HISTORY AND THEOLOGY
IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Ronald E. Clements

When we endeavor to obtain some overall assessment of the impact of a historical-critical approach to the Bible upon the scientific discipline of theology, we discover that a surprisingly wide variety of attitudes and achievements is presented to us. These attitudes are neither wholly positive and reassuring in their regard for the Bible and its role in the Church, nor for the kind of contribution which such critical biblical studies can make to the discipline of theology. For approximately two hundred years we have become used to the practice of speaking of a “biblical theology” without attaining to any clear consensus concerning the aims and assumptions which such a branch of theology should adopt. In large measure, although not exclusively, the assumption has been made that such a branch of theology represents a relatively conservative and necessary expression of a traditional Christian ideal.¹ The Bible is viewed, not so much directly as a body of theological statements and truths, but rather as a rich historical compendium of “testimony” to the nature and being of God and to his revelation given to all mankind. The precise way by which this biblical testimony should then be formally analysed and set out so as to bridge the gulf between its revelatory content and the doctrines, norms, and propositions of theology has varied quite extensively among a host of different theological practitioners. At times we have been presented with a systematic approach which has brought the biblical material surprisingly close to the schematizing and systematising with which we are familiar in traditional Christian dogmatic theology. Yet at other
times we have been assured that such a systematising does so much violence to the distinctive form of the biblical testimony that we must abandon it.2

When we look in specific detail at the contents of the Bible we find that the degree to which historical and theological interests overlap varies very considerably. Issues which must necessarily lie in the very forefront of investigation from the perspective of a scientific historical enquiry may be dealt with in a very summary and restricted fashion in the Old Testament. Conversely, matters which stand prominently in the front of the biblical material, with its theological concerns, may be built up around only a very minimum of historical fact. An excellent example of this is to be seen in the way in which the Old Testament deals with the question of the origins of Israel as a nation. This has quite properly become a central question in all the research which has been devoted to the subject of the history and origins of Israel since the works of Heinrich Ewald and Julius Wellhausen. Surprisingly, it is dealt with very briefly in a single verse of the biblical book of Exodus:

"But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land (of Egypt) was filled with them."

Ex 1:73

The only comparable biblical statement of how Israel became a nation in Deut. 26:5 is equally brief and simplistic:

"A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty and populous."

Deut 26:5

Of course we cannot, and should not, deny that the Old Testament does incidentally contain a great deal of additional information relevant to the reconstruction of the social, political, and ideological factors which led to the growth and emergence of Israel as a nation. Particularly insofar as these reflect a strong religious interest and bear