

Evangelical Faith
and the Challenge
of
Historical Criticism

Edited by

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii
1 Towards a faithful criticism <i>Christopher M. Hays</i>	1
2 Adam and the fall <i>Christopher M. Hays and Stephen Lane Herring</i>	24
3 The exodus: fact, fiction or both? <i>Christopher B. Ansberry</i>	55
4 No covenant before the exile? The Deuteronomic Torah and Israel's covenant theology <i>Christopher B. Ansberry and Jerry Hwang</i>	74
5 Problems with prophecy <i>Amber Warhurst, Seth B. Tarrer and Christopher M. Hays</i>	95
6 Pseudepigraphy and the canon <i>Christopher B. Ansberry, Casey A. Strine, Edward W. Klink III and David Lincicum</i>	125
7 The historical Jesus <i>Michael J. Daling and Christopher M. Hays</i>	158
8 The Paul of Acts and the Paul of the epistles <i>Aaron J. Kuecker and Kelly D. Liebengood</i>	182
9 Faithful criticism and a critical faith <i>Christopher B. Ansberry and Christopher M. Hays</i>	204
<i>Bibliography</i>	223
<i>Index of ancient texts</i>	237

1

Towards a faithful criticism

CHRISTOPHER M. HAYS

Current relations between evangelicals and historical criticism

This is a book about historical criticism. This is not a book about inerrancy. What is tricky, however, is that one can hardly address the topic of historical criticism without at least reflecting on whether and how Scripture might be authoritative and true.

Scholars at the more conservative end of the guild contend that the Scriptures are inerrant, unswervingly true and accurate not only on issues of faith and morals but also on matters of historical fact. The Bible is, they aver, a historical document, but under divine care the Bible has been preserved from the erroneous vulnerabilities of other mundane historical documents. So, when conservative scholars approach Scripture as the word of God, they have a dual commitment to apprehending its theological message and affirming its factual integrity.

At the other end of the halls of the academy are the historical critics. While many of these scholars would indeed affirm that Scripture is the word of God, they do not feel the need (or, indeed, the freedom) to see the Bible as historically pristine. So, when they approach Scripture as a historical document, they bear dual commitments to understanding the message of the text itself and to investigating whether there might be slippage between the way that the Bible describes historical events and the way those events actually occurred in time and space.

As is typical in human disagreements, members of these opposite parties tend to caricature each other, polarizing conversations even

Note: I am grateful to Dr David Lincicum for lending his formidable insight, guidance and (occasionally) prose to this chapter. If ever the thoughts herein rise above the pedestrian, there is a good chance that as much owes to his influence.

further. Historical critics frequently construe conservative inerrantists as woefully naïve or wilfully ignorant fundamentalists. The nasty rhetoric that sometimes accompanies this dim view is often the consequence of autobiographical chagrin, as many more-liberal critics are themselves ‘lapsed’ conservatives. Conversely, conservative inerrantists sometimes lambast historical critics as godless atheists, arrogantly derogating the divine voice. This hostility often derives from a protective impulse, insofar as conservative scholars have tearfully witnessed bright and promising students engage with liberal research and then abandon their faith entirely.

The reality is that neither denunciation is baseless, though neither is fair. Perhaps the people who know this best are the evangelicals, as we stand somewhere between these two poles, oftentimes bleeding into one camp or another, while feeling the tug of each. It is most of all for such students, seminarians, pastors and scholars, that we write this book.

As we said, this is a book about historical criticism, not inerrancy; yet we recognize that, for evangelicals, these are not entirely separable issues. In fact, modern debate about inerrancy is (among other things) a *reaction to* the rise of historical criticism. In the US, the writings of late nineteenth-century historical critics sparked heated disputes, as those critics impugned the historical veracity of the biblical depictions of numerous events. Sadly, the 1920s and 30s witnessed the retreat of the predecessors of American evangelicalism from the cutting edge of the discussion. Conservative Christian academics forged intellectually infelicitous alliances with popular revivalism and dispensational fundamentalism. Even the best conservative scholars of that generation left historical criticism to Harvard and Princeton in favour of founding Westminster Theological Seminary and, shortly thereafter, Fuller Theological Seminary.¹ In the ensuing decades, however, the schools founded by proto-evangelicals came to produce first-rate students, who, in varying degrees, re-appropriated the tools, the literature and the assumptions of the biblical academy. The question that we now face is: how exactly do we relate to the historical criticism that drove our predecessors away from the universities in the first place?

¹ Here I offer the briefest paraphrase of Mark Noll’s masterful summary of the ebb and flow of evangelical biblical scholarship in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd edn (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), pp. 32–61.

Opinions vary, but Mark Noll has helpfully schematized the range of perspectives on historical criticism within the evangelical camp. He makes a major division between ‘critical anti-criticism’ and ‘believing criticism’.² The critical anti-critics, Noll explains, are inerrantists whose academic research engages with the broader academy in an apologetic endeavour to protect traditional interpretations of Scripture; critical anti-critics typically consider inerrancy to be the epistemological foundation of Christian theology.

