

# Setting the Stage: Christianity and the Developments of Modernity

Imagine you lived in Western Europe in 1600. Many elements of your life would be dramatically different. Materially, the majority of people at that time were servants or dependents of aristocratic landowners. Chances are, you would be in that class. Politically, you would live in a monarchy, since there were no democracies. Europe was split into Roman Catholicism in the south and Protestant factions in the north. There was no freedom of religion, only intolerant established religions, so which brand of Christianity you supported would most likely depend on where you were born.

Most significant for the ideas examined in this chapter, whether you were Protestant or Roman Catholic, you would have affirmed certain basic presuppositions about the world, since they were affirmed by all Christian groups of the time. These ideas constituted part of the worldview of people in 1600. A worldview is the set of background presuppositions about reality that is held by the people of an era. These presuppositions are regarded as self-evident, and they remain for the most part unquestioned by the majority of people.

Basic to the worldview of people in 1600 was the affirmation that the universe was created by God according to the story in Genesis 1. In that story, the universe was made in seven days. Human beings were created on the sixth day, and genealogies in the Bible run from the creation of the first man and woman to Abraham and other characters in the Bible. Various biblical scholars attempted to add up those genealogies and determine when the earth was created. The most notable attempt was made by an Irish bishop named James Ussher (1581–1656). Through careful biblical and historical research, he determined that the earth was created in 4004 B.C.E. This date was widely accepted in the English-speaking world, being added as commentary in the versions of numerous Bibles. Thus, the universe was seen as very young.

Not only was the universe thought to be young, but following the biblical story, the universe was considered to be small and shaped with the earth at its center. This made sense experientially, since from the perspective of the earth's inhabitants, the sun and stars seem to move around the earth. It also made sense religiously, since the creation story and biblical history make it clear that the creation and destiny of human beings are the central purpose of creation. Logically, then, humans should be in the spatial center of the universe.

As the Genesis story continues, human beings are created from the dust of the earth by a special act of God. All humankind descends from a common pair named Adam and Eve. This pair had been placed in a paradisaical garden, but because of their disobedience to God, they were kicked out. God altered reality as punishment for their disobedience. Sin, hardship, and physical death were brought into the world for the first time. For European Christians in 1600, the ultimate explanation for why we suffer, why we must die, and why we do wrong was rooted in the primal sin of our ancestors.

Not only was the story of the creation and fall of humanity into sin accepted as literally true in 1600, but so was the entirety of the biblical account. There was no official doctrinal formulation of the literal truth of all parts of the Bible, nor was there a serious concern to prove the literal truth of the Bible. Instead, it was taken for granted. In the biblical story, God is a dramatic actor on the stage of human history. God calls Abraham and sets his people apart for a special relationship and special destiny. God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and miraculously leads the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, gives them a divinely ordained law, miraculously sustains them when they wander in the wilderness, and miraculously leads them to conquer the promised land. When the Israelites disobey, God raises up another nation to destroy them, but God brings them back from exile in order to do the greatest thing of all: to come in the flesh to redeem God's people in Jesus' death and resurrection. Because the Jews, who were originally chosen to be God's people, rejected Jesus, God rejected them and established his people as the Christian church. Whether you were Protestant or Catholic, you regarded yourself as standing in the legacy of that unique realization of God's will in the world.

Clearly, many people in Western civilization today take issue with parts or all of this worldview. The Genesis story is widely disregarded as giving a scientific account of the process of creation or the cause of evil, suffering, and death. Our vast universe is understood to be billions

of years old, and convincing evidence has been given that life on the planet evolved over the course of hundreds of millions of years through natural selection. Furthermore, a new way of viewing biblical history has developed and become normative in academic scholarship on the Bible. Academic scholars think the biblical history was written in layers by a community whose beliefs developed over a long period of time. The community continually looked back on its history and reshaped it, giving different interpretations of that history in light of present events and beliefs. Moreover, scholars understand the biblical writers as having been influenced by the worldview of their time not only in scientific matters, but also in ethical, social, and political matters. From the contemporary perspective, much of what the biblical writers present as normative presupposes an alien worldview.

