



FOREWORD BY JOHN D. WOODBRIDGE

DO
HISTORICAL
MATTERS
MATTER
TO FAITH?



A CRITICAL APPRAISAL
OF MODERN AND POSTMODERN
APPROACHES TO SCRIPTURE



EDITED BY
JAMES K. HOFFMEIER AND
DENNIS R. MAGARY



Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?

A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Tobias' Outerwear for Books
Cover image: Getty Images
Interior design and typesetting: Lakeside Design Plus

First printing 2012
Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2571-1
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2574-2
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2572-8
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2573-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Do historical matters matter to faith? : a critical appraisal of modern and postmodern approaches to Scripture / edited by James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary ; foreword by John D. Woodbridge.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-2571-1 (tp)

1. Bible—History of biblical events. 2. Bible—Evidences, authority, etc. I. Hoffmeier, James Karl, 1951– II. Magary, Dennis Robert, 1951–
BS635.D56 2012
220.6—dc23

2011037802

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SH 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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PREFACE



During the past thirty years biblical and theological scholarship has had to cope with many serious challenges to orthodox and evangelical understanding of Scripture. In addition to the Enlightenment positivist readings of the Bible (which continue with us after more than two centuries), we can now add postmodern literary approaches that treat the biblical narratives solely as literature that should be read as fiction. One of the consequences of this development has been the minimalist-maximalist historiography debate. The generally skeptical mood toward much of the history of the Bible (e.g., the Genesis ancestors of ancient Israel, the Egyptian sojourn, the exodus, the wilderness wanderings, the conquest of Canaan, and the united monarchy) has naturally taken its toll on the academic study of Israelite religion, Old Testament theology, and biblical theology, as these disciplines are intimately connected to history.

These two radically distinct paradigms for analyzing the Old Testament, despite the methodological differences, come to similar conclusions regarding the historical trustworthiness of the Hebrew narratives from Genesis to 1 Kings. J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes well represent the “modern” (yet two-centuries-old!) approach when they opine:

We hold that the main story line of Genesis–Joshua—creation, pre-Flood patriarchs, great Flood, second patriarchal age, entrance into Egypt, twelve tribes descended from the twelve brothers, escape from Egypt, complete collections of laws and religious instructions handed down at Mt. Sinai, forty years of wandering in the wilderness, miraculous conquests of Canaan, . . .—is an artificial and theologically influenced literary construct.¹

Adherents of the postmodern hermeneutic arrive at nearly the same conclusion. Thomas Thompson serves as a representative for this model: “Biblical Israel, as an element of tradition and story, such as the murmuring stories in the wilderness, . . . is a theological and literary creation.”² Similarly, Philip

¹J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 78.

²Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (London: Basic Books, 1999).

Davies seemingly offers an obituary on the age of Moses, declaring, “Most biblical scholars accept that there was no historical counterpart to this epoch, and most intelligent biblical archaeologists accept this too.”³ Traditional critical scholars are dismayed by these extreme positions, as is evidenced in the title of a recent article by Siegfried Herrmann, “The Devaluation of the Old Testament as a Historical Source.”⁴

New Testament studies has not been immune to scholarship that has challenged traditional readings of the Bible. There were the quest for the historical Jesus that began a century ago with Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing approach to the Gospels, both of which treated the New Testament as a suspect document historically. Just as Old Testament scholars have been dominated by the radical stances of the historical minimalists in recent decades, the field of New Testament studies has had to deal with the Jesus Seminar and its dismissive claims of the Gospels with respect to the birth, life, and death of Jesus.

Evangelical biblical scholars have rightly rejected the extreme positions of historical minimalism, whether in Old Testament or New Testament studies. The rise of postmodern approaches, despite the many negative aspects, has detracted from the ascendancy of traditional higher criticism as practiced in the academy since the nineteenth century. One consequence of these competing approaches to biblical studies is that there is no longer a consensus among critical scholars; rather, a plurality of approaches is in vogue. Given the loss of a consensus on the academic study of the Bible, it is surprising that some evangelicals would challenge their colleagues to embrace the findings of critical scholarship, to dismiss the historicity of many events in both Testaments, and then to insist that intellectual honesty requires an admission that the Bible contains many errors and inconsistencies. It goes without saying, in the view of some, that the doctrine of inerrancy should be radically revised, if not laid to rest. “Progressive evangelicals,” as they have identified themselves, are raising some important questions regarding recent academic trends and traditional evangelical views of Scripture. They advocate looking to Scripture purely for theology while setting aside questions of history in the name of bending the knee to the latest conclusions of critical biblical scholarship—a new manifestation of an old neoorthodoxy.

³Philip Davies, “The Intellectual, the Archaeologists and the Bible,” in *The Land I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of J. Maxwell Miller*, ed. J. A. Dearman and M. P. Graham (Sheffield: JSOT, 2001), 247.

⁴Siegfried Herrmann, “The Devaluation of the Old Testament as a Historical Source,” in *Israel’s Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. V. Philips Long (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993).

Peter Enns's book *Inspiration and Incarnation*⁵ has raised some good questions about the relationship between ancient Near Eastern literature and the Bible and inspiration. It was, however, Kenton Sparks's more recent book *God's Word in Human Words*⁶ that turned out to be the catalyst for this collection of essays. While both books focus largely on the Old Testament, and both of these scholars are Old Testament scholars, they do treat New Testament and theological issues. Sparks's book is the more provocative, as he feels that the way around the "contradictions" and "errors" in the Bible is to accept source-critical theories that the Bible preserves multiple traditions within a narrative or among different books (e.g., Kings and Chronicles, or the Synoptic Gospels and John).

This collaborative book is an outgrowth of a panel discussion by faculty members of the Department of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in February 2009. The noon colloquium organized by the Old Testament department was attended by almost eighty students. Dennis Magary, chair of the department, moderated the meeting, and Willem VanGemeren, Richard Averbeck, and James Hoffmeier offered appraisals, followed by a period of questions and answers. Students indicated much appreciation that we were addressing some of these issues, and many expressed the hope that we would publish our thoughts and critique. Not only were Old Testament students present, but a broad range of students from other departments and programs participated, and the questions raised during the seminar and subsequent to it reflected the breadth of Sparks's book, which treats problems with the Old and New Testaments, but also theology and church history.

The questions our students were asking regarding critical issues and the Bible, especially issues identified by Enns and Sparks, prompted Drs. Magary and Hoffmeier to organize this book and to expand the list of contributors to include a broad range of scholars who represent the fields of Old and New Testament studies, archaeology, theology, and church history, using their respective specializations to address these issues head on. Our desire is to offer thoughtful, substantive responses to questions raised by critical scholars, regardless of their theological orientation, rather than *ad hominem* retorts. While this book will place a great deal of emphasis on the Old Testament and archaeology, there will also be chapters on the New Testament (especially touching on synoptic problems and the New Testament view of

⁵Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁶Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

the Old Testament) and what happens to biblical and systematic theology when history is dismissed.