In contrast, believing critics are scholars who allow that higher critical research may require the revision of some traditional evangelical beliefs. Believing critics come in different stripes. The more conservative variety is but a slightly less-dogmatic version of the critical anti-critic, only theoretically entertaining the possibility that traditional evangelical beliefs be overturned, though not thinking as much to be demanded by the evidence. The second group of believing critics asserts that certain traditional interpretations of scriptural texts should be revised, but in a manner putatively in keeping with the intention of the biblical documents. And the third group of believing critics not only allows for the reinterpretation of a given passage in Scripture but also agrees with the broader academy that certain errors do exist in the biblical text. Nonetheless, Noll clarifies, ‘on other important matters – belief in the truth-telling character of Scripture, its realistic interpretation, its substantial historicity, its ultimate authority – these critics align themselves with evangelicals who are conservative on critical matters’.³

Shifting the conversation: the theological entailments of historical criticism

It is not our intention to offer our pennyworth to the inerrancy debate. Evangelicals have mulled over the vexed subject of the historical reliability of Scripture for well over a century⁴ (and even though this

² Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 156–60.

³ Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 156–60.

⁴ For a summary of the discussion’s progression and some comments on the current state of the debate, see Jason S. Sexton, ‘How Far beyond Chicago? Assessing Recent Attempts to Reframe the Inerrancy Debate’, *Them* 34.1 (2009), pp. 26–49. Prominent Christian opponents of inerrancy include, e.g., James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1984), pp. 1–7, 37–9, 75–6, 129; Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation:*

has been a largely 'in-house' debate, all too often we have allowed the conversation to disintegrate into rather sharp-tongued disparagement of our opponents' lucidity and charity). In reflection of this diversity within evangelicalism, the present volume includes the insights of collaborators on both sides of the inerrancy debate. Notwithstanding our diverse views of Scripture, we are all convinced that our biblical scholarship cannot be conducted in indifference towards historical-critical questions. So, for the time being, we would like to set aside the subject of inerrancy, especially because evangelicals have been leery of joining in historical criticism for *another* reason: *fear of heresy* (i.e., fear of beliefs that imperil the legitimacy of one's claim to Christianity).

The spectre of heterodoxy deters the engagement of many scholars who are otherwise intrigued by critical questions. These scholars' reasonable concern is as follows: if the Bible might be historically inaccurate in *some* regards, then how can we trust it in *any* regard?⁵ How can we know that Jesus really rose from the dead? How can we believe that God led the Israelites out of Egypt? How can we know that God is truly loving, committed to the salvation of his people? If the Bible could be 'errant' at some point, then how do we know if it is not errant at every point? This argument from the slippery slope appears frequently in discussions of

Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); James D. G. Dunn, *The Living Word*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 71–111. But inerrancy has found defenders in, e.g., Roger Nicole, 'The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield', *Churchman* 97.3 (1983), pp. 198–215; 'The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield (Continued)', *Churchman* 98.1 (1984), pp. 7–27; 'The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield (Continued)', *Churchman* 98.3 (1984), pp. 198–208; G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008); Mark D. Thompson, 'The Divine Investment in Truth: Toward a Theological Account of Biblical Inerrancy', in James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (eds), *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), pp. 71–97.

⁵ This reasoning appears early on in A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, 'Inspiration', *Presbyterian Review* 2 (1881), pp. 225–60 (241–2), and is pervasive in later evangelical thought; see, e.g., Gleason L. Archer, 'The Witness of the Bible to Its Own Inerrancy', in James Montgomery Boice (ed.), *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 85–99 (92); R. C. Sproul, 'Sola Scriptura: Crucial to Evangelicalism', in James Montgomery Boice (ed.), *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 103–19 (116–17). Also criticized in Barr, *Escaping*, pp. 37–9.

inerrancy.⁶ And once the guard rail of inerrancy is removed, the proverbial slippery slope seems dizzyingly steep.

Consequently, *this book discusses the theological challenges that confront the biblical interpreter who engages with historical criticism*. We hope to show that the ‘slippery slope’ is neither pitched at such a terrifying angle nor composed of such shifting soil that negotiating it is an impossible feat. There is some tricky terrain to be crossed, without a doubt. But evangelicalism has produced some sure-footed explorers, and we are, of course, not without a divine guide to help us on our trek.

Still, it might be better to problematize the image of the slippery slope altogether. As J. D. G. Dunn aptly observed, some of us have demanded that Scripture rise to such unnecessary heights of precision that we now find ourselves at an altitude from which descent feels hazardous.⁷

It is precisely because some evangelicals pitch their starting point too *high*, that the only way to progress in knowledge of God and of his truth for some of their disciples is *down* what they regard as the ‘slippery slope’ – a slippery slope which has been created more by their elevation of their interpretation of Scripture *above* Scripture (human tradition above the Word of God) than by anything else.⁸

If one comes to think that there may be historical inaccuracies in scriptural documents, then one is compelled to trudge down the slope, to assess the accuracy of the historical claims of the Bible, not as an apostasy from or assault on Christianity, but in the service of Christianity. This is a labour done through historical criticism; this has been the intention of many historical critics. But the long hiatus of evangelical biblical scholarship from the historical-critical fray means that historical criticism still appears threatening to us. As such, *it is the goal of the present volume to illustrate that historical criticism need not imperil any of the fundamental dogmatic tenets of Christianity*.

We are not alone in disputing the centrality of inerrancy to Christian dogma. Even the great Princetonians A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, in their landmark work ‘Inspiration’, make a salutary distinction

⁶ See e.g. Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part Three*, vol. 4, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), pp. 170–1, 76, 80–1, 84, 88–9, 93–5.

⁷ Cf. Barr, *Escaping*, p. 158.