The story of the contemporary worldview's emergence from the common presuppositions of 1600 is the story of the development of modern thought. While it may seem odd to begin a book on contemporary Christianity with a look at the developments of modern thought, it is important to do so because understanding its emergence and the questions it brings helps to understand contemporary Christianity. While in many ways Christianity spawned modern thought, it has also been compelled to respond to significant questions raised by modern thought. This chapter explains in broad outline the meaning of the emergence of modern thought for Christianity. The following chapter provides a framework that articulates some of the main Christian responses to the developments of modernity.

## **The Enlightenment and the Development of Critical and Autonomous Reason**

The historical movement most responsible for the development of modern thought is the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a movement of thought among the intelligentsia in Western Europe and the American colonies that began in the seventeenth century and reached its zenith in the eighteenth. Some of its most notable representatives were Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau in France; Reimarus, Lessing, and Kant in the German states; Bacon, Locke, and Hume in Great Britain; and Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, and Paine in the American colonies.

While the Enlightenment was a diverse movement, its most characteristic feature was the elevation of human reason. The elevation of human reason refers to the affirmation of the capacity of the human

mind to discover what is good and what is true by reflecting on reality on its own, or independent of reliance on external authorities. This includes the affirmation of the capacity of the human mind to discover what is good and true without relying on revealed authorities such as the Bible or church teaching. Immanuel Kant said the motto of the Enlightenment was “Dare to know! ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding.’” He said the Enlightenment represented the “emergence from . . . the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance.”<sup>1</sup> The Enlightenment sought to transcend the condition in which humans did not make full use of their reason but submitted to external authorities to know what was true and good.

This elevation of reason put it above the position it had been granted in previous Christian history. In classical Christian theology, while human reason was thought to be warped by sin, it was believed to have been made by God and it had an important role to play in Christian reflection. Many great thinkers of the Middle Ages used reason either to explain certain Christian beliefs or to show that certain Christian beliefs could be proven true. However, reason was always limited or circumscribed by a commitment to revelation. Revelation was understood as God’s act of communication to human beings. The record of that communication is the Christian Bible. In interpreting the Bible, the church had developed doctrines including the belief that God is a Trinity and Jesus is an incarnation of God. These doctrines were accepted as true and taken to be beyond the pale of criticism by human reason. The Bible and the church doctrines derived from it were authorities. They represented divine truth, and human reason was subject to them. With the elevation of human reason in the Enlightenment, many Enlightenment thinkers reversed this relationship for the first time since Christianity became dominant in Western history in the fourth century. Instead of accepting the Bible and church doctrines as unquestioned authorities, they subjected these authorities to human reason. The power they found in human reason transcended even revelation.

For Enlightenment thinkers, the appeal of human reason lay in its universality. Everyone has reason; therefore, whatever is discovered by reason is accessible and provable by all. While matters of taste, such as a preference for chocolate or vanilla ice cream, may be private, all that reason discovers about the universe and its operation, about proper human behavior, about what lies beyond the universe is open to proof or disproof and therefore to universal assent by all. What was needed was simply an unbiased way of looking at the data. Enlightenment thinkers

were convinced that such an unbiased perspective is possible, and that philosophical reflection and the developing sciences in every field could examine their data in rigorous, methodical, and unbiased ways to establish universal knowledge.

