WHY VIRTUAL HISTORY?
ALTERNATIVES, COUNTERFACTUALS, AND THE BIBLE

J. CHERYL EXUM

University of Sheffield

[R]ecourse to divine intervention to explain the unexpected illustrates the importance of contingency in history ...

Herbert Butterfield

Inevitability is only in retrospect ... and the inevitability of determinism is explanatory rather than predictive.

Michael Scriven

How can we ‘explain what happened and why’ if we only look at what happened and never consider the alternatives ...

Hugh Trevor-Roper

No one knows better than a biblical historian that the millennium, so anxiously awaited by so many, is a Western, Christian construct, and an inaccurate one at that, both in terms of the probable dating of the birth of Jesus and in terms of counting, for logically the millennium begins with 2001. But as we move into what much of the world is celebrating as the new millennium, the twenty-first century, it seems fitting for those of us working in a discipline whose subject is an ancient text with considerable contemporary currency to reflect on where we are at the fin de siècle and how we got that way. What if important events in ancient...

---


history had turned out differently? How different might the present century be?

Such questions are the subject of this millennial issue of *Biblical Interpretation*, an issue that marks our seventh year of publication. Although they approach the question “what if” from different angles, the sixteen essays in this volume share a commitment to the historical enterprise: they represent serious scholarly inquiry into alternative historical possibilities, not simply fiction or fantasy. Spanning more than three millennia, from the evidence of the Merneptah stele to the consequences of the Jewish War of 66-70 CE for the subsequent development of Christian thought, they give a picture of what could have been: a Solomonic empire a few decades after the “conquest”; a Philistine book of Judges celebrating Delilah’s role; a defeat of Assyria by the combined forces of Jehu and Hazael in the ninth century BCE; the survival and perhaps economic flourishing of the Northern Kingdom until the end of the Assyrian period; a Bible without the Deuteronomistic History and any deuteronomistic edition of the prophets; a Judaism confined to segregated enclaves in different countries; a failed Maccabean revolt and a different history of Jewish relations with Rome; a very different kind of Judaism with knock-on effects for the development (or not) of Christianity and Islam; a Christianity that remained part of Judaism; a Christianity without a heritage of anti-Judaism; a New Testament without Luke-Acts, or without Paul and his influence.

Some turn traditional questions around to test what passes for “fact” and “evidence” in biblical historiography: What if the exodus and conquest had really happened? At the least we would have a very different Bible. What if Merneptah’s scribes were telling the truth? The biblical historian should take seriously the possibility that they were and its implications, for the traditional assumption of a direct link between the Israel of the Merneptah stele and later Israel ignores the shifting, situational, and subjective nature of ethnicity. What if the Chronicler used the Deuteronomistic History? Posing the question this way not only illustrates the difficulty of proving literary dependence but also the fruitfulness of reformulating the traditional questions to ask how comparisons with Chronicles can help us to understand better the literary history of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Other essays use alternatives to bring to light the process by which historians reach conclusions about “what happened” and why. What if we