Sparks's book *God's Word in Human Words* reads like a reprise of James Barr's *Fundamentalism*,⁷ especially his attack on evangelical/conservative biblical scholars (see esp. chap. 5). Sparks resuscitates Barr's caricature of evangelical scholars, which was outdated and inaccurate in the 1970s, a caricature that portrayed evangelicals as not really understanding critical scholarly methods because they were trained in theologically conservative institutions, or as taking the easy path of archaeology and Near Eastern studies in order to avoid dealing with critical issues raised by critical scholarship. Barr asserted, "Probably none of the writers of conservative evangelical literature on the Bible *who are actual professional biblical scholars* can be found to be so completely negative towards the main trend in biblical scholarship as are those like Kitchen who look on the subject from the outside."⁸ This elitist view is clearly a broadside against scholars who are looking at the Old Testament (in particular) from the perspective of Near Eastern studies. It is as if only when one agrees with the "assured results" of critical scholarship can one be treated as a "professional biblical scholar."

Equally condescending is Sparks's recent pronouncement that "many fundamentalists avoided these difficulties by majoring in 'safe' disciplines (text criticism, Greek classics, and Near Eastern studies) or by studying in institutions where critical issues could be avoided (especially in conservative Jewish Schools and in British universities)."⁹ (The contributors of this book who did their doctoral work in British universities—Aberdeen, Oxford, and Cambridge—would hardly agree with this assessment!) The readers need only to review the list of contributors to see where they completed their PhDs, and it will be abundantly clear that the vast majority worked in secular and critical contexts and had to deal directly with critical issues. In fact, even in the context of Near Eastern studies, the critical approaches of *Alttestamentlers* were a part of the curriculum.

The writers in this volume who use archaeological materials as a vehicle for understanding the context of a passage of Scripture and treat them as tools for interpreting biblical texts are all *practicing* field archaeologists who work with both the biblical and many cognate languages as well. Three of the authors were students of William G. Dever, the dean of North American Syro-Palestinian archaeology, who in the 1970s and 1980s chastised conservative biblical scholars for being "armchair" archaeologists who lacked field

⁷Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

⁸Ibid., 131, his emphasis.

⁹Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 145.

training and, therefore, the requisite tools for having the proper conversation between archaeology and texts. Thomas Davis, Steven Ortiz, and Michael Hasel studied with Dever because they were eager to become professional archaeologists in order to work alongside biblical studies in a responsible way.

Many of the great biblical and Near Eastern scholars of the past fifty years (e.g., William F. Albright, Cyrus Gordon, Donald Wiseman, William Hallo, and Kenneth Kitchen) considered the contextual materials to be vital tools for interpreting the Old Testament, a position taken by many of the contributors to this volume. It is hardly an easy and safe approach as, in addition to working with the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the various literary approaches used in biblical studies, there are the demands of knowing cognate languages and ancient Near Eastern history, religion, and culture. Having a working knowledge of all these fields is no easy task (and raises other questions and challenges to faith and theology), but it is an extremely rewarding and valuable way of reading the Bible. Furthermore, the scholars mentioned above saw the ancient Near Eastern contextual approach to offer an external method for evaluating critical theories that were formulated about the Bible in Western universities rather than in the Semitic world where the biblical text originated. What is curious about Barr's and Sparks's view on those who come at the Bible "from the outside" is that they seem so certain about the conclusions of (objective) critical scholarship (despite its constant shifting of positions and ever-increasing number of newer critical approaches) that they do not welcome an analytical evaluation of their own guild's cherished "critical" scholarship. This is hardly a scientific or intellectually honest position when exculpatory evidence is produced against their charges. It seems, rather, that there is a special pleading for methodologies that have been seriously challenged in recent years (as some of the essays in this volume show) from *within* the guild itself. Postmodern critical scholars of the past twenty to thirty years have done more damage to the assured results of Enlightenment critical theories than all the evangelical scholars of the last century.

We offer this book to help address some of the questions raised about the historicity, accuracy, and inerrancy of the Bible by colleagues within our faith community, as well as those outside it. There will be a special emphasis placed on matters of history and the historicity of biblical narratives, both Old and New Testaments, as this seems presently to be a burning issue for theology and faith. Hence, we begin with a group of essays that deal with theological matters before moving on to topics in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and archaeology.

It is always difficult when individuals attack something or someone near and dear. When the stakes are as high as they are in the present dialogue,

language can become strident. Motives can all too easily be misunderstood or misconstrued. We seek not to impugn but to inspire. It is our hope that the essays in this volume will engage the issues and their proponents with the grace and Christian character with which the late Donald J. Wiseman, the scholar in whose memory we dedicate this book, went about his work. Just about two years ago, Donald passed away, leaving a wonderful legacy as a biblical and Near Eastern scholar (a key figure in the NIV translation committee, a founder of Tyndale House in Cambridge, a writer of Old Testament commentaries, and a contributing Assyriologist) and as a churchman and academic mentor. He was a gracious and kind gentleman whose irenic spirit we should all emulate.

✻ Part 1

BIBLICAL,
SYSTEMATIC,
AND HISTORICAL
THEOLOGY



1

RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY, THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE, AND CRITICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

A Theologian's Reflections

THOMAS H. MCCALL



Introduction

“Do you want us to listen to you?”¹ Peter van Inwagen puts this question to contemporary mainstream New Testament scholarship. He makes clear just who he means by “you”: those who engage in historical-critical study of the New Testament, those who presuppose either a denial of “or neutrality about its authority, to investigate such matters as the authorship, dates, histories of composition, historical reliability and mutual dependency of the various books of the New Testament,” those who study the Bible by such methods as “source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism.”² He also specifies just who he means by “us”: believing Christians who are not trained New Testament scholars but who regard the New Testament as historically reliable; “we” are “ordinary churchgoers” and “pastors who minister to the ordinary

¹Peter van Inwagen, “Do You Want Us to Listen to You?,” in *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 101. An earlier version of this essay appeared as “Critical Studies of the New Testament and the User of the New Testament,” in *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1993), 159–90.

²Van Inwagen, “Do You Want Us to Listen to You?,” 101, 105.

churchgoers,” as well as “theologians who regard the New Testament as an authoritative divine revelation.”³

Do you want us to listen to you? Van Inwagen asks this as a serious question, and he follows it with an equally serious argument for some surprising conclusions.

First, “ordinary” Christians (Christians not trained in New Testament scholarship) have grounds for believing that the gospel stories are (essentially) historical—grounds independent of the claims of historical scholarship. Secondly, New Testament scholars have established nothing that tells against the thesis that ordinary Christians have grounds independent of historical studies for believing in the essential historicity of the gospel stories. Thirdly, ordinary Christians may therefore ignore any skeptical historical claims made by New Testament scholars with a clear intellectual conscience.⁴

What van Inwagen says about New Testament studies may just as easily be extended to critical biblical scholarship (hereafter CBS) more generally.⁵ Many proponents of CBS may be surprised and puzzled by van Inwagen’s question, and may reply, “*Of course we want you to listen to us. We expect you to listen to us, and any honest seeker of truth naturally will look to the experts in the field for information. If you want to know the sober truth of the important issues at stake, then of course you will listen to us. Indeed, failure to listen to us is evidence of noetic laziness (at best) or intellectual dishonesty (at worst).*”

But what *would* prompt a question such as that of van Inwagen? What is it that drives arguments such as his? A well-respected analytic philosopher, van Inwagen is not known for intellectual laziness, and to dismiss his claims out of hand as “dishonest” would itself be both lazy and judgmental. Furthermore, he speaks for many honest Christians; his concerns are more representative of many Christians who think long and hard about these matters than they are idiosyncratic.

