

Ascriptive Realism and the Book of Daniel: Questions for Richard Briggs

Richard Briggs's paper, "A Test-Case in Ascriptive Realism: The Quest of the Historical Daniel and its Complex Relationship to the Practices of Scriptural Interpretation," shrewdly resists typical dichotomies between history and theology. Briggs declines to think of the Bible as essentially about the past, seeing it neither as a record of past events, one that is either accurate or inaccurate as such, nor as an event of past but not ongoing communication—a text that spoke but that no longer speaks in the present. As Briggs sees it, the Bible is not *in its essence* about the past, but there is still a great deal to be learned, even for the sake of an interpretation that is theologically substantive, from historical investigation of the Bible. Via his case-study of reading Daniel as an ascriptively realistic text, Briggs hopes "to illustrate the kind of framework within which we might locate the best practices for integrating historical and theological exegesis: a single practice that is irreducibly historical, irreducibly theological, and beholden to informed imaginative enquiry from a range of sub-disciplinary perspectives." This is a far more compelling goal than one sees in the all-too-common disjunctions between theology and history. Yet questions remain about how the organizing category of ascriptive realism works. There is one formal query worth asking together with a more material issue to consider.

Let us begin by registering a question about the formal aspect of ascriptive realism. What does it mean for a biblical hermeneutic to be ascriptively realistic? In very basic terms, as a form of *realism*, ascriptive realism is concerned with reality, or what actually exists; it is after something more than sheer projection of the reader's subjectivity. It does not rest satisfied with thinking about interpretation as a simple assertion of the self that is entirely aloof about correspondence to external reality and indeed to the very realities with which the text is concerned. Yet as an *ascriptive* form of realism, a reading of the Bible is an effort in

“portraying the world in a certain way.” In ascribing something to reality, the reader is thus genuinely active, not in projecting herself onto a text, but in advancing a definite take on the state of affairs that has been perceived and construed from a point of view. Briggs comments, “In the case of scripture this is of course a theological construal at least as much as any other kind.” So ascriptive realism as applied to the Bible entails, at minimum, offering a theological interpretation of aspects of the real world, where world refers to that which exists, in its transcendent and immanent dimensions, rather than just the created world as opposed to God. This is a simple initial gloss of the meaning of this key category.

The value of ascriptive realism is that it sponsors readings of the Bible on its own terms, helping readers to avoid certain blind alleys they may otherwise be tempted to travel. Briggs surveys some examples from scholarship on Daniel that illustrate how readers attempt to shoehorn this biblical text into modern historical categories where it does not fit at all well. If one fails to note the text’s ascriptive force, it is possible in theory to read Daniel as trying to provide a historical record of events in something very much like the form that a modern historian would offer. Doing so then means grappling with the lack of fit between the details contained in Daniel and the particulars of this stretch of history as modern historians can construct them using a whole variety of sources, not least those from outside of the biblical canon. But getting into this quagmire is a product of a prior mistake, failing to heed the text’s own agenda, not engaging it with reference to its own aims. Why not let the Bible speak on its own terms and do what it is trying to do? Why not apply broadly historical standards that are sensitive or responsive to the text’s purpose? The text does not need to be transposed into an interpretive idiom that is fundamentally different than this, and indeed pressing it into the framework of modern historical writing generates obvious problems very quickly—problems that are signs of antecedent interpretive decisions that deserve to be challenged. The category

of ascriptive realism is useful insofar as it helps readers to avoid going down this problematic path.

Some of the paper's explication of the theme of ascription, however, could be clarified. Briggs initially introduces the term ascription in contradistinction to description, the latter of which is associated with the modern style of historical writing. If the point of using the terminology of ascription is simply to say that none of our canonical biblical texts actually operates according to the genre conventions of modern historical writing—and that is at least part of the point—then using this language certainly has some value, along the lines indicated above. But the difference between description and ascription cannot be too stark if ascriptive realism is actually a form of realism—and Briggs insists that it is. In this connection, he notes that Hans Frei, from whom he is drawing the language, has shown that “the ascriptive and descriptive were not traditionally distinguished, which is why it is no counter-argument to Frei's thesis that one can find descriptive issues being pondered by pre-modern readers.” If the difference between description and ascription is but slight, and a distinction needs to be made carefully, what exactly is the merit of the ascriptive terminology? How is it distinctive over against description? Briggs touts the value of the language by saying, “For our present purposes, ascriptive realism in contrast to descriptive accuracy gives us the focus we need.” But why is that what is needed here? It is probably best to read Briggs as drawing in even the nuances of Frei's own exposition of the distinction between ascription and description. Frei's intent seems to be not to jettison entirely all considerations of description, but rather to highlight or underscore the primacy of ascription and the specific interpretive take that is wrapped up in it. There is here a prioritization of one

category over another, not a complete antithesis between them.¹ What Briggs is seeking to do makes most sense when it is understood as being aligned with Frei on this count.

