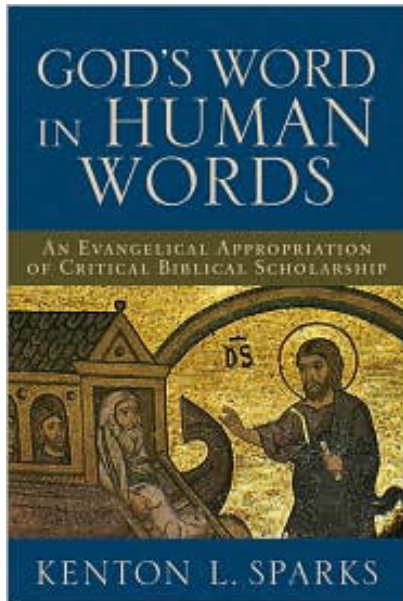


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Sparks, Kenton L.

God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship

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Kenton Sparks aims to appropriate much of the data that has been produced within the world of critical biblical scholarship in such a way that can be of benefit for the evangelical community. Much of evangelicalism has the tendency to respond to the results of critical biblical scholarship in a *traditional* way, which Sparks defines as those who “believe that these results, if true, would represent a serious threat to biblical authority” (19). On the other end of the spectrum is the *secular* response, which views Scripture as “just another of the many religious texts for scholars to study, dissect, and critique,” certainly not divinely inspired (19). In order to avoid these two ends of the spectrum, Sparks’s work is geared toward fostering a *constructive* response or *believing criticism* that “attempts to integrate biblical criticism to the faith” (20). He believes that this is possible because the implications of critical biblical scholarship have often been misunderstood by evangelicals.

The opening chapter is focused on epistemology and hermeneutics and briefly traces premodern, modern, and postmodern views. Whereas premodern scholars “generally trusted tradition and worked within the theological boundaries established by church authority” (30), modern scholars tended to embody “a full-blown suspicion of tradition” (30). In reaction to both of these earlier views of epistemology and hermeneutics, Sparks

sees himself functioning within a “wing” of postmodernism known as “practical realism.” This epistemological and hermeneutical option takes into account that humanity has the capacity to obtain useful and reliable knowledge, although without access to infallible, God-like knowledge.

The second chapter focuses on historical criticism and Assyriology. After briefly explaining the origins of Assyriology, Sparks turns to literary patterns that appear in Mesopotamian texts; for example, narratives that appear historical actually end up being fictional (Gilgamesh Epic, Sin of Sargon), and prophetic texts contain pseudoprophetic material as opposed to authentic predictions (Uruk Prophecy). These literary patterns are mentioned to make two points. First, it shows that critical scholars are just as critical when approaching nonbiblical texts as they are when approaching the biblical text, thus answering the evangelical and fundamentalist accusation that biblical critics are biased against the Bible. Second, all of the literary patterns mentioned in this chapter are also found within the Hebrew Bible.

Sparks outlines in chapter 3 some of the challenges of biblical scholarship for evangelicals. He makes clear at the outset that his emphasis will be on the human origin of Scripture, while not forgetting or downplaying Scripture’s divine genesis. The “problems” presented in this chapter will not be new to those conversant in critical biblical scholarship. Sparks introduces the reader to questions raised by critical biblical scholarship, such as the authorship of the Pentateuch, the historical problem of the exodus, and the problem of Israelite historiography. By introducing readers to these issues, Sparks wishes to bring his readers face to face with specific instances where traditional views regarding the authorship, dating, historicity, and theological consistency of the biblical text are at odds with the dominant and persuasive views of critical scholarship. The next two chapters deal with how evangelicals have usually dealt with these issues.

Chapter 4 discusses the tendency characteristic of the *traditional* response to critical biblical scholarship: to reject their “troublesome” conclusions and, thereby, to guard the authority of Scripture. “In this vein of thought, biblical criticism leads to faulty conclusions because it has been wrongly done or because it is an illegitimate exercise in the first place” (133). By using examples of modern evangelical scholars such as Kenneth Kitchen, T. Desmond Alexander, and Richard Schultz who characterize this *traditional* response, Sparks notes eight unhelpful strategies that these scholars utilize, such as artificial presentations of the evidence, selective and illegitimate appeals to critical scholarship, and/or misleading and illegitimate harmonizations. Sparks concludes that, “for the most part, evangelical efforts to challenge the standard results of biblical criticism not only fail but often fail badly” (169). The better response, explored in chapter 5, is a *constructive* response that takes into account the practical realism described in chapter 1.

As a result of this view, Sparks attempts to integrate evangelical commitments with the results of biblical criticism. Starting with Barth's view of Scripture, Sparks highlights the work of some biblical scholars who have laid the groundwork for constructive responses to biblical scholarship.