In this essay, I first offer a sketch of some important recent work in religious epistemology, work that has direct bearing upon the efforts of CBS—but work that is often not given sufficient consideration by the proponents of CBS. I then relate that work in religious epistemology to some relevant issues in CBS, and I briefly engage with the work of some representative proponents of it. I

³Ibid., 101, 104.

⁴Ibid., 103.

⁵Indeed it has been extended more broadly, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 374–421. Plantinga says that he concurs “for the most part” with van Inwagen (375 n. 2).

conclude, not with any kind of slam-dunk argument, but with some serious epistemological and theological reflections.

Important Work in Religious Epistemology: A Brief Overview of Some Recent Contributions

The last few decades have been particularly fruitful in discussions of religious epistemology. While the vast majority of what has taken place is beyond the scope of this discussion, several particularly important elements deserve mention. So while I make no pretense that what follows is anything more than the barest sketch of some of these developments, even such a brief overview will serve to highlight some of the most important of these aspects.

Justification in Religious Epistemology

The position often known as “classical foundationalism” (or, alternatively, “strong foundationalism”) has been prominent in many quarters. Often pictured as a pyramid of knowledge, this view (or family of views) holds that claims to knowledge that could count as truly justified are of two classes: either those that are properly foundational (or “basic”) or those that are appropriately structured upon the properly foundational beliefs. Beliefs that could count as genuinely foundational or properly basic are only those that are either self-evident (e.g., laws of logic and mathematics) or evident to the senses.⁶ So if a belief is really justified, it is so by virtue of being either self-evident or evident to the senses (if foundational), or appropriately built upon such beliefs. Any justified belief would meet one of these two conditions: it will either satisfy

(CF1) being either self-evident or evident to the senses;

or

(CF2) being appropriately structured upon such (CF1) beliefs.

Classical foundationalism has attracted much criticism, and, while it is not without contemporary defenders, it is safe to say that it is on the defensive. One of the main areas of criticism is that classical foundationalism’s criteria for justified belief simply cannot account for a great deal of what we (safely) take to be true. Is the world more than five minutes old? Are there other minds? Critics of classical foundationalism (Alvin Plantinga being among the most

⁶Sometimes the category of “incorrigible” is included here as well.

important and distinguished of these critics) argue that it is notoriously hard to account for such important—one might even wish to say *basic*—beliefs as these: surely the world is more than five minutes old, and surely solipsism is false, but it is hard to rule out such obviously erroneous beliefs on classical foundationalism. Classical foundationalism is also commonly charged with being self-referentially incoherent. Is classical foundationalism itself properly basic? If it is, then it must either be self-evident or evident to the senses. So is it self-evident? Not at all. Is it evident to the senses? Not at all. Well, then, is it appropriately built up from something that is self-evident or evident to the senses? Not obviously. But if it cannot satisfy its own stated conditions for justified belief, then it is self-referentially incoherent. Being self-referentially incoherent is not a virtue, and the continuing defenders of classical foundationalism generally recognize that they have work before them. Nicholas Wolterstorff goes so far as to conclude that “on all fronts foundationalism is in bad shape. It seems to me that there is nothing to do but give it up for mortally ill and learn to live in its absence.”⁷

If the future of classical foundationalism is less than bright, what other options are there? One of the main alternatives is *coherentism*.⁸ Coherentism eschews the picture of the pyramid of knowledge, and instead conceives of knowledge as more akin to a *web* or a *raft*.⁹ There are various versions of coherentism, but what they share in common is the notion that a belief *B* is justified if and only if it coheres with the other beliefs in the system or web of beliefs. Some of the beliefs in the web will be more central than others and vital to the strength or integrity of the raft or web, while others will be on the periphery and of less importance. These beliefs can be adjusted “on the move”; just as one might be able to replace a piece of a raft while floating on it (as long as it is not too large or central), so also beliefs may be added or dropped as their coherence with the rest of the system is tested. Is a belief *B* justified for someone? Well, there is a way to check: is it consistent with the other beliefs in the epistemic web?¹⁰ If the belief in question is not consistent, then it is not justified. If it is consistent, then it can count as a

⁷Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 56.

⁸This is not to be confused with a coherence theory of truth; it is possible to hold both to a coherence theory of epistemic justification and to a correspondence theory of truth.

⁹See Ernest Sosa, “The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge,” in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Alcoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 192–93.

¹⁰The exact pattern or criteria will vary between coherence theories (e.g., positive or negative coherentism, or linear or holistic). For further discussion, see John C. Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1986).

justified belief (and, of course, if it is a justified *true* belief, then it counts as genuine knowledge).¹¹

Coherentism has also, however, come in for its share of powerful criticism.¹² There are some common and powerful philosophical objections to coherentist theories of justification: as Plantinga argues (via his example of the “Epistemically Inflexible Climber”), coherence is not sufficient for justification. As engagement with any real “true believer” in a conspiracy theory shows, it is possible to have a very coherent set of beliefs while many of those beliefs are completely out of touch with reality. Nor is it clear that coherence is necessary for justification. Many people will admit that there are times in their lives when it is hard to make *everything* “add up,” yet we seem to have good reason to hold to all of these beliefs. While tight coherence might be desirable, to conclude that it is necessary for justification would threaten to rule out many beliefs that really belong. At any rate, coherentism makes it tough to choose between competing “webs” or traditions. As William P. Alston puts it, “Coherentism continues to be faced with the stubborn fact that, however the notion of coherence is spelled out, it seems clear that there is an indefinitely large multiplicity of equally coherent systems of belief, with no way provided by coherence theory for choosing between them.”¹³

So if classical foundationalism and coherentism are both in trouble, what other options are there? Some of the most interesting proposals on the contemporary scene are those of the *modest foundationalists*, the most interesting and influential of which is Plantinga’s “Reformed Epistemology.”¹⁴ Plantinga is among the most insightful and powerful critics of both classical foundationalism and coherentism,¹⁵ but he thinks that the basic foundationalist structure is not itself problematical. The problems with classical foundationalism come from a foundation that simply is too narrow; the problems come when too little is allowed as properly basic. Taking suggestions from “reliabilism,” Plantinga proposes that “a belief is warranted if it is produced by our properly

¹¹For the sake of continuity with the major discussions, I am assuming that knowledge is “justified true belief” (or something closely akin to it). But see the *locus classicus* of objections to this way of thinking about knowledge, Edmund L. Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121–23.

¹²E.g., Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 66–161.

¹³William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 13.

¹⁴Other “founding fathers” of “Reformed Epistemology” would include Nicholas Wolterstorff and William P. Alston. I once heard Alston say that he was still holding out for “Episcopalian Epistemology,” but that he didn’t think it was going to catch on.