⁸ Dunn, *Living Word*, p. 100.

between scriptural inspiration and the essential doctrinal tenets of Christianity.⁹

While the Inspiration of the Scriptures is true, and being true is a principle fundamental to the adequate interpretation of Scripture, it nevertheless is not in the first instance a principle fundamental to the truth of the Christian religion . . . Nor should we ever allow it to be believed that the truth of Christianity depends upon any doctrine of Inspiration whatever . . . Inspiration can have no meaning if Christianity is not true, but Christianity would be true and divine, and being so, would stand, even if God had not been pleased to give us . . . an infallible record of that revelation absolutely errorless.¹⁰

Whatever our differences (and on particular topics they surely are many), the contributors to this book do agree that the Bible is inspired in whatever way God intends it to be.¹¹ In a similar vein, the scholars in this volume believe that we should approach Scripture as a collection of historical texts; we feel that we should examine the Bible *inductively* in order to figure out *in what way* God has inspired his written word.¹²

As evangelicals, we believe that there needs to be space for an approach to Scripture that is historical critical. This endeavour ought well to be historical, because we believe that God has chosen to reveal himself in history, to Abraham, to Israel, and ultimately through Jesus. And this endeavour should be critical because, in the footsteps of the great Reformers, we do not want to confuse our human traditions with God's own revelation; we do not want to accord such wholesale deference to

⁹ Admittedly, the various Christian traditions are not univocal on which doctrines are essential to Christianity. Still, it does warrant note that the various early Christian creeds, pre-eminently the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed to which (apart from the *filioque*) the widest ecumenical assent is accorded, have very little to say about historical events outside the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

¹⁰ Hodge and Warfield, 'Inspiration', p. 227; see similar statements in defences of inerrancy: Kenneth S. Kantzer, 'Evangelicals and the Doctrine of Inerrancy', in James Montgomery Boice (ed.), *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 147–56 (149); Thompson, 'Divine Investment', p. 97.

¹¹ The question is whether all the texts in the Bible aim to convey historical facts *in the same way that we modern people suppose they must do*. No reader expects the Parable of the Good Samaritan to communicate historical facts, because everyone recognizes that communicating historical facts is not what parables set out to do.

¹² So also Enns, *Inspiration*, pp. 66, 108, 68; Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 73–132.

the presuppositions of our pious but fallible human predecessors that their limitations impair our access to the way God has spoken in Scripture.

Servant or master? Being critical of historical criticism

It should certainly be admitted that historical-critical inquiry does have its dark side, and one need not read long to amass many examples of a certain species of tiresome rhetoric among its adherents (e.g. language of the sort claiming that historical criticism at long last awakens its practitioners from their dogmatic slumber and frees the New Testament from the theological bondage to which it has been forcibly suppressed). One wonders if the cavalier confidence of such historical critics might not render them like the guards in the front matter of this volume. They are so certain that dead men do not rise that they snore at their posts, blithely unaware of the singular eschatological moment occurring at their backs, as the resurrected God-man steps nimbly out of his casket, over their snoozing forms, and strolls out of the tomb, leaving behind those assured that the doors of life and death are firmly barred against the hand of the Pantocrator.

Early exegetes who committed themselves whole-heartedly to a thoroughly critical approach to Scripture did often come into bitter conflict with ecclesial authorities, and one can trace a steady stream of two-way vituperations from that time to this. While the precise origins of the historical-critical approach to Scripture are debated, it seems clear that at least some of its tributaries flowed from English Deism and continental scepticism about the reliability of biblical accounts. The mere mention of names like Hermann Samuel Reimarus and David Friedrich Strauss is sufficient to recall the chequered history of historical criticism's theological intentions. In this age of ideological awareness, it would be naïve to assume that historical-critical inquiry is value-neutral.

So, at this point, one might raise the question: must historical criticism be viewed as an ideology whose demands are total? If we answer 'yes' to that question,¹³ if we concede that, in Gerd Lüdemann's words, anyone who offers to historical criticism their little finger must in the end give his or her whole hand,¹⁴ then evangelicals should

¹³ So Robert W. Yarbrough, 'The Embattled Bible: Four More Books,' *Them* 34.1 (2009), pp. 6–26.

¹⁴ Gerd Lüdemann, *Das Jesusbild des Papstes: Über Joseph Ratzingers kühnen Umgang mit den Quellen* (Springer: zu Klampen, 2007), p. 151.

steadfastly refuse to practise it. If an ethics of belief will allow only those things that pass the bar of verifiable history, defined in Late Modern terms, then the ideologically determined historical method can permit nothing approaching an orthodox, much less evangelical, Christianity. But if it is possible to approach historical criticism itself critically, to employ its methods in a non-totalizing fashion, to assign to it the position of an unworthy servant in its master's house, then evangelicals must engage (and criticize) the method with full vigour.

In fact, in offering this call for a re-engagement with historical criticism, this volume does not stand as a solitary 'voice crying in the wilderness'. Rather, as contributors we lend our voices to the growing chorus calling evangelicals to engage in an intellectually honest and academically rigorous wrestling match with Scripture in all its troublesome particularity. Scripture is certainly not all trouble, and the old post-Reformation tenet of *claritas Scripturae* expresses an important truth. Any statement of the perspicuity of Scripture, however, becomes irresponsible as soon as it excuses one from the need to join in the laborious task of seeking the perfection Scripture *has*, and not simply the perfection *we* would demand of it. In fact, refusing to engage historical criticism at all can only have the effect of preparing the next generation for apostasy – or at least preparing them to leave evangelicalism. What is the thoughtful evangelical to do should she become convinced that some critical conclusions are, in fact, correct? If as academics in service of our ecclesial constituencies we fail to provide an answer to that question, we have failed in our vocation to think on behalf of (and therefore occasionally prophetically against) the Church. As evangelicalism seeks to shed the anti-intellectualism of its youth, it will take more faith, not less, to walk the narrow path of fidelity in the life of the mind. In this, the task of the evangelical biblical scholar must not be to peddle pious truisms but to make plain the witness of Scripture on its own uncomfortable terms.

