postmodern theories like deconstruction, for example, *An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* says that “focusing on underlying tensions in a text may surface some part of its meaning, particularly in the more cryptic parts of Scripture—even if we might wish to go on to propose resolutions to those tensions” (76). Like deconstruction, New Historicism also focuses on tensions—these tensions, however, are tensions of alternative histories that people and texts tell. In the same way, then, applying a kind of New Historicism that looks for these kinds of tensions and then seeks to understand how God acknowledges and then resolves them could lead to a richer understanding of God’s work in human history and in the lives of the individuals whose

lives He entered. Examining more carefully Washington's study on gender and violence may illustrate the benefits of appropriating aspects of New Historical insights for evangelical goals of interpretation without adopting their overarching presuppositional framework.

Washington's study on violence and gender argues that in the Old Testament, language of violence is gendered and language of gender is violent, ultimately promoting a rape culture and constructing gender in a problematic way that still affects the Western world today and needs to be rectified. Violence becomes a defining feature of men, while subjugation and victimhood become a defining feature of women. Ultimately, this connection of violence with masculinity legitimates male acts of violence against actual female subjects, whether on the battlefield or in the home, and creates a perception of women as the sexual possessions of the men in their lives. His interpretation subverts an understanding of these texts as promoting peace and mercy toward women compared to other cultures of the time. Of course, most evangelicals today would feel discomfort in arguing that God would actively promote a society that not only objectified but violently violated women in this way, and placing the focus on this issue seems to distract from the goal of understanding the message of a passage as a whole. Evangelicals would struggle to understand how a loving God could promote violence, define men in relation to violence, and permit the abuse of women.

However, perhaps with some reframing of this study, Washington's work can still be harnessed in an effort to better understand God's intent in His Word. First, one must examine if Washington's work really fits under the category of New Historicism. Though his interpretation qualifies as a radical rejection of traditional orthodoxy and certainly of evangelical attitudes toward the past, liberal interpretations in the end are not what makes New Historicism what it is. New Historicism is defined by its emphasis on unresolved tensions in the text, and Washington

does not examine the biblical books of Deuteronomy and Numbers for examples of contested ground, of places where gender is constructed in contradictory ways or for evidence of conflicting ideas. Instead, he undermines a traditional understanding of the biblical narrative to instead create a new understanding of the violence of Israelite understandings of masculinity. Perhaps Washington's work is a counterhistory that pushes back against traditional interpretations of passages in Numbers and Deuteronomy, but he does not offer examples of counterhistory within the biblical text. He ultimately argues for a unified narrative of violence associated with masculinity that promotes sexual violence and legitimates female victimization, rather than a culture in flux. This new history actually does not fit with New Historicist presuppositions, because he argues that even those texts that seem to subvert such violent masculinity ultimately uphold it. In this way, Washington's interpretation seems to be feminist rather than New Historicist, at least in the terms articulated by Gallagher and Greenblatt.

Interestingly, perhaps Gallagher and Greenblatt's use of anecdote could actually demonstrate real examples of counterhistory and tension in the Old Testament narrative. Perhaps the most obvious example is the story of Rahab in Joshua. The spies' treatment of Rahab directly contradicts the Deuteronomic laws—the Israelites were to wipe out the entire land, yet they did not wipe out Rahab because she protected them, nor is there a textual indicator of the kind of forced sexual relationship Washington takes issue with in the Deuteronomic laws. Her story interrupts the narrative of the conquest of Jericho, making it a kind of anecdote in the account that fits with the New Historical conception of anecdotes supporting counterhistories. While her story still serves to reinforce the idea that the Israelites were superior to the peoples of the lands they were conquering, it still highlights a significant deviation from the norm found in Deuteronomy.

Washington himself acknowledges the presence of violent women in the book of Judges while arguing that they actually reinforce violent masculinity, but his interpretation seems to ignore key tensions in the histories of these women. For example, Washington argues that Deborah, rather than subverting the gender binary, participates in it as an “[interloper] in masculine valor” by signifying “the ultimate defeat of [the Israelite] opponents: defeat in battle by a woman” (362). Nevertheless, he ignores the overall context of Deborah’s story, for she was not only a warrior but a judge, and she did not intrude into the male world of violence but was invited by Barak. Surely Deborah’s power and respect in Israel represents more than just a humiliating defeat for Israel’s enemies in light of a culture of violent masculinity. It represents a redefining of female power, one where the woman functions not merely an object of subjugation nor as primarily a violent warrior but first and foremost as a civil leader. Her presence seems to both reinforce and subvert standards for male and female identity simultaneously, becoming the kind highly contested ground that New Historicists look for in their interpretations.