¹⁵Among other options criticized by Plantinga.

functioning cognitive faculties working in accord with their design plan.”¹⁶ Belief in God, he argues, itself is (or can be) properly basic. In other words, if it is produced by our cognitive faculties working according to their “design plan” (the *sensus divinitatis*, before the fall, or the “internal instigation of the Holy Spirit,” in the postlapsarian state), belief in God need not be built upon beliefs that are more basic. So although the traditional arguments for the existence of God may have a useful place, they are not necessary for genuine or *warranted* belief. Moreover, the full panoply of Christian belief—the “great things of the gospel”: Trinity, incarnation, resurrection, atonement, salvation, eternal life, etc.—is also (or can be) “properly basic” for believers (on the “Extended Aquinas/Calvin Model”). So whatever value there might be in the arguments of evidentialist apologetics for, say, the historicity of something reported in the Bible, such arguments themselves are not necessary for robust and warranted Christian belief.¹⁷

Acceptance of the “Extended A/C” proposal does not mean that there is no place at all for apologetics, for Christian belief is not insulated from challenges and potential “defeaters” (some of which are recognized to come from CBS). It means only that apologetics will be focused (at least primarily) on “negative apologetics” (the task of responding to such challenges). Plantinga’s proposal continues to engender much debate, and we shall return to some relevant aspects of that controversy shortly. But even from this sketch it should become obvious that the proposal of “Reformed Epistemology”—as well as the state of play within religious epistemology more generally—has important implications for Christian engagement with CBS.

Internalism, Externalism, and Epistemic Virtues

The debates between internalists and externalists in epistemology are also interesting and important for our discussion. W. Jay Wood locates the “crux of the debate between internalists and externalists” in “the nature and extent of the personal access, or oversight, each of us must have to the factors contributing to our justified beliefs.”¹⁸ Internalists, whose ranks are composed of both foundationalists and coherentists, insist that the grounds of any truly justified beliefs must be something to which we have access (or could get such access in fairly short order if we were to turn our attention there). The grounds for

¹⁶Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, and James K. A. Smith, *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 20.

¹⁷See William Lane Craig’s distinction between “knowing” and “showing” the truthfulness of Christianity, e.g., *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 43–60.

¹⁸W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 138.

our beliefs are *internal* to us, and we can get at them (if we know how and where to look). Stouter versions of internalism will insist upon quicker and more immediate access, and correspondingly will maintain that we exercise a sizable degree of control over our beliefs; weaker or more modest versions will insist only that we be able to gain the prerequisite access. But what they have in common is this conviction: for our beliefs to be truly justified, we must have access to—and corresponding responsibility for and control over—the grounds for those beliefs.

Externalists, not surprisingly, deny that the grounds for our justified beliefs must be internal to us or within our cognitive reach. Tending to emphasize “reliabilism” more than “responsibilism,” they

deny, however, that individual cognitive agents must have personal access to all the elements contributing to a belief’s being justified. The agent is not responsible for personally overseeing that the right sort of connection between belief and the world obtains; either it does or it does not, but this is not a fact of which the agent need be aware in order for her beliefs to be justified.¹⁹

We do not *earn* epistemic justification by our efforts; “justification is something that happens to us.”²⁰ Where many classical foundationalists and coherentists alike are internalists, many modest foundationalists incline toward or endorse externalism. Thus Plantinga prefers “warrant” to “justification”; since we do not earn or merit epistemic justification, we should get rid of deontological notions and instead talk about “warranted” belief in terms of “proper function.”²¹

Many epistemologists are convinced that the choice between internalism and externalism is not best conceived in terms of polar opposites and all-or-nothing categories.²² Rather than think of only the extremes of internalism and externalism, they say, we should think of these matters in terms of a continuum. Perhaps we do not exercise *complete* or *direct* access to or control over our beliefs, but maybe we do have *some* access and control (even if that access is limited and the control is indirect). It is at this point that “virtue epistemology” often makes an entrance into the conversations between internalists and externalists.²³ Virtue epistemologists are concerned to recover

¹⁹Ibid., 141.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²²Thus Linda Zagzebski notes that William P. Alston favored “internalist externalism,” “Religious Knowledge and the Virtues,” in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 201.

²³See especially Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

the place of such characteristics as wisdom, prudence, discernment, honesty in the pursuit of truth, perseverance, and willingness to suffer for the truth. They are equally concerned to avoid the opposing vices of “folly, obtuseness, gullibility, dishonesty, naivete, and vicious curiosity.”²⁴ These virtue theorists work hard to remind us that intellectual and moral concerns cannot be neatly separated, and without the prerequisite moral virtues we will not likely be the kind of people who know what we can and should know. Epistemic equipment involves much more than mere IQ levels and adequate neurological health; it also involves commitment to the truth—and to being the kind of persons who can gain access to it.

The relationship of discussions in virtue epistemology to the internalism-externalism debates is complex, but the basic point made by the virtue theorist may be summarized this way: Even if we cannot directly access or control the grounds for (all) our beliefs, we surely can exercise some control over the kinds of activities and commitments that put us in places where we can—or cannot—gain true beliefs. Even if the grounds to all beliefs are not directly within our grip, we do have some level of access (and responsibility) through the belief-forming (“doxastic”) practices in which we engage. For it is through these doxastic practices that we can gain the tools and positions that are needed for knowledge. As Wood concludes, both internalism and externalism

capture important intuitions about justification. One requires that our justified beliefs be strongly tied to the truth, and the other requires that we bear some responsibility for overseeing our interior intellectual lives. . . . A virtuous intellectual agent believes justifiably and tracks the truth without necessarily being cognizant at the time of the grounds of the belief.²⁵

Religious Epistemology and Critical Biblical Scholarship

This brief survey, sketchy as it is, is relevant background for an evaluation of the claims of CBS. With this in mind, just what are we to make of the claims of CBS, on one hand, and, on the other hand, those of van Inwagen and company?

Some Observations

Even those practitioners of CBS who are (apparently) committed to classical orthodoxy often insist upon the utter necessity of CBS. N. T. Wright denounces “pre-critical” readings because such interpretations make it all too

²⁴Wood, *Epistemology*, 16.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 144, 147.

easy for the theologically motivated reader to “inflict his or her own point of view onto unwilling material,”²⁶ and he insists that he agrees “completely with the [Jesus] Seminar that the search for Jesus in his historical context is possible, vital, and urgent. I am as convinced as they are that if the church ignores such a search it is living in a fool’s paradise.”²⁷ Kenton Sparks says that many evangelical biblical scholars are “poorly trained” (owing, in part, to their work in British or Jewish universities), and he makes the assertion that “fideism, specious arguments, misconstruing evidence, strained harmonizations, leaving out evidence, special pleading, and various kinds of obscurantism” are “par for the course.”²⁸ The average Christian, on his view, is “in most cases” completely out of the loop and “in no position to evaluate, let alone criticize, the results of critical scholarship.”²⁹ On the other hand, as we have seen, van Inwagen argues that “ordinary Christians” (laity, pastors, and theologians alike) have grounds for believing in the historical veracity of the biblical claims—grounds that are independent of CBS. He also argues that CBS does nothing to undercut those grounds, and he concludes that such Christians “may therefore ignore any skeptical historical claims” made by the practitioners of CBS.

Facing this impasse, I suggest that we think in terms of the major epistemological options. Consider Rick, an interpreter who thinks that—to choose as an example an issue that is deeply traditional but not exactly part of the creedal faith—the exodus from Egypt was a historical event. Rick is confronted with the claims of CBS that the exodus did *not* happen, and he finds those claims impressive (if also a bit strident). Suppose that Rick is a classical foundationalist; he is committed to the view that his belief in a historical exodus must be supported by the appropriate evidence (evidence that is more basic) to count as justified. Suppose further that Rick is an internalist; he thinks that he must have access to the grounds of his belief for the belief to be justified (whether or not Rick is philosophically sophisticated or even aware of the

²⁶N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 117.