It may also be that the theological climate is ripe for a re-engagement with critical questions. Following the work of John Webster, one can sense a certain enthusiasm for the dogmatic relocation of Scripture away from the prolegomena of systematic theology (i.e., from the foundational doctrines that determine everything which follows) to the loci of God and the Church, in which Scripture

can be seen as *one of the means* by which God reconciles the world to himself.¹⁵ As evangelicals, together with Christians of other traditions, gradually awaken from our own epistemological slumber, it becomes more and more clear that foundationalist impulses in theological method have as much to do with an Enlightenment yearning for certainty as with a genuinely Christian theological reflection. If Scripture is not strictly prolegomenous to theology, if Scripture is seen as one aspect or one agent of God's reconciling work through the Spirit in the Church, albeit a uniquely privileged one, then we can pursue theology in the freedom that comes from knowing that the Church and her witness are sustained not by the epistemological certainty of inerrancy but by the sovereign freedom of her God. What is more, the reevaluation of tradition, and the recovery of the common roots of all Christian traditions in the writings of the Church Fathers, provides a certain space for a freedom to pursue historical-critical questions within the bounds of a broad tradition, on the one hand, and allows the study of Scripture to be reclaimed as a meeting ground for ecumenical conversation, on the other. We have seen just such an ecumenical meeting between mainstream Protestant and Catholic exegetes in the years following Vatican II.

In fact, evangelicals may have something to learn from their Catholic peers.¹⁶ In many ways large portions of evangelicalism still inhabit the conflict with Modernism that also captivated the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church. But over the last century, and especially with the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) and *Dei Verbum* (1965), the Catholic Church created space for critical questions to be entertained.¹⁷ This has been the case to such an extent that the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, countenances a wide variety of interpretative approaches to Scripture, and reserves its most negative verdict for obscurantist

¹⁵ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and note the similar evangelical proposals by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), and A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007).

¹⁶ Cf. Sparks, *Human Words*, pp. 194–5.

¹⁷ Cf. Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing the Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 28–31.

fundamentalism. These documents both indicate a concern for conciliar and magisterial orthodoxy and also recognize the need for critical questions to be examined. Failure to do so imperils the ‘plausibility structures’ of those who believe.¹⁸

Deathbed proposals and strange bedfellows

Mention of such a weighty phrase as the ‘dogmatic relocation of Scripture’ immediately raises the question of theological method. Without trying the reader’s patience with a litany of books the present work does *not* aspire to be, we should at least be clear that this is not a work prescribing a singular theological method. In fact, one can discern a variety of approaches to the way one goes about theologizing in the contributions that follow. It may well be that the conclusions of historical criticism warn against pursuing certain types of theological methodology (e.g., a strict foundationalism that requires all of its theological tenets to be explicitly constructed upon the materials supplied by Scripture itself), but it is just as true that a wide variety of theological methodologies can be hospitable towards historical-critical inquiry. The purpose of this book is not to recommend a single way of doing theology, but rather to urge that, whichever method we follow, some acknowledgement of the fruits of critical biblical exegesis should be made.¹⁹

It might be objected that in the call for evangelicals to embrace aspects of historical criticism, we are merely suggesting one more repetition of an all-too-familiar scene in evangelicalism: adopting the consensus position just as that position is itself becoming *passé*. If those who marry the spirit of this age find themselves a widow in the next, evangelicalism has proved itself adept at deathbed marriage proposals. Are we recommending that evangelicals subject themselves

¹⁸ For a brief survey of twentieth-century Catholic approaches to historical criticism, see Benedict Thomas Viviano, ‘The Normativity of Scripture and Tradition in Recent Catholic Theology’, in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (eds), *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), pp. 125–40.

¹⁹ For some recent evangelical reflections on theological method, note, e.g., Treier, *Theological Interpretation*; John G. Stackhouse (ed.), *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*.

to historical criticism at just the time the rest of the Church and academy seem to be throwing off its shackles? That seems doubtful. While we may be witnessing historical criticism's fall from hegemony, with an awareness that its methods are not the only means of approaching the biblical text in an academically rigorous way, this realization appears to be more of a chastisement than a wholesale abandonment of the method. It may prove healthy to engage historical criticism when the phrase 'assured critical result' is now relegated to scare-quotes and used sarcastically as often as not.²⁰ In the best light, the current willingness to be critical of the historical-critical method may help evangelicals to remain evangelical but still expose themselves to an honest and searching engagement with necessary historical questions.

This type of work has not been characteristic of evangelical biblical scholarship, in large part because of the philosophical paradigms to which we have intentionally or unintentionally wed ourselves. It is by now something of a truism to point to the close ties between the rise of evangelicalism and the hegemony of Modernist thought. As we will briefly sketch below, many evangelicals have accepted certain tenets of Modernism (that deceptively monolithic concept), including the standards of truth and error by which Scripture is evaluated and other epistemological judgements about the way the biblical text refers to history. Though they have at the same time maintained a critical distance from much post-Enlightenment thinking, now some are tempted to forge uneasy alliances with postmodern rejections or critiques of Modernism, without considering the full range of philosophical and theological issues involved. In the end, one strange bedfellow is exchanged for another.

