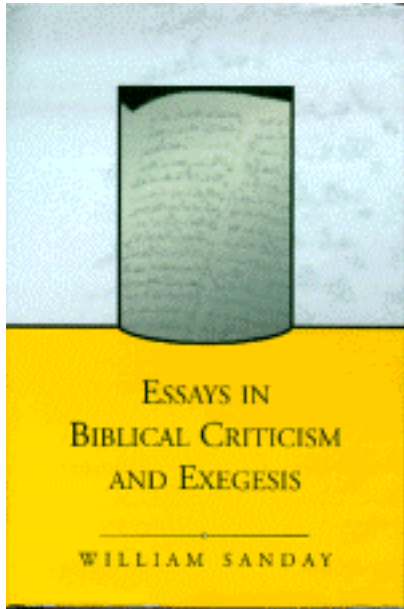


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Sanday, William W.

Essays in Biblical Criticism and Exegesis

Articles selected and edited by Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, with the assistance of Scott N. Doff

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This informative collection of essays by the English theologian and biblical scholar William Sanday (1843–1920), is the first volume to appear in the new Sheffield Academic Press series, Classics in Biblical and Theological Studies. After reviewing the collection, it is clear why the editors selected Sanday to launch the series. As a pioneer in the scientific study of the New Testament, Sanday’s writings offer classic models and guidelines for biblical criticism and exegesis that rightly deserve rediscovery.

For those unfamiliar with Sanday, the editors’ foreword presents a brief biography and listing of his most important writings. Sanday’s scholarly output was considerable, with numerous books, essays, and commentaries to his credit. Nineteen of his essays are presented in this volume, with full publication details provided on the first page of each essay. Because space will not permit an analysis of the entire collection, this review will comment on several essays in the book’s major subject divisions of method, language, and exegesis.

In part 1 “Method,” two essays are particularly noteworthy for their development and application of historical methods in biblical criticism. In “Biblical Criticism: The Fulness of Revelation in the New Testament” (1894), Sanday tackles the ongoing tension

between biblical criticism and doctrinal Christianity. The fear among many church people of the late nineteenth century (as well as today) was that biblical criticism would erode the authority of church doctrine. Sanday argues to the contrary that if biblical criticism follows a strict historical method, one that lets the facts “tell their own tale” and that does not anticipate or impose conclusions not warranted by the facts, the results will “tend to strengthen, not weaken, the hold on fundamental doctrine” (17–18). To prove his point, Sanday offers convincing evidence of Trinitarian thinking in Paul’s letters, showing that “the foundation stone of the doctrine was already laid” in the thoughts and language of Paul, long before the formulation of the Nicene Creed (19).

However, Sanday’s support for scientific method is not without qualification, especially when he encounters biblical scholars who, in his view, fail to uphold the strict regimen and purpose of the historical method. In “Methods of Theology: Historical Method” (1897), Sanday is highly critical of A. Kuenen’s book on prophecy because he used the historical method to argue that the words of the prophets were their own rather than the gift of divine revelation. In Sanday’s view, “any theory or mode of presentation which seeks not only to explain but to explain away, is not the historical method. To explain without explaining away might be taken as the motto of that method” (25).

In respecting the revelatory integrity of Scripture, Sanday recognizes and affirms a fundamental principle of biblical hermeneutics that we largely take for granted today. He recognizes that the more we understand how the biblical witness affected its original audience, “the more we shall understand the message which it has for other ages, including our own, because it speaks to us through those permanent elements in human nature which are the same in all ages and connect the remote past with the present” (26). Sanday’s insights on method clearly reflect the mind of a man ahead of his time.

Part 2, “Language,” includes Sanday’s responses to his dispute with Dr. A. Roberts, which played out in a series of lively articles in *The Expositor*. Much to Sanday’s consternation, Roberts maintained that, because of the dominance of Greek culture in first century Palestine, it was logical to assume that Jesus habitually spoke Greek and only occasionally spoke Aramaic, the vernacular language. In “The Language Spoken in Palestine at the Time of Our Lord” (1878) and “Did Christ Speak Greek? A Rejoinder” (1878), Sanday deftly dismantles Roberts’s position point by point, challenging his simplistic reading of the social, cultural, and linguistic history of Palestine as well as the very logic of his reasoning. Roberts’s insistence, for example, that Jesus preached the gospel in Greek instead of Aramaic does not hold up under Sanday’s withering use of common sense.

