

[MJTM 12 (2010–2011)]

BOOK REVIEW

Sparks, Kenton L. *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 416 pp. Pbk. US\$28.00, ISBN 978-0-8010-2701-7.

Kent Sparks's 2008 volume *God's Word in Human Words* has received some attention and, predictably, strong negative reactions among some. Regardless of whether one identifies with it or is repulsed by it, *GWHW* is an engagement of evangelical biblical scholarship that should be taken very seriously and engaged patiently. The volume deserves serious, patient and constructive attention by evangelical biblical scholars and theologians. I have a longer history with this book than most, having been asked by Baker to review it in pre-publication form in January 2007.

What is Sparks getting at in *GWHW*? There are many ways of answering this, but let me get at one point in particular, and one that may explain why there has been such strong reaction to the book. Sparks is arguing that evangelical biblical scholarship has largely failed in not appropriating critical scholarship as it should. This failure stems from a faulty theology that expects things from Scripture that critical scholarship has shown to be untenable. I realize Sparks may not word it precisely this way, but this gets at what I think is a point of tension. Sparks is critiquing evangelical theology's failure to appropriate critical advances in our knowledge of Scripture. What this amounts to for some readers is a criticism of evangelical theology for being evangelical. Hence, the response is that Sparks is no evangelical, and so for some his book actually demonstrates why evangelicals should *not* appropriate critical scholarship.

What I have seen thus far in some of the early criticisms to the book is far less engagement of the content of the book than I had hoped. There has been a lot of marking of territory about who can rightly claim to be evangelical. Much of that criticism is centered on two issues Sparks raises: inerrancy and Cartesian

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dualism.

Sparks denies the “traditional” doctrine of inerrancy, so—as the rhetoric goes—he is no evangelical, and so he is part of the problem not the solution. I understand this chain of reasoning, but, again, I would like to see more reflection given to why Sparks would say what he does. The truth of the matter is that, whether or not one agrees with Sparks’s assessment of things, he most certainly understands the theological architecture of evangelicalism. He is also a trained biblical scholar, and he is saying, with both sides of the issue in mind, “we have a problem”—a sentiment generations of evangelical biblical scholars can relate to on one level or another, although typically with more reticence. Those who for whatever reason do not appreciate this problem will likely dismiss Sparks’s theological project. Those who do appreciate the problem may not all agree with Sparks, but they will realize that the problem deserves serious engagement, and so will contribute to the discussion.

GWHW is a concentrated, deliberate attempt within evangelicalism to address the serious tensions between evangelical theology and modern biblical scholarship, and to do so in a detailed, academic manner (which does not mean exhaustive or flawless, by any means). To walk away from the problem or maintain that there is no problem is to affirm Sparks’s diagnosis. To appeal, as some have, to the “clear teachings” of Scripture as to its own character, and thus neutralize the problem and Sparks’s argument (as if Sparks is somehow unaware of these passages), is not an argument but an assertion, the very assertion of evangelical dogma that Sparks is challenging.

As for Descartes, I hope that readers can move beyond who is a Cartesian dualist and who isn’t. I understand that Sparks is the one who brought it up, but if being called Cartesian is offensive, it is wisest to move on and listen to *the actual critique itself*, namely that evangelical theology does not do well with alternate paradigms of the nature of Scripture because its system of thought depends on certitude in a number of areas, Scripture being one of them. Ironically, we should consider whether some of the criticisms of *GWHW* actually bear this out. At this point, at least, I have seen more reactions to words than concepts, and I

hope the discussion does not get derailed there.

The central ideas of the book are as follows:

The Bible is God's word expressed in fully human words, and so is, by God's own design, subject to the types of analyses offered by modern biblical criticism. Another way of putting this is that, for Sparks, it is the evangelical doctrine of Scripture (which when properly articulated does not mute Scripture's "humanity") that demands it be engaged in a manner consistent with that humanity.

Modern biblical criticism has truly hit on many irrefutable re-articulations of Scripture that most certainly affect how we as evangelicals should think and talk about Scripture. Modern biblical criticism has argued persuasively that (1) the Old Testament is a product of lengthy development more than "all-at-once" authorship (i.e., source criticism, form criticism, tradition history), and (2) Israel's religion cannot be properly understood in isolation from the religion of the surrounding cultures (i.e., comparative religions). From where I sit, I would add that *many evangelical Old Testament scholars accept and work within these parameters*, at least on some level. Sparks argues that this is done at best very inconsistently. I would put it a bit differently, that evangelical work is done without *deliberate* engagement of how such parameters affect how we think about the nature of Scripture (a central concern in my book *Inspiration and Incarnation*). In other words, for many evangelical biblical scholars, it is not a question of *whether* critical insights should be employed, but what it means to do that "well" and, more importantly, to what extent such appropriation should affect evangelical theology.