²⁷N. Thomas Wright, “Five Gospels but No Gospel: Jesus and the Seminar,” in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans, NTTS 28/2 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 119. Wright goes on to say, “My own study of Jesus leads me to believe that ‘conservative’ and ‘orthodox’ Christianity, in the twentieth century at least, has often, indeed quite regularly, missed the point of Jesus’ sayings and deeds almost entirely.” Wright says further that traditionally minded Christians are “capable of all kinds of fantasies and anachronisms in reading the Gospels, and to pull the blanket of canon over our heads and pretend that we are safe in our private, fideistic world is sheer self-delusion.” “Jesus and the Identity of God,” *ExAud* 14 (1998): 49.

²⁸Kenton L. Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 168–69.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 70.

epistemological debates is not at issue, as it is possible to be committed to a position while untutored in matters epistemological). Suppose further still that Rick is convinced that the methods of CBS are the best (or only) way to discover the truth about the purported exodus event. If he becomes convinced that CBS undercuts the evidence for belief in a historical exodus, then he is in epistemic trouble. In this case, Rick likely will conclude that his (prior) belief in a historical exodus is not justified.

Of course this route is not inevitable for Rick. Suppose that when faced with the challenges of CBS, he reviews the classical theistic arguments and the arguments from religious experience, and again he concludes that they (or at least some of them) provide justification for belief in the existence of God. He also revisits evidential arguments for distinctly Christian claims, and again he concludes that belief in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ is justified. Beyond this, he thinks that the New Testament and the basic Christian account of salvation require a historical exodus, and he concludes that there is yet warrant for belief in a historical exodus. Or Rick's investigations into the matter introduce him to the work of Old Testament scholars and Egyptologists who make a strong case for the historicity of the exodus.³⁰ Either way, Rick is—despite the challenges from some proponents of CBS—convinced that belief in Mosaic authorship enjoys epistemic justification. So while it *may* be the case that Rick's classical foundationalism leaves him vulnerable to the claims of CBS, it does not follow that such claims will inevitably be decisive for him.

Consider Rick's brother Corey. Corey is a coherentist. He is also a convinced internalist (whether or not he has been burdened with a philosophical education and is an informed coherentist or internalist) who thinks that the methods of CBS are generally above reproach. Corey has thought that there was a historical exodus, but he becomes aware of the "consensus" of CBS that there was *not* a historical exodus. He cannot square his belief in a historical exodus with the web of beliefs that include the conviction that CBS offers the best methods *and* that CBS will not allow belief in a historical exodus. Corey's internalism demands that he have direct access to the grounds for his beliefs, and since he cannot access adequate grounds for belief in the historicity of the exodus, the conclusion becomes clear: intellectual honesty demands that he reject the view that there was a historical exodus.

Now consider further their cousin Bill. Bill holds to "Reformed Epistemology"; he is a modest foundationalist who also eschews internal-

³⁰Good places to begin are James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

ism for (some version of) externalism. His belief in the truthfulness of the Bible is warranted because it is triggered by the “internal instigation of the Holy Spirit,” and, as part of the “great things of the gospel” it is part of the fulsome package of “warranted Christian belief” and thus part of the set of beliefs that is “properly basic.” In this case Bill would have van Inwagen’s “grounds” for these beliefs—grounds that are completely independent of CBS. Furthermore, since CBS has “established nothing” against the “thesis that ordinary Christians have grounds independent” of CBS for believing in the essential historicity of the biblical accounts, CBS does nothing whatsoever to undermine or overturn “Reformed Epistemology” or what it delivers. Suppose Bill is confronted by the claims of CBS that belief in a historical exodus is deeply mistaken and embarrassingly naive. He is not able, by the tools of CBS, to make a compelling case for a historical exodus. But he has a properly basic belief in the “great things of the gospel,” and he is convinced that the biblical account of the gospel is deeply intertwined with an actual Passover and exodus. Upon reflection, he realizes that CBS does nothing to undercut or overturn his “warranted Christian belief,” and he concludes therefore that it does nothing to destroy his belief that what the Bible says about the matter is warranted. He concludes with van Inwagen, therefore, that he “may therefore ignore any skeptical historical claims . . . with a clear conscience.” This does not mean that he *must* or *should* ignore such claims. On the contrary, Bill is intrigued by them and continues to wrestle with the claims of CBS on the matter. Many of his friends (some of whom know the methods and conclusions of CBS much better than he does) see things very differently than he does, and he is genuinely interested in conversation. But as he engages them, he takes the scorn of the guild of CBS for what it is. While honestly admitting that he does not have a complete answer to their arguments (on strictly critical grounds), he nonetheless holds fast to his belief in the truthfulness of the claims of Christ and Scripture.

Even from this brief reflection, we are in a position to see that epistemological commitments make a major difference in engagement with the claims of CBS. This is true whether those epistemological commitments are informed and sophisticated or inchoate and ill-formed. The believer who holds to Reformed Epistemology is in a position to conclude that while the declarations of CBS might be important and interesting, they do nothing to touch grounds for beliefs that are not reliant upon such methodology. Such a believer may—though he need not—ignore the conclusions of CBS. The classical foundationalist (or the coherentist), on the other hand, may be in a very different situation. To be clear, he *may be* in a difficult epistemic place, but he is not necessarily in that place. The classical foundationalist who takes

CBS to be finally authoritative on the matters in question will likely face a dilemma, as will the coherentist. But those coherentists and classical foundationalists who take a critical look at CBS itself and then conclude that it is not above reproach might be in a position to maintain a healthy distance from it as well. Indeed, some philosophers have looked at crucial aspects of CBS and concluded just that: CBS itself, at least as commonly practiced, is not above reproach. Interestingly, it is supported by, and sometimes seems to be motivated by, distinctly *philosophical* underpinnings. And, as we shall see, this philosophical support itself is not entirely stable.

CBS and the Shadow of Naturalism

As we have seen, philosophical reflection on the deliverances of CBS sometimes shows that critical conclusions about the nature, meaning, and authority of the Bible may not have the last word. But sometimes further reflection probes the very foundations of the enterprise.³¹ Central to much contemporary CBS is commitment to the principles of *correlation*, *analogy*, and *criticism*. From their formulation by Ernst Troeltsch forward, these principles (or their siblings and progeny) have exercised great influence on biblical scholarship.³² The principle of correlation can be roughly stated as the belief that explanations for historical events should be found with reference to their immediate and natural historical contexts. The principle of analogy maintains that records of alleged historical occurrences should be understood by comparison to what happens (or might happen) today. The principle of criticism is basically the view that the historian stands as judge over the record of the historical incident. The discussions of these principles have a long history, and the debates are not yet done. While this is not the place to rehearse the history of such debates, it is worth noting that the principles themselves have drawn criticism on distinctly *philosophical* grounds. C. Stephen Evans has pointed out that these principles usually come loaded up with strongly internalist (and foundationalist-evidentialist) baggage—but as we have seen, there is good reason to think that such epistemologies themselves are somewhat less than compelling.³³ Evans has pointed out further that the principles are ambiguous; the principles of correlation and analogy, for instance, seem to be potentially problematic only when (metaphysical) naturalism is smuggled into them.³⁴ But

³¹These are not, alas, always happy encounters. See the introduction to Stump and Flint, *Hermes and Athena*, xiii–xvi.