We know that he [Jesus] addressed his teaching especially to the poor. Our own version tells us that “the common people heard him gladly.”... But if so, it is to me quite incredible—and I ask if it is not to every one else—that our Lord should have preached the gospel to the people in any other language than their own vernacular. If he had done so, can we believe that it would have had the effect it had? (101)

Part 3, “Exegesis,” includes Sanday’s interpretations of the parables, the title Son of Man, as well as several essays on Pauline theology. “On the Title, Son of Man” (1891) is a particularly insightful and innovative essay that challenges the method and exegetical conclusions of yet another biblical scholar, the Rev. J. Estlin Carpenter. Carpenter argued that Jesus did not use the Son of Man title to refer to his personal messianic mission but used it strictly in terms of its Old Testament meaning in Daniel (i.e., to designate a regenerated Israel). Believing Jesus to be the Messiah, the Gospel writers simply reinterpreted his Son of Man sayings to support their belief in the coming kingdom and in the second coming of the Messiah.

Echoing his criticisms of Kuenen and Roberts, Sanday rejects Carpenter’s theory, contending that he progressed too fast, choosing only those sayings that supported his theory and explaining away those that contradicted it. Such selective reading led Carpenter to the paradoxical conclusion that Jesus accepted messianic titles when applied to him by others and was aware of his messianic mission but did not use the title Son of Man in a personal messianic sense, even though it is the only title he applies to himself in any of the Gospels (164). For Sanday, such forced interpretation is tantamount to “the rewriting—and the premature rewriting—of the Gospels” (162).

To avoid such pitfalls, Sanday suggests that biblical scholars uphold a “self-denying ordinance” and confine themselves “strictly to the critical problem of ascertaining what is the absolutely earliest form of the tradition, and by what steps and gradations other later forms are built up round it” (162). Sanday demonstrates this principle with a thorough historical-critical analysis of the Son of Man sayings in both the Gospels and the pseudepigraphal book of *Enoch*, a source that Sanday considers a glaring omission in Carpenter’s reading. Sanday’s analysis suggests that the Son of Man title was already applied to the personal Messiah before Jesus ever used it. Based on this premise, Sanday draws some solid conclusions about the development of the title that warrant citation.

I take it that among the Jews at the Christian era, at least such as shared the lively expectations which were then abroad of the great deliverance which was approaching, it was distinctly understood that the “Son of Man” meant “the Messiah.” At the same time it was not a common title, because the ordinary usage

of the phrase “son of man” in the Old Testament pointed to that side of human weakness and frailty which the zealots of the day least cared to dwell upon in the King for whom they were looking. But the very reason which led them to avoid the title induced our Lord to take it. It expressed it in that veiled and suggestive way which characterized the whole of his teaching on his own person. At the same time it conveyed to those who had ears to hear the whole secret of the incarnation. That which the Jews shrank from and ignored he rather placed in the forefront of his mission. He came as the representative of humanity, not militant and triumphant but in weakness and suffering. (164)

Although some biblical scholars might dispute Sanday’s claim about the relation between the Son of Man and the Messiah, his work clearly anticipates the contemporary shift in thinking about the historical Jesus and the process of tradition embedded in the biblical texts. Today many scholars maintain that Jesus established a precedent for interpreting his person and work through the use of Old Testament images and titles, that often the images and titles were reinterpreted and transformed by this encounter, and that the Gospels are partly the product of this extended layering of tradition. Sanday’s contribution to this growing consensus is obvious.

William Sanday’s writings deserve to be read and studied, not only for their content, but for what they teach us about good biblical scholarship. Sanday was a scholar thoroughly engaged in his field, exacting in his work, fair and respectful in his criticism, and willing to go wherever the evidence took him. Recognizing the value and quality of his work, the editors of the series intend to publish another volume of his papers. Readers unfamiliar with the development of biblical criticism in Britain would benefit greatly by the inclusion of an introductory essay that would summarize the critical debates and major figures of Sanday’s era. Additional context would help readers fully appreciate the man’s considerable talents and achievements.