Because reason was directed to what is universally true, it offered hope of transcending the particularities of religion based on revelation. Roman Catholics, Protestant groups, Jews, and Muslims all claimed they had the true revelation or interpretation of that revelation vis-à-vis each other. If reason simply had to submit to revelation, there was no way of adjudicating their conflicting claims. Many Enlightenment thinkers thought reason should supersede revelation, or at least purify it, and thereby reduce the claims of revelation to an essential core that could be affirmed by reason and was common to all religions.<sup>2</sup> The very need for revelation implies a human incapacity that many Enlightenment thinkers were unwilling to admit. They thought if God had to reveal things to human beings in history and act in history to save people, then God had not made human minds and wills very well in the first place. This was an inadequacy they were unwilling to claim either of God or of the human mind and will.<sup>3</sup>

With their demand that religion be universal and reasonable, some Enlightenment thinkers created a rival religion to Christianity called Deism.<sup>4</sup> This was the first non-Christian religion to emerge on Christian soil since the triumph of Christianity over the paganism of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Many parts of Deism were rooted in and compatible with Christian beliefs of the time. For example, Deists believed the order of the world proves that a good and rational Creator made it, and they thought the rationality and goodness of the Creator were revealed more and more as human beings uncovered the laws by which the universe operates. With the Christian thinking of the time, they affirmed that God gave people an immortal soul and a conscience to know the difference between right and wrong. They tended to be more optimistic than classical Christianity about human capacities. Deists believed people have free will and are able to do what is right, and they thought rewards and punishments would follow in the afterlife based on people's actions in this life.

What was notably absent from Deism was any belief in miraculous divine intervention in the world, and this is where it veered most sharply from standard Christian views. Such divine action was deemed unnecessary because God had made human beings properly in the first place. Belief in divine intervention was considered superstitious. The universe

was conceived as a great machine, and the emerging natural sciences discovered rational laws by which the universe operates that were thought to be immutable. Belief in divine intervention was placed on the same level as belief in fairies or trolls, or the belief that a black cat brings bad luck. Accepting it meant resorting to an illogical explanation for events instead of relying on a rational explanation.

Not everything Enlightenment thinkers said and did had lasting significance. While influential, the religion of Deism never achieved great popularity among the masses of people, and it largely faded from the scene in the nineteenth century. Today, Enlightenment thinkers are roundly criticized for being overly confident about the objective and universal scope of reason. A vast new intellectual movement has risen that calls itself “postmodern.” While this is a diverse movement, two common themes of postmodernity are the limitations of reason and the affirmation that the thinking subject is always embedded in a particular time and place with presuppositions that the subject can never fully escape. The presuppositions of the knower always affect the reflective process in such a way that humans can never see reality in a purely objective and universally rational way. These are vital and significant insights that are taken seriously by scores of contemporary thinkers, even while individual thinkers interpret the precise meaning of these insights in different ways. In general, the very use of the term “post-modern” implies that the modern period, which is primarily identified with the Enlightenment, is over. Despite this understanding, however, it is important not to overlook the contributions of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment effectively changed the character of intellectual reflection in the West. The work of Enlightenment thinkers initiated an enduring pattern of thinking that remains significant today even for postmodern thinkers who point out the limitations of Enlightenment thought.

Two important aspects to the enduring pattern of thinking inherited from the Enlightenment are the critical and the autonomous sides of reason. Critical reason refers to reason’s power to critique religious authorities or sacred objects rather than simply submit to them. Reason today, as it functions in Western academic contexts, for example, does not presuppose it must submit to the teachings of church, synagogue, or mosque. Except in some private religious schools, academic instructors do not sign a religious creed assenting to a certain set of beliefs, thereby giving the assurance that what they find in their research and say to students will not conflict with those beliefs. The lack of such submission

means that reason wields a potentially critical power in relation to religious beliefs. Scholars are free to criticize religious ideas on the basis of independent research and reflection in their fields. This does not mean all academic scholars reject religion, and in fact, this is far from the case. It does mean, however, that they are free to reject it or to criticize, adapt, and rethink religious ideas as they deem appropriate, instead of simply submitting to traditional religious convictions. Not only in academia, but in news outlets, the popular media, and the culture more broadly, one finds the expression of the free critical power of reason in relation to religion.