God accommodates his word to fallible human modes of expression and thinking. Sparks's main hook for engaging biblical criticism is Calvin's notion of accommodation. This model is, for Sparks, less problematic than an incarnational model (which I employ). Either way, the "humanness" of Scripture is something God is comfortable with *as human*, not because God successfully maneuvers around Scripture's unfortunate creatureliness. This humanity of Scripture is God's chosen means by

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which to speak. For Sparks, accommodation does a better job of explaining why the Bible looks the way it does, and critics of Sparks would need to present a more persuasive model in response rather than simply pointing out that Sparks is working from a different model.

One cannot appeal to evangelical theological prolegomena to adjudicate the proper influence critical scholarship should have. In fact, those who appeal to such prolegomena without also being fully conversant with biblical criticism and its more solid developments are (ironically) in no position to critique the theological matter, even if that discussion turns back on theological prolegomena. This is a sore point to be sure. Sparks is saying “the gate-keepers have no clothes.” If Sparks argues, “such-and-such point of evangelical doctrine is wrong for this demonstrable reason,” a response such as “it is not evangelical theology to say such things,” or “here is a list of evangelicals who would take offense at that,” or something similar, is inadequate. A defense of evangelical theology against Sparks’s arguments cannot be simply a *reassertion* of evangelical theology. Unfortunately, this is where the discussion has stalled.

Evangelical biblical scholarship has a history of employing certain “strategies” whereby critical insights can be held at arm’s length from evangelical theology, what Sparks refers to as “Critical Anti-Criticism” (a term borrowed from church historian Mark Noll), and is marked by special pleading and a selective engagement of the evidence. Sparks is making a rather bold point here, one that has ruffled a few feathers. I can understand why, but the point remains whether Sparks is correct or not, or perhaps better, to what extent he is correct or not. Sparks is not afraid to name names. His charge is substantive and cannot be dismissed lightly.

If anything, for apologetic purposes, an evangelical doctrine of Scripture cannot be developed in the absence of true engagement and general acceptance of modern criticism. This is one of the ironies of the book. It will be said, as already has been, that the positions outlined in *GWHW* will lead the sheep astray. It is, therefore, a “dangerous” book. Sparks would contend that biblical criticism has indeed led people astray, but that is not a

necessary consequence. Unfortunately, by failing to offer viable and persuasive alternate paradigms, evangelicalism has been an unwitting accomplice in “leading the sheep astray” by inadequately addressing the very real challenges of biblical criticism. As counterintuitive as it might appear to some, Sparks is writing an apology for Scripture, but one that asserts the need to adjust seriously evangelical doctrine.

Although Sparks understands the difficult interplay between academia and the church (including the world of Christian academy, where progress of thought and constituency expectations often collide), it is high time for the church to embrace true developments in our knowledge of Scripture rather than automatically adhering to older models of thinking or bowing to constituency (i.e., economic) demands. This is where Sparks argues all of this has to lead. Agree or disagree, he is to be commended for deliberately expressing the sociological factors that (at least in my view) drive many of our theological discussions.

Of course, there are other points of the book worth drawing out, but these are the central ones in my estimation. Each of these points deserves serious and patient interaction, not rote reaction.

In general, I would say that a great strength of the book is Sparks’s assessment of the evangelical biblical scholarship landscape. One difference I have with Sparks is that he argues that evangelical scholars do not engage critical issues, whereas I say that evangelical scholars certainly do engage critical issues positively at times, but generally fail to do the synthetic theological work of bringing that engagement to bear *deliberately* on how they articulate their understanding of the nature of Scripture.

Others might contend that the “assured results of higher criticism” tone Sparks adopts will win over few not already disposed to his point of view (not to mention Sparks’s appeal to Barth, Barr, and Wink, to name just three, as examples of scholars who get it right). But I truly hope that critics of Sparks will not focus here. The real point is the *overall* portrait Sparks is painting. Appealing to less than agreeable examples here and there may offer some temporary comfort, but will do nothing to

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neutralize the general observations he makes. I would like to see critics engage Sparks on the level of specific matters of biblical scholarship.

Even though the approach is more blunt than many of us are used to, Sparks is calling for a rediscovery among evangelicals of the legacy of such scholars as Ray Dillard and F. F. Bruce—not that these or others would agree with Sparks on every point. Rather, what Sparks has in common with these and other evangelical scholars is the understanding that a persuasive articulation of biblical authority must reckon with the overlap of divine authorship and modern biblical criticism. What is needed is a true hermeneutical self-consciousness, one that aims at a synthesis of theological commitment and higher criticism. Such a synthesis is to be found neither in fundamentalism nor liberalism. It should, Sparks argues, be found in evangelicalism.

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