So much for my focus on the formal element of the paper. I want to raise a second question now, this time focusing on a material contention regarding Daniel, which relates to the formal agenda of the essay. If we read Daniel on its own terms, what sort of text do we find it to be? And how might this help us to resolve questions about how to handle what seem to be discrepancies between it and what the discipline of history can establish about the events and people Daniel mentions? Briggs does not give a simple answer to the question of Daniel's genre; he rightly wants to recognize insights in a wide variety of approaches to reading it. But one way to read the text emerges as having a great deal of insight in helping us to navigate the text: that is, postcolonial theory. The text means to undermine the empire of Babylon in which Daniel is exiled. If it offers a counter-narrative to that of the empire itself, that is entirely to be expected, for it is contesting the empire's oppression. And this at least helps in grappling with tough historical issues, even if it does not tidy everything up in one fell swoop.

Yet this proposal about postcolonial theory opens up some rather large issues in connection with ascriptive realism. Assuming that we have sufficient clarity on the nature of ascriptive realism, does it really fit with ascriptive realism to take Daniel as a postcolonial text? It is genuinely illuminating, as Briggs shows through several examples, to see Daniel as pushing back against an oppressive empire. And postcolonial theory certainly contains insights, especially about the dynamics of power within interpretive operations, from which scholars of the Bible can learn a great deal. But postcolonial approaches to biblical

¹ Cf. what Frei says about the literal sense of Scripture: "The basic use of the literal sense is ascriptive rather than descriptive; it is descriptive only in a secondary way." See Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 125.

interpretation often involve saying things that do not fit in any obvious way with an ascriptively realistic framework. For instance, some postcolonial readers construe language that ostensibly refers to God to be merely a projection of human ideals, rather than a way of saying something about a divinity who has an independent existence quite apart from the highest aspirations of human creatures.² Ascriptive realism is employed by Frei as part of a hermeneutic of restoration rather than suspicion, whereby religious language can be understood on its own terms, instead of needing to be converted into something else (say, an account of humanity) in order to make sense.³ Projection is some distance from ascription. Another area where there is a lack of obvious resonance is that postcolonial readers of the Bible often challenge the prescriptive claims of Christianity, while ascriptive realism is associated with seeing the entirety of the biblical narrative as a story that can “absorb the world,” that is, one that can accommodate within its scope all other narratives or explanations of reality. According to the larger hermeneutical framework within which ascriptive realism is deployed, nothing is more definitive as an account of what is real than the broad sweep of the canonical story. The narrative is, thus, not only accepted, but it is assumed that all other claims to knowledge should in principle be seen to fit within its scope. This is not a matter of challenging Christian claims but of attempting to see all claims in the light that Scripture sheds.

² On Christology, see Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 171. More generally on postcolonial approaches to the Bible, see R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethos of Interpretation: Biblical Studies in a Postmodern and Postcolonial Context,” in *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Rodney Lawrence Petersen and Nancy M. Rourke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 211-28.

³ Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 12-13.

How do these larger trends relate to what Briggs himself argues? There is no suggestion in his paper that God-language is actually a projection of things people want to believe about themselves. Nor is his reading of Daniel tied up with repudiating any specific features of a larger Christian theological framework. But neither does he offer much by way of an account of how ascriptive realism fits with the strand of his essay that appropriates postcolonial insights for the sake of reading Daniel. He owes a significant debt to Frei for his major interpretive category for Scripture as a whole, yet he wants to apply to a particular canonical text a hermeneutic that does not chime in with this in an obvious way. There is an unresolved tension here. Presumably the working assumption is that ascriptive realism and postcolonial theory can be married to one another if only selected aspects of the latter, instead of the entire package of ideas, are appropriated. That may just work. Yet readers are bound to have lingering questions about how the appropriation works—can the ideas that are taken up actually function without the supporting ideas from the larger context?—if these concerns do not receive explicit attention. How does this hermeneutic need to be adapted to fit Daniel? This question deserves further attention.

There is a great deal of promise in thinking of the Bible, and Daniel specifically, via the category of ascriptive realism. Yet queries remain. If what Briggs means with this terminology is closely aligned with the way Frei frames the matter, then the most important question has to do with the aspects of postcolonial theory that counts as a hermeneutic of suspicion and how such suspicion fits with the inclination toward restoration that Frei advocates.