But the postmodern option is only one avenue for contemporary evangelicalism, and it is unlikely that the evangelical movement as a whole will come to a thorough-going acceptance of its central emphases. Historically, evangelicals and their forebears have sought to defend the authority of Scripture on the epistemological grounds set by Modernism, including especially the strict equation of meaning with historical reference (on which see below). Even if evangelicals rightly feel themselves chastened by the insistent postmodern claims that

²⁰ Note the poignant reflections along these lines in Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 6–30.

all of our knowledge is situated and perspectival, it is difficult to envision evangelicalism eschewing its concern for history entirely. The movement has a long legacy of reading the Bible historically, both in the sense of seeking to understand it in its historical context and in the sense of reading the Bible for history. Especially in terms of the latter, problems arose as the world of the text became divorced from the world outside the text. It is to that divorce we now turn.

From pre-critical to critical schools of thought

For some schools of thought, the reliability of the biblical texts' witness to historical events is irrelevant to Christian theology. A variety of theologians over the last three centuries have circumvented historical-critical discussion: some have considered the theological message to be sufficiently communicated by the stories of Scripture themselves;²¹ others have opined that the theological content of Scripture is to be found in universal religious ideals²² or essential human religious experiences²³ expressed in the text; yet others have surmised that the biblical writings are irreducibly polyvalent in their theological potential.²⁴ But evangelical scholars cannot be cavalier about the historical reference of the Scriptures. We all believe that certain events happened and that they possess significance for our experience and hopes in the special history of the people of God.²⁵ This is particularly poignant because of the nearly ubiquitous expectation of a genuinely historical and future eschatological redemption. We all admit that the Scriptures transmit and give interpretive expression to those events. But the crucial question which this book hopes to

²¹ This view was typical of the Yale school, though its adherents typically endorse a judicious balancing of historical criticism and the canonical approach associated especially with Brevard Childs; see also George Lindbeck, 'The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation', in Stephen E. Fowl (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 39–52.

²² Spinoza, eighteenth-century Romanticists, Neologians.

²³ Such as Schleiermacher's God-consciousness.

²⁴ Deconstructionist and postmodern interpreters.

²⁵ See further Christopher M. Hays, 'Theological Hermeneutics and the Historical Jesus: A Critical Evaluation of Gadamerian Approaches and a New Methodological Proposal', in Jan van der Watt (ed.), *The Quest for the Real Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 142–6.

pose is: *to what degree* do the enscripturated events, attributions and expectations *need* to have occurred as described in order to maintain the integrity of evangelical Christian theology? *To what degree* is evangelical Christian theology *threatened* by the conclusions of historical criticism?

In the days of pre-critical, sixteenth-century interpretation, when giants like Calvin, Luther and Erasmus strode the theological landscape and wielded the Bible as a revived authority against a myriad of episcopal and Scholastic excesses, there were narrower grounds on which to impugn the integrity of Scripture's historical descriptions. No great mass of Assyrian inscriptions, no excavation of Jericho and no modern astrophysical theory on the age of the universe yet existed whereby one might question the historicity of the Scriptures. The Reformers' soaring encomia on the character of the Bible, to which evangelicals often refer in bolstering their views of inerrancy, were primarily oriented towards disputing the Roman appeal to the necessity of tradition for understanding the Bible. Thus, during the Reformation, there was little historical or theological impetus to generate dispute over whether the events described in Scripture actually occurred as such in time-space history.

With the Enlightenment and the rise of critical biblical scholarship, all that changed. We now live in a world where the scriptural texts can be called into question by a myriad of considerations of admittedly variable reliability. Evangelicals have by no means lain down in the face of this onslaught. We have often resisted specious reasoning, questionable presuppositions of naturalism, Hegelian views of historical development and the American-academic penchant for iconoclasm.²⁶ We have excelled in discussions of textual criticism, intertextuality, ancient languages and exegesis. But when the weight of historical evidence tips the balance of critical probability away from the biblical witness, evangelicals frequently take refuge in the shadow of Calvin and the pre-critical assumption that the text accurately transmits events as they occurred.²⁷ Discarding the academic tools we use gladly when the evidence is in our favour, we all too often take the doctrine of inerrancy in hand and (to adopt Schweitzer's memorable image) go 'seal hunting', clubbing historical criticism on the head

²⁶ Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 33–4, 86.

²⁷ Whether or not this appeal is entirely fair to Calvin remains a different matter.

with our confidence in the unswerving factual accuracy of the Bible. But without inerrancy as a cudgel, can we truly dispute the substance of historical criticism? It is hard to say, considering the limited degree to which evangelicals have made inroads into this discussion.²⁸ Are not we evangelicals, who hang so much hope on the veracity of the events described in Scripture, obligated to make a genuinely critical assessment of the historicity of those events?

Such an assessment would include discussion of whether or not the biblical text actually evinces an expectation that we consider its narratives to transmit historical, time-space occurrences. And this runs up against a fundamental hermeneutical dispute over the meaning of a given biblical text. Hans Frei, in his magisterial work *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, charted the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century disputes over the locus of meaning in narrative texts; his account of the debate's progress is worth summarizing here, since one can hardly find a more capable guide through this complex material.

History and story

Beginning with the writings of the English deist Anthony Collins, much eighteenth-century scholarship came to equate the meaning of narrative, history-like texts with their *ostensive historical reference* (i.e., with the events that the text, apparently, claimed to have happened).²⁹ Though Romantic and Idealist scholars disputed Collins's perspective, the underlying universalism on which their alternative views depended was incompatible with orthodox convictions about the special revelatory character of Scripture and with the traditional Christian desire to see oneself in continuity with the biblical history (so J. Cocceius and J. A. Bengel). As such, the heirs of the Reformation tradition assented to Collins's equation of meaning with ostensive referent. Thereupon, these conservative interpreters found themselves pitched in a fierce battle over the historical accuracy of the biblical text.