There are other examples throughout the Old Testament that seem to hint at a different conception of both male and female identity in Scripture than is discussed by Washington. While Washington’s conception of female identity is one of subjugation, examples like Ruth, Esther, Rahab, Abigail, Bathsheba when she approaches Nathan on behalf of Solomon, and even Jezebel are all examples of women who find themselves under male power but simultaneously seem to exercise some power themselves. While Washington talks about women like Jael and Delilah as femme fatales that feed into the violent masculinity construction, it seems clear that many women of the Bible do not fit squarely into a femme fatale description. Proverbs categorizes Wisdom as a woman and suggests in Proverbs 31 an image of an ideal woman who seems to take control of her own life rather than suffer under subjugation, and the female speaker in Song of

Solomon seems to take a delight in sexuality that a passive, subservient object would not be able to. God Himself refers to Himself in feminine terms in several passages in the Bible, and, interestingly enough, in Deuteronomy 32, the book on which Washington himself focuses most. Verses 11 and 12 describe God as a mother eagle, whereas in verse 18 God employs images of Himself giving birth to Israel. All of these are examples in the biblical text that do not directly subvert a violent masculinity but do seem to counter and support them simultaneously.

Maybe evangelicals would benefit, not from ignoring a New Historical biblical scholarship that highlights the presence of uncomfortable discourses in the biblical text, but from applying New Historical tools to identify conflicting discourses in the text and then asking how God may have intended to use them to communicate his overall message. After all, if God is in control of history and has direction over the text, then He can design even the cultural significations of a work to communicate His message. In light of our example, there are multitudes of ways these conflicting views of gender could be interpreted in light of authorial intent. I will only make suggestions for the purpose of this paper. First, it seems that feminine imagery of God paired with typical masculine imagery provides a vivid understanding of God's own character. The God who is a violent warrior does so out of extreme faithfulness to His people that closely aligns with other images of Him as a fiercely protective mother, giving God a much different reason for violence than the patriarchal motivations Washington finds in Israelite men. Exceptions to laws regarding foreign women, as seen in Rahab and Ruth, foreshadow redemption that is fulfilled in Christ, and understanding the cultural conflicts surrounding these situations make this reality all the more poignant. These and other possibilities could make New Historicism a fruitful tool for evangelical interpretation.

Perhaps evangelicals can accept a view of history that accounts for the richness of unconscious, contradictory discourses bubbling underneath all cultural occurrences. Maybe evangelicals can use New Historicist tools, which actively look for these places within text, and yet use them not to only understand how texts may be reflecting or shaping their culture, but to understand what God communicates through rich cultural significations. Applying New Historicist methods to the Bible could perhaps serve to deepen the historical-grammatical method evangelicals already apply to the Bible. New Historicism could open evangelicals up to historical realities they had never considered that can further expand their understanding of what God has communicated to them. There is still much work to do to clarify what such a process would look like, but it seems to be possible for the evangelical to do so in good conscience, as long as he maintains proper presuppositional and interpretational boundaries.

Conclusion

The New Historical enterprise as described in *Practicing New Historicism* is as complex and embedded in its various cultural contexts as the history and literary texts it interacts (or maybe even plays) with. Yet it always demands certain assumptions, namely the historical-cultural embeddedness of the literary text, the nature of history and culture as requiring interpretation, the power of the text to bring counterhistories to light, and the influence of culture over the interpreter as well. While these pose many challenges for evangelicals, there are also many rewards to be gained through the practice of New Historicism, if used wisely. Therefore, evangelicals should practice caution when employing New Historicism, making sure to avoid assuming only the materiality of the text, the unimportance of authorial intent, and the inability of ever reconciling tensions in texts and cultures. Instead, evangelicals can use New Historical methods to look for conflicting discourse in the biblical text while applying these tools toward

finding God's meaning and resolution in the text. By using New Historicism in this guarded way, evangelicals could find a richer understanding of God and His workings in history and in His Word through its employment. Perhaps they may even find the God of both histories and counterhistories on the other side of their interpretive attempts, "the touch of the real" God.

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