The sixth chapter represents a turning point in the book in that Sparks becomes less descriptive and more constructive. He revisits many of the examples that have already been mentioned and employs analytic generic categories in order to treat Scripture "as the ancient document that it is rather than as an instance of modern discourse" (227). This takes seriously the full humanity of Scripture instead of retreating to a form of "scriptural docetism"¹ that marginalizes or even ignores the human dimension of Scripture. By doing so, many of the perceived theological difficulties implied by historical criticism are adequately resolved. Continuing in chapter 7, Sparks employs the language of "accommodation" when speaking about the way in which God chose to speak through humanity. He then traces this understanding of accommodation through the work of Calvin, the Reformers, the early Christian interpreters, and contemporary theology in order to show that this viewpoint has a rich historical background. Although some evangelical scholars have objected to the idea of accommodation, Sparks does not view it as a threat to evangelical theology but rather as being absolutely essential in our understanding of Scripture.

The themes of the chapters 8 and 9 are closely related. The eighth chapter accentuates and elucidates the connection between Scripture and the created order; that is, Scripture is only intelligible insofar as it is related to its historical context. Moving from the context of Scripture to the larger context that lies beyond Scripture, chapter 9 pushes the reader to come to grips with her or his own historical context and how that context shapes the way one reads Scripture. As Sparks notes in his conclusion, "the best interpretations of Scripture are those that read Scripture in relationship to its context, and that context is not merely Scripture's immediate context ... but the context of the whole, which comprises both the created order and any special revelation that God has provided to humanity" (327).

Chapter 10 is illustrative, as Sparks revisits some of the examples mentioned while applying the hermeneutical methods explained in the previous chapters. His approach to Scripture parts ways with conservative evangelicalism in that Sparks has allowed Scripture understood in its historical and literary context to set the agenda for his theology of

1. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 18.

Scripture and in regard to the “peripheral use” of Scripture (i.e., “the use of Scripture as a source of insight into matters that are peripheral to the intentions of the biblical author” (355). For instance, Sparks does not see justification in reconstructing a biography of David when the biblical texts that present David to the reader are based on uncritical use of ancient propaganda. Ironically, to use the text of Scripture to construct something that was peripheral to the author’s purpose actually creates the conflicts evangelicals feel when approached with historical criticism. The final chapter focuses on the use of biblical criticism in the context of the local church and the Christian academy, pushing for more integration of biblical criticism than has been allowed.

Sparks’s main thesis is that critical biblical scholarship can and *must* be integrated with evangelical theology. Although many will benefit from Spark’s contribution to a vital conversation, his work must be viewed within his own context of evangelical Christianity, which is the very community he is addressing. While the book’s sociological context is evangelical, its theology reflects a broader ecumenical faith respecting the vitality of Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions. His insights into the way in which evangelicals have either ignored or brushed aside critical biblical scholarship are accurate and based on first-hand observation. The course Sparks suggests to correct these inadequacies would have profound implications not only for evangelical biblical scholarship but for an evangelical doctrine of Scripture. While it is true that some evangelicals have “walked away from their faith” because they were approached with some of the results of critical biblical scholarship, Sparks demonstrates that the fault does not lie with biblical criticism but on the reluctance of evangelicals to actually engage, appropriate, and integrate these results with evangelical theology. If the evangelical answer continues to be fideism or pretending that the “problems” do not exist, then the laypeople, seminarians, and graduate students who are approached with the strength of these issues are left without a paradigm or hermeneutical method that can account for both data produced by biblical critics and the faith they hold. Their “liberal” views or their “falling from faith” are not the necessary conclusions of critical biblical scholarship but the necessary conclusions of evangelicals’ negligence not only to deal with the data of biblical criticism but also to integrate it with their theology.

The most helpful points in this book regarding the inadequacy of evangelical responses to biblical criticism and the inadequate evangelical view of Scripture will undoubtedly be the most debated by conservative evangelicals. Yet these points demonstrate why this book is necessary. Sparks demonstrates that evangelical scholars, who often complain about not being included in discussions centering on biblical criticism, need to come to grips with the human dimension of Scripture in order for their approaches to do justice to the very human phenomena of Scripture. Because evangelicals have underplayed or essentially

denied the humanity of Scripture, their exclusion from these discussions is completely warranted. I am in full agreement with Sparks that evangelicals shirk the difficult questions when it comes to biblical criticism and revert to fideism, hiding their heads in the sand of the “essentially divine” origin of Scripture. If evangelicalism is going to claim to take Scripture seriously or to hold a high view of Scripture, it must take into account the results of critical biblical scholarship and the reality of the humanity of Scripture. Otherwise, it is not the Hebrew Bible or Christian Scriptures that evangelicals hold in esteem but a divinely dictated book completely abstracted from history.