Autonomous reason refers to the power of reason to construct new ideas on its own. Autonomy means “self-law,” so autonomous reason is reason that discovers truths by itself and functions by its own laws, or its own critique of itself, instead of submitting to authorities. This aspect of reason inherited from the Enlightenment is responsible for creating the independent sciences as we know them today—the natural, social, and human sciences. Over the past few centuries, these scientific fields have broken free from submission to religious authorities, and secular academia functions on its own. Physicists and biologists, for example, do not first submit to the truth of the biblical account of creation before analyzing their data. Instead, they independently analyze their data, following a tradition of such independent analysis in their fields in which they generate and test hypotheses about the data regardless of whether their hypotheses accord with the biblical account or not. The proper method to analyze the data and the correct hypotheses to account for the data are matters of consensus and ongoing debate, but decisions about method and content are to be made by rational reflection and not by assent to a revealed authority. The quoting of biblical verses as proof texts about the origin of the universe has no weight in a scientific discussion that analyzes the data on the basis of autonomous reason.<sup>5</sup>

When reason is both autonomous and critical, it may come into conflict with the Bible and church teaching. Autonomous reason discovers new truths about reality. On the basis of these new truths, critical reason may critique a biblical account or a doctrine of the church, or argue it is to be understood in a new way. This is the situation of reflection in academia and the broader culture today, and it is an inheritance of the elevation of reason and critique of authority introduced in the Enlightenment. It explains the breakdown of the monolithic worldview held in 1600, described at the beginning of this chapter.

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

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**Galileo, Scientific Method, and Church Authority**

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) was one of the rare scientific geniuses of Western history. His work was so novel and brilliant that not only what he discovered but also the method he used to make his discoveries changed the course of future scientific inquiry. Galileo is widely credited for inaugurating the modern scientific method in which hypotheses using mathematical calculations are combined in an interactive way with rigorous experiments and observations in order to come to verifiable conclusions. Using this method, he made extraordinary advances in the human understanding of the nature of motion.

Galileo also explored the movement of heavenly bodies. He built on and transformed previous theories about the place of the earth in relationship to the sun. Famously, combining theory with observation, he became convinced that the earth spins, and the earth and the other planets move around the sun, rather than the sun and planets moving around the earth. He made his view known publicly, only to have the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church denounce the position as contrary to what was then regarded as known physics and the teaching of the Bible. This did not stop Galileo from eventually publishing his views, for which he was brought to trial before the Inquisition in 1633, condemned, forced to recant his views, and held under house arrest for the remainder of his life.

Galileo was no materialistic atheist, a position that would become acceptable in Western history only centuries later. By all accounts, he was a pious Christian believer and ardent lover of the church. Like other scientists of the early modern period, he understood his scientific work in theological terms as disclosing truths about the wondrous universe God made, and as an expression whose purpose was to give glory to God. He was, however, working at a time in which the natural sciences had not yet emerged from religious control. They had not yet become autonomous, something that would happen only after his time as the result of the influence of the Enlightenment. In Galileo's time, not only were the sciences under religious control, but the religious authorities read the Bible

literally and thought at least certain truths of the natural sciences could be derived from that reading. Such truths had divine sanction and were not to be contradicted.

In his letters and writings, Galileo himself tried to argue for another position. He claimed the Bible and science have different goals. The Bible teaches about salvation, while science teaches about how the universe operates. Consequently, there should be no interference or conflict between what each one affirms. If there appears to be conflict, he argued, the Bible should not be taken literally. Scripture could still be regarded as true if it were interpreted in a metaphorical fashion. Galileo did not take the posture of critical reason and argue that the limitations of the biblical writers mean some affirmations of the Bible are not to be regarded as true. Instead, he affirmed that if it is interpreted correctly, the Bible can still be understood as true. Critical reason in relation to the Bible would emerge only later in Western history, also as a result of Enlightenment influence.