³²One of the most forceful and rigorous of the contemporary advocates is Van Harvey, e.g., *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

³³C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 186.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 198–99.

this very smuggling operation is what often happens. And when naturalistic assumptions serve to control “real history,” we should not be surprised to see the proponents of historical criticism either struggle to maintain belief in the historical reliability of the biblical accounts or give up on that reliability entirely (or, in some cases, almost entirely). But the claims of metaphysical naturalism should have no hold on historians who are Christian believers (or other theists). Moreover, as Plantinga’s famous “evolutionary argument against naturalism” shows, metaphysical naturalism itself is not without some stiff challenges (some of which are epistemological in nature).³⁵ As Evans points out:

It is not clear, therefore, why a historian who did not share Harvey’s philosophical bases would be disqualified as a “critical historian.” Harvey’s procedure is in effect a commitment to a kind of “methodological naturalism” in history, but if I am right in claiming that it is Harvey’s dubious metaphysical naturalism, or equally dubious epistemological assumptions about miracles, that underlie this methodological naturalism, then there seems no reason at all to think that a responsible, critical historian must follow Harvey.³⁶

Evans speaks here both of “metaphysical naturalism” and “methodological naturalism.” What about “methodological naturalism” (hereafter MN)? Should a Christian who denies metaphysical naturalism (naturally enough) also engage in historical scholarship that proceeds pretty much *as if* naturalism were true? *Can* a Christian historian do so? *Must* he or she do so? Evans engages the thought of N. T. Wright on this question.

Evans argues that Wright should be interpreted as a kind of methodological naturalist with respect to historical studies.

The historical method generally followed by Wright (with some important exceptions to be noted) is essentially similar to that defended by Ernst Troeltsch and Van A. Harvey, and this method is the dominant method employed by historical biblical scholars [and] this historical method incorporates a commitment to what is usually termed “methodological naturalism.”³⁷

Evans helpfully analyzes the category of “methodological naturalism,” and he draws a distinction between what he calls Type-1 MN and Type-2 MN.

³⁵See, e.g., Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 199–240. See also Michael C. Rea, *World without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁶Evans, *Historical Christ*, 197.

³⁷C. Stephen Evans, “Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship,” in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 182, see also 188–95.

Type-1 MN holds that the rules of MN are “somehow binding or obligatory on historians, such that one who does not follow them is not practicing good history.”³⁸ Type-2 MN, on the other hand, maintains only that “these rules simply prescribe a method that can be followed and may be valuable to follow, without regarding that method as obligatory for historians.”³⁹ Evans argues that Type-2 MN is a route that is open to believing historians, and I think that the conclusions of Evans are sane and sensible. We soon will return to these issues, but for now these basic points should be clear: first, the dominant principles of (much) CBS are often freighted with hidden—but dubious—epistemological and metaphysical commitments; second, Christian scholars would be well advised to understand these entanglements and to stand firm in their own epistemological and metaphysical commitments (where those are defensible). Beyond this, Evans’s conclusion that there might be a proper place for CBS brings us to another interesting question: What are we to make of “believing” biblical criticism?⁴⁰

What about “Believing CBS”?

Evans’s reflections regarding “methodological naturalism” raise some interesting questions about the future of the involvement of biblical scholars who are committed to classical orthodoxy in the work of CBS. The proposals of Sparks are particularly intriguing here, both because he actually begins with attention to “epistemology” and because he is a bright and knowledgeable Old Testament scholar who has wrestled at length with these issues. His book *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* actually begins with a chapter titled “Epistemology and Hermeneutics.” Unfortunately, there is not a lot here in the way of developed hermeneutics, and there is even less in the way of careful epistemology.⁴¹ Instead, we are presented with a kind of general “intellectual history,” one that proceeds by way of a surface discussion of the “pre-modern,” “modern,” and “postmodern” periods (Kant is dealt with in two paragraphs; Hegel’s influential contributions get one). The main lessons to be learned from this history seem to be these: Descartes was very important, and “Cartesianism” is very bad—“faulty Cartesian philosophy” is the root of many evils and is “fundamentally flawed,” while Carl F. H. Henry’s “arguments are thoroughly

³⁸Ibid., 184.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰See, e.g., Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words*, 133.

⁴¹Sparks states that some friends who read earlier drafts suggested that the book would be stronger without this chapter (ibid., 25). I am in firm agreement with these friends. Sparks’s considerable knowledge of CBS is not matched by his grasp of epistemology (or historical and systematic theology).

Cartesian, of course.”⁴² It is not at all clear how Sparks conceives of the relations between hermeneutics and epistemology or between epistemology and revelation. The closest we get to a concrete epistemological proposal is his advocacy of something called “practical realism.” Thankfully, we learn that Sparks insists that humans are finite knowers (though I must confess that I did not know that such was in question) and that he thinks that genuine knowledge is available. But we are left to wonder what “practical realism” means (with respect to epistemic justification, etc.). Meanwhile, he brings an impressive volley of arguments from CBS to the conclusion(s) that many traditional beliefs about the nature and claims of Scripture are simply untenable, and he concludes by heaping scathing criticism upon evangelical biblical scholarship: evangelical scholars are akin to those who would deny the Copernican revolution and have a “well-deserved reputation for not playing fair.”⁴³

Sparks’s full-throated advocacy of CBS raises some important questions about just what is meant by “criticism.” He explicitly endorses the principles of correlation, analogy, and criticism (two of them with their Troeltschian labels unpeeled).⁴⁴ He thinks that the need for this critical approach is “obvious,” but he denies that employment of it must go down the way of naturalism.⁴⁵ He insists that he is completely open to the possibility of the supernatural in history, but he also insists that where the tools of CBS do not uncover what should be unmistakable, telltale signs of the supernatural, we should conclude that there was no such supernatural activity. This leads Sparks to conclude that while there is decent historical evidence that Jesus Christ was raised from death, there is no such comparable historical evidence that, say, Jericho was razed to death: honest Christians should conclude not only that such events as the Passover and exodus either never occurred or were “much less significant historically than the Bible now remembers”⁴⁶ but also that “the Pentateuch’s narrative is more often story than history, and that its five books were composed by several different authors living in contexts at some remove from the early history of Israel.”⁴⁷ The story continues with a standard laundry list of critical issues: the historical records of early Israel are contradictory and not trustworthy as historical sources; a “serious and sober reading of Isaiah will easily suggest to readers that large portions of this prophetic collection

⁴²Ibid., 258, 138.

⁴³Ibid., 373. While he says it would be “too strong and unfair” to describe evangelical biblical scholarship as “flat-earth” scholarship (373), Sparks does describe the work of Kenneth A. Kitchen as an argument “that the earth was flat” (12).

⁴⁴Ibid., 57.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., 157.

⁴⁷Ibid., 100.

were not written by an eighth century prophet whose name was Isaiah”; the Synoptic Gospels are partly history but partly fictive; and overall there are a great deal of mistaken historical claims, fabrications, and propaganda within the Bible.⁴⁸ It is hard to avoid the conclusion that while there is openness to the supernatural *in principle*, in actual practice most claims of CBS are taken fully on board. Maybe Sparks is not sufficiently critical of the common employment of the principle of criticism. Perhaps he is not sufficiently critical of the principle itself.