²⁸ This should not be taken as a sweeping rejection of the evangelical scholars who have broken with the general pattern and seriously engaged with historical criticism; rather, it is an invitation to provide them with company.

²⁹ See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 66–85.

The next movement to appear on the horizon did shift attention away from the historicity of the biblical narratives; focus was instead directed towards the ‘mythicizing’ mindset of the ancient writers whose thought and reasoning had allegedly not yet coalesced into an abstract conceptualization. Advocates of this (rather condescending) perspective claimed that the biblical writers birthed elaborate myths in an ‘unconscious folk poeticizing’. In other words, these scholars claimed that the ancient Jews told myths to describe God’s character and work because their pre-Enlightenment minds lacked other categories to describe the transcendent. This mythical option, perfected by David Friedrich Strauss,³⁰ won no popularity among traditionalist interpreters, and so it continued to seem that the only orthodox location of meaning in narrative texts was in the ostensibly referenced historical event.

Frei goes on to explain how liberal Protestant theologians after Kant (figures such as Schleiermacher) argued that the theological endeavour required a conscious self-positioning; the idea was (and is) that people only know God in the religious relationship to which they dispose themselves and that this relationship does not entail knowing God as God is *in se*.³¹ Accordingly, the individual interpreter moved from being seen as an objective observer to being considered a religious subject. Attention was thereby cast on the function of the Bible in religious experience.

To sum up 200 years of scholarship, the discipline of hermeneutics went from focusing on the historicity of the biblical stories to focusing on the religious effects that the biblical stories had on their modern readers. The problem is that the vast majority of evangelical scholarship eschews Kant’s conviction that the individual interpreter is *the* determining factor in theological understanding.³² So on what hook can we hang our hermeneutical hat?

Frei ended his monograph with Schleiermacher and Hegel because they mark, as he saw it, the total ‘eclipse of the biblical narrative’ (hence the monograph’s title); they represent the culmination of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tendency to locate the meaning of the biblical narratives somewhere other than the text itself.

³⁰ Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 233–44.

³¹ Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 283–4.

³² Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, p. 146.

Frei himself was critical about the relocation of meaning from the text to an ostensive historical referent, or to an ideal referent, or to the mythical consciousness of the writer, or to the divine Spirit as refracted by the unique religious disposition of the interpreter. It was Frei's hope that interpreters might locate the meaning of the Bible in the narrative texts themselves;³³ Frei understood the Bible as providing history-like metanarratives that can shape our world-view irrespective of whether or not the events they depict occurred in history.³⁴

Most evangelical interpreters rightly feel themselves tugged in two directions by Frei's desire to locate meaning in the narrative text. Such a perspective lends itself to theological interpretation of Scripture and sees the text itself as mediating the word of God. Frei's perspective, however, entails a broad (though not undifferentiated) indifference towards the time-space reality of the narrated events that most evangelical scholars would not countenance.³⁵

The picture Frei paints, for all of its diachronic and philosophical detail, includes certain sweeping strokes that are only acceptable if one plans on drawing conclusions similar to Frei's. As the title of the book betrays, Frei's primary concern is with the 'narrative' portions of the Bible.³⁶ As such, he sets up a dichotomy between

³³ Though Frei is sometimes coy about this, see Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 280; his personal hermeneutical agenda becomes much more apparent in 'Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal', in George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (eds), *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 26–44 (38–41), and 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?', in Frank McConnell (ed.), *The Bible and Narrative Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 36–77 (66–73).

³⁴ Frei, 'Remarks', pp. 34–7; Frei, 'Theology and Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations', in George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (eds), *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 110–14; Frei, 'Response to "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal"', in George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (eds), *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 207–12 (208–10).

³⁵ Cf. Graham A. Cole, 'The Peril of a "Historyless" Systematic Theology', in James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (eds), *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), pp. 55–69.

³⁶ Of course, such an undifferentiated category as 'narrative' (or sometimes 'realistic narrative') is hardly a sufficient generic heading for the sundry texts of Gospels, Acts, Former Prophets, Genesis, Exodus, Ezra, Nehemiah, Jonah and Daniel. There are a myriad of generic subcategories into which these books and portions of these books can and should be placed.

construing meaning as ostensive reference and meaning as residing in the narrative. Given this dichotomy, most non-evangelical scholars who still want to derive theological meaning from texts such as Genesis 1—11 or Jonah have opted to interpret those narratives as stories rather than as histories. Now, this may well be the right way to understand *some* biblical narratives. In *some* cases, the most historically responsible way to understand the text and to respect the text *as a historically situated document* may be to ask about the meaning of the narrative, rather than its historicity. But this is not invariably and always the case. Sometimes, it really does matter (to the ancient author and the twenty-first-century reader) whether or not an event occurred in the way in which the Bible describes it.³⁷ And rigorous Christian biblical interpretation needs to be able to tell the difference. We need to be critical enough to see a text for what it is, in all its historical particularity, and we need to be evangelical enough to realize that historical-critical decisions sometimes have theological ramifications.

Critical *and* evangelical

The present work, then, is a call for conservative interpreters of the Bible to be both critical *and* evangelical. What precisely constitutes an ‘evangelical’ has been a matter of debate, and our intention is not to circumscribe the boundaries of that term (which will always be disputed) but to aim for the centre. In this sense, we find ourselves operating in sympathy with the recent definition by Timothy Larsen in the *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*:

An evangelical is: 1. an orthodox Protestant 2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield; 3. who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice; 4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross; 5. and who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and

³⁷ Hays, ‘Theological Hermeneutics’, pp. 142–6.

others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.³⁸

To such believers, then, we address our charge.