Despite his time and place in history and the tragic way he was treated by the church, Galileo inaugurated new ways of thinking about the relationship between Christian faith and the emerging natural sciences. His work stands at the beginning of a debate about the relationship between Christianity and the natural sciences that continues strongly into the present day.<sup>6</sup>

## Historical Criticism of the Bible

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Christians were oblivious to or unconcerned with the transformations of thinking that were characteristic of the Enlightenment. Other Christians were aware of these transformations and either resisted them, thinking they threatened Christianity, or embraced them, thinking they were an outgrowth of Christianity and could be shown to be compatible with it. Whatever the individual responses in the period of the Enlightenment, the impact of the emergence of modern thought on Christianity has only deepened over time, and it is no longer a serious option for Christians to ignore it.

This section delves more deeply into the questions modern thought has raised for Christianity by looking at an important development in modernity called historical criticism or higher criticism of the Bible.

Tracing the development and major findings of historical criticism vividly shows the impact of autonomous and critical reason on Christianity. It also exposes significant questions regarding the formulation of traditional Christian doctrines. Prominent among the questions raised is the nature of the relationship between faith and history, a question that the remainder of this chapter will engage in a significant way.

Historical criticism is a summary term for a view of the Bible that affirms the cultural conditioning and limitations, as well as the individual creativity, of the biblical authors. Historical criticism flourished particularly in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in the twentieth century, it became part of mainstream academic scholarship on the Bible everywhere in the West. It is the standard scholarly approach to the Bible in academia today, as reflected in the fact that it is used in all mainstream introductory academic textbooks on the biblical literature.<sup>7</sup> While historical criticism examines the Bible with a critical eye and traces the human element involved in the construction of the Bible, this does not mean it is incompatible with the affirmation that the Bible is divine revelation. Historical criticism has been embraced by many Christian denominations, and hosts of leading historical critics are also Christian believers. What historical criticism does, however, is raise questions about how Christians can and should understand the Bible as divine revelation. Examining what historical criticism is and looking at some of its major findings show how this is the case.

## **The Two Main Hypotheses of Historical Criticism**

As autonomous reason made key discoveries in the natural sciences in the nineteenth century, these discoveries pointed to the scientific limitations of the biblical authors. The fact that the earth is not the center of the universe was well established by the nineteenth century, but it was in the nineteenth century that it was postulated through studying the stratigraphy of the earth and fossil records that the earth was much older than the six thousand years affirmed by the biblical account. In 1859, Charles Darwin built on the idea of an ancient earth in his groundbreaking work *The Origin of Species*. He argued that all complex life-forms, including human beings, evolved from less complex forms by natural selection over vast reaches of time. While there was initial controversy about Darwin's theory in the scientific community, evolution through natural selection became accepted fairly quickly as the normative large-

scale explanatory paradigm for understanding diversity in biological phenomena, and it remains so today.

These scientific findings compelled many Christians to face, for the first time, the idea that in the biblical stories of creation and fall in Genesis 1–3, God was not supernaturally imparting information about the beginnings of the universe to an author who could not possibly have been there to witness the events. Instead, the author or authors were creatively retelling stories that expressed beliefs the ancient Israelites held about God, creation, and the origin of evil. Quite naturally, these stories presupposed the scientific worldview of the ancient Israelites, who did not know about the discoveries of Copernicus or Darwin. Autonomous reason in the natural sciences, along with critical reason's interrogation of the biblical literature, showed the scientific limitations of the biblical authors. They held to the science of a bygone era that modern people could no longer accept.

Historical critics affirmed more than just scientific limitations of the biblical authors. Analyzing the Bible with the same critical tools they used to analyze other historical documents, critics argued the biblical authors were conditioned and limited broadly by their culture. While they worked creatively within those limitations, the biblical authors were limited historically, ethically, and theologically.

Using critical reason, historical critics asked penetrating questions about the historical texts of the Bible: What did the writers know? How did they know it? When did they write? As a concrete example, consider the story of God's calling of Abram in Gen. 12:1-9 (Abram's name is later changed to Abraham). In these verses, God makes tremendous promises to Abram that a great nation will come from him, that all people of the earth will be blessed by him, and that his children will inherit the land that came to be known as Israel. Critical reason naturally asks how the writer knew this happened. Was the writer there with Abram when God spoke to him, so the writer heard God's voice as well? Did Abram tell someone, who told someone, who told the writer?

