IN THE STABLE WITH THE DWARVES: TESTIMONY, INTERPRETATION, FAITH AND THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

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Introduction

The writer C.S. Lewis, near the end of the last of his children’s stories known as the Narnia Chronicles,\(^1\) pictures for us the eschatological end of everything, when the world of Narnia has been made new and the old things have passed away. Even though the new world clearly exists, there are nevertheless some—the dwarves—who refuse to acknowledge it. They have been let down earlier in the story, discovering that the god-figure whom they had been worshipping as Aslan the lion is in fact merely a donkey disguised as a lion. Having been taken in once, they are not about to be fooled a second time. Disappointment thus gives way to cynicism and self-interest; and that is why, as Aslan in reality appears, the dwarves are to be found huddled in an inward-looking group, in a stable that no longer really exists, complaining about the darkness and the smell. They are not about to be taken in again—not even by reality. And so all attempts at testimony to the reality outside the group founder on the rock of dwarvish solidarity, on the shared commitment to cynicism and scepticism. Even Aslan himself cannot shake their world-view. His low growl in their ears is interpreted simply as another attempt to trick them into faith; the glorious banquet he provides for them is experienced as animal fodder and dirty water. But in a curious way they are satisfied with their lot. “At any rate,” they remind each other, “there’s no Humbug here. We haven’t let anyone take us in. The Dwarfs are for the Dwarfs.”\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Lewis, *The Last Battle*, p. 135.
The story nicely illustrates the issues at the heart of the current debate over the Hebrew Bible and the history of Israel. For centuries the Bible has been widely held to define reality for its readers, including historical reality. It has more recently been discovered, to put this statement in its mildest form, that matters are a good deal more complex than hitherto suspected. This has led most readers of the Hebrew Bible, at least in the scholarly world (and that is all I am concerned about in this paper), to some degree of modification in their views about the relationship of the Bible to history. It has recently led significant numbers to doubt whether whole sections of the Bible give us access to history at all, and a few to the opinion that the Bible as a whole is more of an obstacle to the historian than an aid. So it is that we have journeyed from implicit trust in, to explicit distrust of, the Bible as providing access to Israel’s past. Scholars that tend towards such principled distrust are apt to perceive themselves as the champions of truth and justice over against the forces of obscurantism and oppression. Their distrust is addressed not just towards the Bible, but often towards those who differ in their attitude to and use of the Bible, who are characterised as motivated more by religious or political commitments than by the pursuit of truth and justice. In brief, like the dwarves, these scholars are against humbug—historical humbug, whether found in the Bible or among the Bible’s interpreters. They are determined not to be taken in; and so they take a maximally suspicious stance in respect of both. The dwarves are for the dwarves, and most assuredly against anyone who is not to be found in their stable.

Is this attitude of principled suspicion toward the Hebrew Bible in particular, with regard to history, justified or indeed sensible? My own view, already expressed in my 1995 *JBL* article on this topic, is that it is not at all justified or sensible. Clarifications are immediately in order at this point, given the misunderstandings that have arisen in some quarters about the argument of that essay.

*Clarifications*

I have not taken my stand against some of the more recent developments in writing on the history of Israel primarily because of my

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