Sparks’s advocacy of CBS also raises questions about what he means by the claim that it is “*believing* criticism.” His discussion of the views of Jesus (and the writers of the New Testament) is telling indeed.

Most modern biblical scholars believe that Moses, Isaiah, and Daniel were not the authors of the books traditionally attributed to them. The difficulty this seems to raise is that Jesus and the New Testament writers clearly identified Moses as the author of the Pentateuch, Isaiah as the author of the second half of Isaiah, and Daniel as the author of the Daniel apocalypses.⁴⁹

Sparks is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that Jesus and Paul believed in Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (e.g., John 5:46–47; 7:19; Acts 3:22; Rom. 10:5). It seems to me that Sparks lays this out as an all-or-nothing proposition (or something very close to it): either affirm Mosaic authorship or deny any compositional or redactional activity. It also seems to me that this approach is overly simplistic—surely it is possible to affirm Mosaic authorship *and* allow for what seem to be obvious threads and layers of later activity. But Sparks is convinced that there indeed *is* a dilemma, and he paints the options with utter starkness: Jesus believed in and taught Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, but CBS insists that Moses did not write the Pentateuch. Supposing the dilemma is really this grim, what is to be done?⁵⁰

Sparks’s response is clear. There is only one responsible way forward: honesty demands that we go with CBS over Jesus and deny that Moses had anything to do with the authorship of the Pentateuch. For although Christians “will want to consider seriously what Jesus and the New Testament writers said about the Old Testament,” this does nothing to outweigh the conclusions of CBS.⁵¹

⁴⁸Ibid., 108 (73–132).

⁴⁹Ibid., 164.

⁵⁰Such a supposition helps us see the epistemological and theological issues more clearly, and at any rate it helps us engage directly with the proposals of scholars such as Sparks.

⁵¹Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words*, 164.

If the critical evidence against the traditional authorial attributions in the Old Testament is as strong as it seems to be, then it is perhaps evangelical Christology—and not critical scholarship—that needs to be carefully reconsidered. . . . So the putative testimony of Jesus and the Bible, while important, cannot be adduced as foolproof evidence for our judgment about who wrote the books of the Old Testament. There are good reasons to suspect that Jesus' words about these matters are not historical-critical testimonies so much as the everyday assumptions of a pious, first-century Jew. Precritical orthodoxy makes it possible, and modern critical research makes it likely, that Jesus has not told us who really wrote the Pentateuch, Isaiah, or Daniel.⁵²

So for Sparks it comes to this: either the views of Jesus or the assured conclusions of CBS. At least we know what the choice is. What we do not yet know is what good reasons there might be for preferring CBS over the views of Jesus. Sparks points out that the statements of Jesus probably were not “historical-critical testimonies.” Surely Sparks is right; I am tempted to say, “*Of course* Jesus was not engaged in historical-critical research.” But how is this even relevant? If—and only if—historical-critical research were the only way that Jesus might learn about the authorship of the Pentateuch (or other matters), then we might have good reason to dismiss the claims of Jesus. But why think that Jesus would have had to do historical-critical research to know such things?⁵³ I can readily think of other possible ways of knowing—for starters, being the omniscient incarnate Son might be relevant.

Perhaps this is too quick, for Sparks says that we may need to reevaluate our commitment to classical christology. Exactly what he is proposing is something less than pellucid, but one option is this: because Jesus was fully human, he was necessarily mistaken about some matters.⁵⁴ Sparks elsewhere often conflates finitude and error, as if to be human *qua human* is to be mistaken.⁵⁵ So Jesus “would have erred in the usual way that other people err because of their finite perspectives.”⁵⁶ If Jesus was fully human (as Scripture teaches and the

⁵²Ibid., 164–65.

⁵³Although this is not the place to explore such matters, I register my concern that Sparks has routinely misunderstood patristic (and Reformation) views of the nature and authority of Scripture. Notably, Sparks fails to engage such important work as that of John D. Woodbridge or Richard A. Muller.

⁵⁴Or perhaps Sparks thinks that Jesus's problems come with his *fallen* human nature; on which see Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 252 n. 67. To this possibility I will make only these brief observations: first, Sparks gets the traditional view exactly backward (his reference to Aquinas shows that Aquinas takes the opposite view); second, there are very good theological reasons to hold to the traditional view and *reject* the (oft-confused) notion that the humanity of Christ was “fallen.” To the latter, see Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90–117.

⁵⁵E.g., Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words*, 55, 171, 225–26, 252–54, 298–99.

⁵⁶Ibid., 252.

creeds affirm), then Jesus necessarily was mistaken about some things. And, of course, if CBS says that his views on the authorship of the Pentateuch (or other matters) could not be right, then his views on these matters would be in the “mistaken” category. Several observations are important here. First, and fundamentally, on this reading, Sparks is committed to the view that the property *being said or authored by a human* entails the property *being mistaken*. But he gives us no reason to think that this entailment holds. Nor are there good reasons to think that this entailment holds.⁵⁷ There are, on the other hand, good reasons to think that such a claim is manifestly false (as accurate statements on all sorts of matters are available).

The second and more important set of observations concerns the christology itself. On standard medieval christologies (either part-whole or subject-accident models), the human soul of Christ enjoys the beatific vision and its privileges.⁵⁸ I cannot see how Sparks’s mistaken Jesus could be consistent with such models. Major alternative pro-Chalcedonian approaches do not seem much more promising for Sparks’s view. Thomas V. Morris’s “Two Minds” christology posits a divine mind that is (naturally enough) omniscient as well as a human mind that is limited and finite (as human minds are).⁵⁹ But his account has an “asymmetrical accessing relationship” between the two minds, and the divine mind (as omniscient) knows all things and informs the human mind of what it needs to know. On this model the human mind is limited, but that does not mean that it is committed to false beliefs. It is one thing to say, “I don’t know” (cf. Mark 13:32); it is another thing entirely to make something up or even mistakenly to repeat a falsehood. Some versions of kenotic christology might be more hospitable to Sparks’s proposal, but even there we see what is at best an awkward fit.⁶⁰ Suppose that Jesus empties himself of the standard access and use of the essential divine-knowledge attribute (omniscient-unless-kenotically-and-redemptively-incarnate) and

⁵⁷At least none that I can think of—which admittedly isn’t very impressive.

⁵⁸On these proposals, see Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 108–43.

⁵⁹Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); “The Metaphysics of God Incarnate,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 110–127.

⁶⁰Some of the more radical kenotic christologies probably *would* fit well with Sparks’s proposal, but these are *alternatives* to the Chalcedonian faith rather than versions of it. See the illuminating essay of Thomas R. Thompson, “Nineteenth-Century Kenotic Christology: The Waxing, Waning, and Weighing of a Quest for a Coherent Orthodoxy,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74–111.

simply does *not* know “the day or the hour.”⁶¹ Would this mean that he was mistaken about Moses? Not at all; even on kenotic accounts, the incarnate Son is led and nourished by the Holy Spirit, who protects him and who gives him divine knowledge. Even on kenotic models of the incarnation, it does not follow that Jesus was mistaken about Moses. To the contrary, there still might be good reason to believe that he would have been *right* about such things.