This critical questioning of the text led historical critics to certain basic hypotheses about the construction of the historical sections of the Bible. Two main hypotheses form the framework for the analysis of the text by contemporary historical critics. The first one is that there is a gap between the historical events recorded in the Bible and the writing down of those events by the biblical writers. In the case of the New Testament Gospels, the length of time was several decades, but in the case of the narratives in the Hebrew Bible, it was often hundreds of years. There

is evidence of this gap throughout the biblical narratives. In fact, in the story of the calling of Abram in Gen. 12:1-9, the author lets the reader know he or she is telling of an event in the past when the author says, "*At that time* the Canaanites were in the land" (12:6, italics added). The author is saying that back when the calling of Abram occurred, the Canaanites were in the land. This implies the Canaanites are not in the land when the author is writing. Since the Israelites followed the Canaanites into the land, the author must be writing when the Israelites are there. When you trace the history implied by this affirmation, it means the author is writing a story about events purported to have happened at least five hundred and probably closer to eight hundred years before the time of the author.

Between the event and the writing down of the event, the community that finally wrote the Bible transmitted a memory of the event at first by word of mouth. This is commonly called "oral tradition" by historical critics. Generations of people told and retold the events of the past and in this way kept a memory of their history alive. Eventually, some of this material was written down in diverse sources that the biblical writers used in combination with oral tradition to write their narratives.

The uncovering of this process implies that the biblical authors were historically conditioned and limited. They had sparse historical information that had been passed on through the generations in complex and very human ways. The information they received and used was subject to the vagaries of all such human transmission.

The second hypothesis of historical critics is that the community and the biblical authors transformed the events of the past primarily out of a theological interest. The believing community, whether it was the ancient Israelites or the early believers in Jesus, was not strictly concerned with detailing accurate history. The community was concerned with understanding what it thought God was doing in history. Based on what the community understood God to be doing in the present, the community and, subsequently, the biblical authors themselves changed the details of past events and even created entire stories of events.

Consider again the story of God calling Abram and giving promises to him in Genesis 12. Most historical critics think this story has only a faint historical core. On the whole, it is the creation of the Israelites, who were already a nation in the land of Israel and who looked back upon their coming into the land as the activity of God. The Israelites thought God put them in the land and made them a great nation. This was their theological conviction. They also remembered Abraham as their most

distant ancestor, as a kind of founding father of the Israelites as a people. They created the story of God's calling and giving these specific promises to Abraham to stress their conviction that being who they were, where they were, was God's will. It was the unfolding of a plan that God had for them all along. In this interpretation, the story does not so much explain what happened to Abraham as it exposes the later Israelites' theological convictions.

The hypothesis that the biblical writers changed and created stories primarily out of a theological interest implies that the biblical writers were in some sense limited and conditioned by their time theologically. They sought to interpret God's actions in their history, but they had no absolute transcendent standpoint from which to make this interpretation. Neither Abraham, nor Moses, nor the biblical historians had directly imparted supernatural knowledge about the past. Nor did they have such knowledge about the future. Instead, the historians who wrote the biblical text all sought to understand God's actions in the past, and they projected the future in different ways in light of this understanding.

Combining the two hypotheses of historical criticism yields the main approach of historical critics to the biblical narrative as a whole. To historical critics, the biblical narrative consists of a fusion of events from the past and theological interpretations that change and transform those events. Historical critics argue about how much of the text narrates actual history and how much of it involves the transformation of events by theological interpretation, but this argument takes place from within the supposition that the text includes both elements.