Procedure

This book aims to stimulate evangelicals to engage seriously with the historical-critical method by demonstrating that the very fact of such engagement does not jeopardize one's Christian confessions. To this end, we will discuss seven crucial and controversial historical-critical topics, not in order to make a final ruling on any single issue, but in order to evaluate the potential theological impact of historical criticism. Each of the chapters of this book will begin by delineating critical opinion on a given topic and then proceed to unpack the *theological ramifications* of a given critical idea for Christian dogma.

While each chapter will follow this basic procedure, moving from describing critical theses to evaluating the theological consequences of those theses, individual chapters are tailored in such a way as to highlight the most significant critical and theological issues pertaining to the topic in question. Sometimes critical opinion is so fragmented that various perspectives will need to be examined separately (as in studies of the historical Jesus or of the relationship between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the epistles). At other times, critical scholarship is largely of one mind on a given issue insofar as it is relevant to Christian theology (as is the case regarding the disputed historicity of Adam or the presence of pseudepigraphic texts in the biblical canon), and we will not try the reader's patience by detailing the infinite subsidiary disagreements between critical scholars.

Different doctrinal issues will occupy the various chapters, as suggested by the historical-critical topic being examined. As is no doubt obvious, historical Jesus scholarship (for example) has ramifications for

³⁸ Timothy Larsen, 'Defining and Locating Evangelicalism', in Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1–14 (1). Larsen himself presents the definition as a development of David Bebbington's well-known 'quadrilateral': 'There are the four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross' (D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* [London: Unwin Hyman, 1989], p. 3).

a myriad of Christian doctrines (Christology, eschatology, soteriology), while a subject such as the 'failure' of prophecy bears primarily on the nature of special revelation. But, regardless of the fact that some chapters may focus on a single aspect of critical opinion or Christian doctrine, each chapter will follow the same basic procedure of *describing* standard historical-critical views and then *working out* what might be the theological consequences of those views. Finally, individual chapters may make tentative suggestions about how the authors think evangelicals might move forward in these discrete fields of inquiry.³⁹

It should now be obvious that this book is as much about theology as it is about historical criticism; in fine, it is about the significance of historical criticism for Christian theology. As the chapters unfold, we will at times find Christian theology utterly unscathed by critical research; on some occasions we will see that certain doctrines might need to be reformulated in the light of new historical insights; and in certain instances we will discover that historical criticism actually *enhances* our apprehension of God and his self-revelation in Scripture. Simply put, we will see that historical criticism is a tool, one which can be difficult to wield, which can cause damage if misused, but which also can be immensely valuable and constructive if placed in capable hands.

We should underscore that this book does not propose to defend one given critical perspective over another. After all, historical-critical scholarship remains an active discipline, and we do not presume to have historical answers for every critical debate. This volume is not an introduction to biblical criticism; it is, rather, the book that the authors very much wish they had as a companion text when they were students sitting in lectures on biblical criticism. What this book provides is an accessible and succinct account of the theological consequences of historical-critical scholarship. We do not claim that theological considerations will finally lead scholarship to draw a single conclusion on a given topic, but we do aim to show that, however complicated these issues may be historically, they do not require us to jettison our Christian (or even our evangelical) beliefs. Insofar as evangelical scholars, even our own colleagues and former professors, by and large have not embraced critical scholarship, we hope that this book provides an encouragement to join the fray. And insofar as students, pastors

³⁹ Naturally, our contributors are only endorsing the views expressed in their own essays, not necessarily those of any other chapter in the volume.

and interested laity often find themselves stymied or at very least disconcerted by historical-critical scholarship, we hope that this book provides comfort that the work of the university has not crowded out or discredited the faith of the Church. The academy can be an ally of the Church, not just an aloof, abstruse or snide foe.

Outline

The argument of this book unfolds in nine chapters. Since this first chapter has already given a general account of the historical and intellectual context of contemporary evangelical biblical scholarship, the discrete chapters of the volume's body will focus on particular critical topics.

Chapter 2 ('Adam and the fall', by Christopher M. Hays and Stephen Lane Herring) plunges into the deep-end of contemporary controversy, assessing the commonplace critical denial of the historicity of Genesis 2—3. This chapter, however, quickly clammers out of the trenches of the historical debate, and walks along the ridge of Christian theology, asking how the doctrine of sin (hamartiology) would be affected if the critical scholars were right. In the end, the authors show that, wherever the debate about the historicity of Adam may end, essential Christian doctrine will remain on sure footing, even though certain features of that doctrine might need to be refined.

Chapter 3 ('The exodus: fact, fiction or both?' by Christopher B. Ansberry) evaluates the polarized debate between minimalist and maximalist approaches to the exodus from Egypt. Drawing on recent advances in our understanding of ancient historiography and cultural memory, Ansberry dispels the notion that biblical authority can only be respected by a maximalist affirmation of the historicity of the exodus. Nonetheless, Ansberry teases out the way in which Israel's sense of election, her hope of redemption and, indeed, Christian affirmation of Jesus' messianic status are based, in varying degrees, on the belief that God did indeed intervene to save Israel from Egypt. Thus, this chapter identifies shortcomings in both minimalist and maximalist approaches to the exodus, and creates theological and methodological space for a constructive and critical engagement with the subject of Israel's salvation from Egypt.