Sparks offers yet another possibility. He says that “even if Jesus knew the critical fact that Moses did not pen the Pentateuch, it is hardly reasonable to assume that he would have revealed this information to his ancient audience.”⁶² Note that this move assumes the very issue in question and so begs the question. But note further the very important theological claim that is being made here: if Jesus knows that Moses had nothing to do with the writing of the Pentateuch but nonetheless *says* that it was written by Moses, then it is clear that Jesus is not merely mistaken—he is actively and intentionally bearing false witness. What else is there to conclude from such a suggestion? Would not Jesus be stating as true something that he knows to be false? Does not this make the christological situation worse: instead of a mistaken Jesus who knows far less about his Scriptures than modern critical scholars know, would we not now have a Jesus who intentionally misleads?

So what Sparks offers is this choice: the claims of Jesus or the assured conclusions of CBS—and with the latter a rejection of commitment to classical, orthodox christology.⁶³ At least we know what the stakes are. As for me and my house, in such a dilemma we will go with orthodox christology and with the teachings of Jesus over the pronouncements of CBS. And we think that there is good epistemic *warrant* for doing so—warrant that CBS does not undercut or override.

Some Concluding Reflections

Do you want us to listen to you? As a theologian (and preacher) who wants to foster good interpretation of the Bible, I highly respect and deeply value rigorous biblical scholarship. I want “us” to listen to “you”—but I also want “you” to have something truly valuable to say to “us.” I don’t wish to discourage good biblical scholarship, but I do dare to hope for some improvements.

⁶¹See Ronald J. Feenstra, “Reconsidering Kenotic Christology,” in Feenstra and Plantinga, *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, 128–52.

⁶²Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words*, 165.

⁶³Note that this is not the same as saying that Sparks pushes us to *reject* orthodox christology (or that he does so himself). But what is clear is this: Sparks expects us to be more committed to CBS than to the beliefs and claims of Jesus himself.

In this essay I have, following the barest sketch of some important issues in religious epistemology, tried to show that while some epistemological positions might leave the scholar critically vulnerable to whatever the latest “consensus” of CBS dictates to us, there are other approaches that do not depend upon the pronouncements of CBS for robust belief and confidence. Indeed, there are some epistemological positions that do not depend upon CBS, are not undercut by CBS, and thus make it possible for the believer (with van Inwagen) to “ignore” the skeptical claims of CBS with a “clear intellectual conscience.” I have also suggested that CBS is (at least partially, perhaps mostly) operating upon distinctly philosophical scaffolding, but that there is reason to suspect that this very scaffolding is itself unstable.⁶⁴ I conclude that there is good reason to think that, say, *believing what Jesus says is authoritative* enjoys warrant. Sparks says that the views of Jesus are not “foolproof evidence” against the pronouncements of CBS.⁶⁵ There is a sense in which Sparks is undoubtedly correct; we do not have to look far to see that this kind of evidence does not penetrate certain forms of foolishness. But how does that observation count as an objection against taking the statements of Jesus as authoritative?

I suggest that there is a better way for “believing CBS” to proceed. Recall Evans’s distinction between different versions of methodological naturalism: Type-1 MN holds that the rules of CBS are “binding and obligatory”; Type-2 MN holds only that the methods of CBS “can be followed and may be valuable for historians” but do not give the only or final word on all matters (historical or otherwise).⁶⁶ While Type-1 MN is overly restrictive and itself without warrant, Type-2 MN might be very valuable for a whole range of reasons. As Evans explains, it has parallels.⁶⁷

Suppose that Kelly, a Christian bioethicist, wishes to convince her colleagues that a particular research program *P* is morally problematic. Kelly’s orthodox Christianity may give her distinctly religious or theological reasons and motivation to oppose *P*, but she knows that these reasons will not be persuasive to her Buddhist and secular colleagues. She does, however, find common ground with these colleagues, and she argues accordingly. She should not, of course, be duplicitous; she should not pretend to be something (a secularist) that she is not. But nor should she ignore or reject her Christian beliefs. She may know that she has *additional* reason to reject *P*, and she

⁶⁴Philosophers also sometimes criticize the actual *practices* (as well as the principles) of various sectors of the CBS world. See, e.g., William P. Alston on the criterion of “double dissimilarity.” “Historical Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels,” in “*Behind*” the Text, 151–79.

⁶⁵Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words*, 165.

⁶⁶Evans, “Methodological Naturalism,” 184.

⁶⁷Ibid., 199–200.

may wish that her colleagues shared that basis with her. In fact, she might think that getting them to embrace the right view about *P* might give them reason seriously to consider the Christian faith. In the case that her “common ground” arguments are less than fully convincing, she can readily admit that fact while still not capitulating on the issue or ignoring her own convictions. She may use all the “common ground” arguments available to her, and she can admit that sometimes they are sufficient for the task but that sometimes they may not be. But they are not the only—or even the strongest—reasons for her to take a position on *P*. She can do her best work, honestly admit its strengths and weaknesses, and at the end of the day’s labors rest with a “clear intellectual conscience.”

To use a different illustration, Max the Mountaineer may know of several routes to the top of a challenging peak. He joins a party of climbers who insist that the route up the Liberty Ridge is the *only* route to ascend, and he agrees to help them. Part way up, however, they realize that they simply cannot make it. Perhaps they could summit with better tools or more training, but they come to the conclusion that they simply cannot reach the summit in current conditions. Max is disappointed, for he sincerely wants his fellow climbers to succeed. But the fact that they do not make it via the Liberty Ridge does not mean that the summit *cannot* be reached, and the fact that his fellow climbers refuse to try any route other than the Liberty Ridge does not mean that there are no other routes. If Max knows of other routes and has climbed via them—if he has seen the view from the top—then he will continue to believe that there is a summit and that it in fact is within reach. He may be disappointed that he cannot either help his fellow climbers make it via the Liberty Ridge or convince them to try another route, but he may rest from his labors with his belief that the mountain can be climbed yet intact. And he may do so “with a clear intellectual conscience.”

I suggest that pursuing CBS in the Type-2 MN sense (especially when done from an externalist epistemology) might be helpful for believing Christians.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the Christian who engages in CBS might weigh evidence and make arguments with all the rigor that he can muster. He has good reason to hope that these arguments will be successful and persuasive to other scholars. But he will not be tempted (or at least *as* tempted) to overestimate either the importance of the views with which he engages or his own work. He will see that his engagement with CBS is a valid exercise, one that might be helpful and salutary. For pragmatic and apologetic reasons, his work may be very

⁶⁸I do not mean to suggest that this should be the course of action for *all* Christians (or all *honest* Christians).

valuable. But in the event that he faces a critical argument that he cannot answer, he does not feel pressure to capitulate immediately. If, after all, he has grounds for belief that are independent of CBS and that are not undercut by CBS, he has no reason to despair when faced with difficult arguments from CBS. Given his epistemic virtues, he will not wish to stretch or mash the evidence (the evidence available from CBS) in dubious ways. In the event that his arguments fail to convince other critical scholars, he can readily admit that as well—and again without feeling pressure (from epistemological internalism) to give up a belief simply because he cannot show exactly how it is justified for him.⁶⁹ If pursued in this way, perhaps critical biblical scholarship can be “appropriated” in a way that is both intellectually and spiritually healthy. For the sake of us all, I hope so.

⁶⁹What I suggest here is in some respects parallel to the proposal of “skeptical theism” (with respect to the problem of evil). For an excellent introduction to this discussion, see Michael Bergmann, “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 374–99.



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