## **Theological Questions and Challenges Raised by Historical Criticism**

Historical criticism of the Bible emerges from the development of critical and autonomous reason and has become part of the contemporary worldview of many Westerners. Its emergence has raised a number of important theological questions and challenges. Two of the major challenges are examined in this section. These challenges are new in Christian history in the sense that Christians who lived before the rise of historical criticism did not have to face them in the same way or with the same power as those who live with the legacy of historical criticism.

The first and perhaps most obvious challenge historical criticism brings to theology is that it calls into question the absolute veracity of the biblical narrative. Put bluntly, historical critics claim things did

not always happen in the way things are said to have happened in the Bible. There is an overlay of creative interpretation and transformation of events by the believing community that transmitted the memory of those events and by the biblical writers who creatively wrote down those interpretations. Given this interpretation of the biblical text, what does it mean for Christian doctrines that are based on historical events and, in particular, for doctrines based on miraculous events? The Bible often records divine intervention in the form of miracles, and a standard understanding of those doctrines claims the miracles actually occurred. Consider, for example, not only the miracles Jesus is purported to have done during his lifetime, which many Christians throughout history have claimed give testimony to his divine status, but also the miracles that happened to him, including the virgin birth, his bodily resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into heaven. Historical criticism at least raises the question of whether they actually happened. Are they based on real historical memory, or are they the creative theological interpretations of early believers in Jesus?

Some historical critics argue for the latter, not only for the miracles related to Jesus, but for all the miracles recorded in the Bible. They claim there is a significant difference in thinking between the ancient biblical writers and modern people. Since the ancient authors wrote before the development of the natural and social sciences, they often gave a supernatural cause to events they did not understand but to which contemporary people would give a natural cause.<sup>8</sup> Being ancient people, the biblical writers had a worldview that affirmed the reality of direct divine intervention in history, while people today can no longer affirm such a worldview and need to have alternative explanations or interpretations of what the biblical writers understood and presented as miraculous divine intervention.

Other historical critics disagree and claim the ancient biblical writers' understanding of the universe was not that far from the contemporary understanding. While there may be exaggeration at times in the biblical text, and all recorded miracles may not have occurred, or did not occur precisely as the text claims, this does not mean no miracles occurred. In any case, however, this debate about the veracity of miracles and what it implies for the understanding of Christian doctrines is a new debate that has emerged as historical criticism has become the normative approach to the Bible. In 1600, a Christian scholar who questioned whether the miracles recorded in the Bible actually occurred would have been labeled a dangerous heretic. Today, it is commonplace for Christian scholars to

question whether recorded miracles happened and to take a stand on the issue one way or the other.

The second major theological challenge raised by historical criticism is its affirmation that the biblical text does not have a completely unified point of view. For historical criticism, the biblical text developed over time as the authors of the text and the community from which the Bible came engaged in a continuous interpretation of events. Sometimes biblical authors of the same period interpreted events differently or in ways that stood in tension with one another. Sometimes, as events changed, the theological interpretations of the community changed, and the community adapted and rewrote its history. While old interpretations were often expunged, at times they were allowed to remain in the text, and a new understanding of what God was doing that stood in tension with an old one was placed alongside the old. The biblical text contains multiple interpretations and layers of interpretation built upon one another, many of which stand in some level of tension or conflict with one another.

The fact that the biblical text has layers of interpretation in tension with one another is a challenge for theology because traditionally Christian doctrines were thought to be derivable from the single voice of the Bible. Since the Bible was divinely inspired, the doctrines were thought to be equally inspired, expressing biblical truth in concise and abstract form. If the biblical writers did not have a single voice but the text presents a range of theological options, which of the options within this range is true?