The fourth chapter of the book ('No covenant before the exile?' by Christopher B. Ansberry and Jerry Hwang) tackles the covenant,

a subject that gets little air-time in the popular media, and yet is at the heart of the way Old Testament scholars understand the history of Israel. After introducing the academic disagreement about whether the Deuteronomic covenant was developed before or after the exile, Hwang and Ansberry ask what it might mean if the book was not penned by Moses, or even if it possessed only a limited historical connection to Israel's greatest prophet. They then turn a constructive corner and explain how the book of Deuteronomy, if it in fact was progressively composed in the centuries after Moses' life, models for us the way in which the people of God continued to appropriate and reapply the revelation of the Mosaic covenant for subsequent generations.

The fifth and sixth chapters confront phenomena present in both the Old and New Testaments. Chapter 5 ('Problems with prophecy', by Amber Warhurst, Seth B. Tarrer and Christopher M. Hays) examines features of biblical prophecy that have been thought to imperil the truth-claims of those prophecies. Historical critics have pointed out (1) that some events foretold by prophets did not in fact come to pass, (2) that some prophecies appear to have been written 'after the fact' and (3) that sometimes prophetic fulfilment was repeatedly reshaped and deferred into the future. Certain readers have concluded on these grounds that the biblical prophecies are 'false', thus impugning the Christian belief in the truthfulness of scriptural revelations. Nonetheless, Warhurst, Tarrer and Hays show that this negative judgement is actually a confusion of how the prophetic genre serves to communicate divine revelation. As such, historical-critical examination of prophecy can actually provide Christians with greater clarity about how God uses prophecy to reveal himself to his people.

Chapter 6 ('Pseudepigraphy and the canon', by Christopher B. Ansberry, C. A. Strine, Edward W. Klink III and David Lincicum) takes up the historical-critical consensus that certain books (or parts of books) in the Scriptures were not composed by the people to whom they were attributed. While this argument has been thought by many to obliterate any claim to authority or revelation, the authors of this essay show it is far from the case. Utilizing the Pentateuch and the Gospel of John, Ansberry and Klink explain how ancient conceptions of authorship and authority differ from modern suppositions, thus alleviating the burden to prove that Moses, for example, composed the Torah. Strine and Lincicum then proceed,

through examination of Isaiah and the Pauline corpus, to unpack something of the intricate process by which God condescends to make himself known in Scripture and over time. This study not only alleviates much of the anxiety evangelicals have felt about the phenomenon of pseudepigraphy but also ushers us into a more robust and animating understanding of how God has made himself known through the Bible.

Chapter 7 ('The historical Jesus', by Michael Daling and Christopher M. Hays) brings us to the focal point of Christian belief: the person and work of Christ. Taking snapshots of four of the most debated and theologically poignant topics in Jesus scholarship (Jesus' self-presentation, miracles, the virgin birth and the resurrection), the chapter sketches the range of opinion among Jesus scholars and describes what would be the ramifications of such critical Jesuses for the doctrines of Christology, soteriology and eschatology. The chapter shows not only that Christians can do serious, critical Jesus scholarship without damaging their theology but also that Christians must support such work in defence of the faith of the Church.

Chapter 8 ('The Paul of Acts and the Paul of the epistles', by Aaron J. Kuecker and Kelly D. Liebengood) bridles the extraordinarily unruly topic of whether the Paul portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles accords with the Paul that we espy through his own letters. Kuecker and Liebengood explain how scholars have attempted to line up the chronologies of Paul's missions as described in Galatians 2 and Acts 15; they lay out the different critical options and analyse how scholars' preconceptions about scriptural authority influence their approaches to this topic. Kuecker and Liebengood then turn to a second critical issue in Pauline studies, comparing the theological content of Paul's letters with the speeches attributed to him in Acts. In the process, the authors both distil a complex array of exegetical debates and highlight a number of essential but underappreciated factors in critical interpretation of Scripture. They close the essay with several theological considerations to bear in mind, not only when addressing difficult issues in Pauline studies, but also when engaging as a Christian in the historical-critical endeavour.

The final chapter of the book ('Faithful criticism and a critical faith', by Christopher B. Ansberry and Christopher M. Hays) stands on the shoulders of the previous eight in order to call evangelical Christian scholars to deep and productive engagement with historical

criticism, both for the defence and for the enrichment of the Church. Studying the Bible critically need not lead to a theological nihilism that loses touch with tradition in a historical-critical void; evangelical critics can still affirm the majority of their theological heritage while doing justice to historical judgements within the realm of public verification. Accordingly, the book's editors encourage a new generation of Christian biblical scholars to engage in a *faithful criticism*, which grapples with the sharpest challenges of contemporary research all the while being rooted in Christian orthodoxy. Simultaneously, the chapter calls for the cultivation of a *critical faith*, an eagerness to know God even if one must subject one's traditional assumptions to scrutiny in the light of new insights. In hopes of spurring on such research, the book closes by offering some theological advice on how to engage productively with historical criticism. Collating the insights of all the authors of the volume, we proffer some hermeneutical and spiritual perspectives that we pray might aid a new generation of scholars in presenting the Bible as God's word, the inspired account of how God has revealed himself to his people in history, for the benefit of his people throughout history. To our minds, this is part of the work, privilege and responsibility of the twenty-first-century Christian biblical scholar. We are obliged and fortunate to surrender ourselves to God's self-revelation . . . even if that revelation takes forms we did not anticipate.

Suggestions for further reading

- Enns, Peter, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
- Frei, Hans W., *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
- Hoffmeier, James K., and Magary, Dennis R. (eds), *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).
- Noll, Mark, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd edn (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004).
- Sparks, Kenton L., *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).