This last question can be developed with two major examples. A long-standing argument in Christian theology claims that one proof of the fact that Jesus is the Messiah is that hundreds of years before Jesus came, Old Testament prophets predicted a Messiah would come and do precisely what Jesus did.<sup>9</sup> This argument, showing the connection between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment by Jesus, is used to prove that the events of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus must be part of a divine plan. Historical critics have shown, however, that the Old Testament has a variety of perspectives about the future. It does not uniformly point to the coming of a Messiah, nor does it present in undeniable detail that the Messiah will do what Jesus did. Among other things, this approach affirms that a Jewish interpretation—one that denies Jesus is the Messiah—can be based on a legitimate reading of the Old Testament. If the Old Testament does not uniformly and unambiguously point in one direction, what does this mean for the Christian affirmation that Jesus is God's Messiah?

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

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**The Suffering Servant of Isaiah**

One of the most renowned passages in the Hebrew Bible for the Christian interpretation of Jesus as fulfilling God's plan as the Messiah is the passage about a "suffering servant" in Isa. 52:13—53:12. This passage describes a servant of the Jewish God, Yahweh. The servant goes through tremendous suffering without complaint. This suffering is at the hands of others and is clearly a matter of injustice. The servant is brought to death. Surprisingly, however, this suffering and death is interpreted as part of Yahweh's plan (53:10-12). The servant suffers unjustly as an offering for the sins of others in the same way that an animal brought to the temple as a sin offering suffers for the sins of those who brought it. Because of the servant's willingness to suffer as part of God's plan, God will exalt and raise the servant to a high status.

The early Christian community clearly used this passage—along with many others, of course—to understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. In Acts 8:32-35, the disciple Philip affirms that a quote from Isaiah 53 refers to Jesus.

It is easy to see how this passage could be applied to Jesus by Christians. Most academic scholars today, however, think that in its context, the passage refers to the nation of Israel in its exile. The suffering of the servant described in the passage is in the past tense. Only the anticipated exaltation is in the future tense. Scholars think this passage was written by an unknown prophet around 540 B.C.E., a time when it looked as if the defeated Israel, which had undergone suffering and exile to a foreign land, was going to be set free and allowed to return to its homeland. The unknown prophet, using poetic metaphor, spoke of the nation of Israel as Yahweh's servant and described the nation's suffering and exile as if it were a death. Surprisingly, this was seen as part of Yahweh's plan. The nation suffered for others, and other nations would realize this when Israel was freed from captivity and allowed to return to its homeland in glory.

If this passage in context refers to the nation of Israel, it complicates the simple Christian interpretation that claims a prophet from hundreds of years in the past miraculously predicted in detail

what would happen in the future when Jesus came. It does not necessarily deny Christians the opportunity to apply this passage to Jesus. Christians can still claim that a passage that meant one thing in the Old Testament context can express ideas or meanings that help explain what God is doing in the new and different context of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In fact, many Christians today embrace this interpretation. However, this is a more complex and nuanced interpretation than the claim that detailed knowledge was miraculously given by God to a prophet who wrote about events that were to happen hundreds of years later. In this more nuanced view, one must admit that other possibilities for interpretation of this passage are also present.

Another example is the New Testament authors' understanding of Jesus. Since the time Christianity affirmed in its major creeds that Jesus was an incarnation of God, both fully God and fully human, it has been assumed that the New Testament unambiguously affirms this position. However, historical critics have shown this assumption is not so easy to make. When one examines the individual authors of the New Testament in their own right, it appears they did not all understand Jesus to have been an incarnation of God who was both fully God and fully human. Some writers thought of Jesus as a human being who was full of God's Spirit and who was adopted by God, performed God's will, and was exalted by God for his faithfulness.<sup>10</sup> What does it mean for contemporary theology if the New Testament writers had more than one view of Jesus?

This chapter has attempted to show that the kinds of insights and questions that arise with the development of modern thought are important for contemporary Christian self-understanding. While many Christians find the insights and questions of modernity threatening, others have found them exhilarating, and they have spawned a creative outpouring of theological reflection in the contemporary period. The next four chapters cover some of this creative outpouring. Chapter 2 presents a framework situating major theological positions in relation to the developments of modern thought. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 each deal with the development of classical theological themes before examining the way some contemporary theologians have understood and at times transformed those themes, given the insights of modern thought.