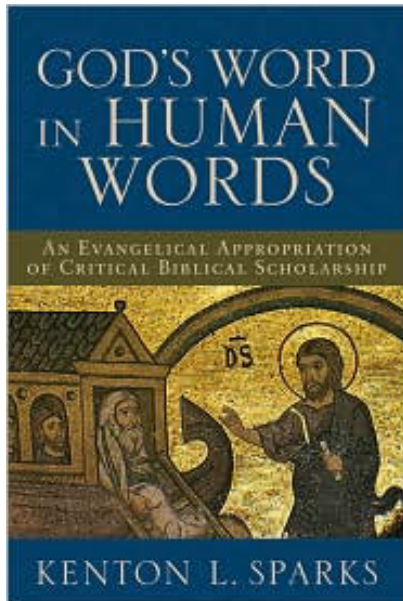


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Sparks, Kenton L.

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

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In *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship*, Kenton L. Sparks displays both his knowledge of biblical (especially Hebrew Bible) scholarship as well as his appropriation of theoretical issues of epistemology and hermeneutics. An avowedly Christian and evangelical scholar, Sparks is attempting to speak directly to fellow evangelicals and to invite them to new understandings of the nature and scope of the Bible's authority. He perceives a major problem for evangelicals, to wit, that the common evangelical view of biblical authority builds on intellectual error even while it hinders communication with those who are more knowledgeable about biblical scholarship and its assured results (12–13). *God's Word in Human Words* is Sparks's learned attempt to offer an alternative view.

After a brief introduction, Sparks's argument advances in ten chapters. "Epistemology and Hermeneutics (ch. 1) overviews important differences between the premodern, modern, and postmodern periods and their approaches to the Bible and to perceived difficulties or errors therein. Premodern students of the Bible were not unaware of these difficulties, of course. The modern period was often characterized by a "full-blown suspicion of tradition" (30). In his discussion of the postmodern period, Sparks focuses especially upon two epistemological views. The "antirealists" hold that "all truth claims lie

embedded within a matrix of cultural fiction. Interpretation, whatever it is, does not recover ‘the truth’ but creates it” (40–41). In contrast stand the “practical realists,” who advocate a kind of “soft” postmodernism that concludes that tradition is “the imperfect but useful way that humans grasp, discover, and perpetuate truth” and that human beings “enjoy a modest and *adequate* capacity to understand and successfully live in the world” (42). Sparks takes his own stance as a practical realist, convinced that human views and convictions cannot be “perfectly right, but adequately right” (54). Sparks’s opening chapter attempts to cast an appropriate tenor of intellectual humility over all human conclusions regarding the Bible and its authority, since all human knowledge is partial.

In chapter 2, “Historical Criticism and Assyriology,” Sparks describes some of the broader strokes of the study of ancient Assyrian documents, both in terms of method and conclusions. Although the chapter contains important information in its own right, it contributes to the book’s overall argument by showing that scholars have applied the methods of historical criticism to other bodies of ancient literature and tradition, not only to the Bible itself.

The longest chapter in Sparks’s work is chapter 3, “The Problem of Biblical Criticism.” The stated purpose of the chapter is “to lay out as clearly as possible the evidence and logic behind the standard conclusions of mainstream biblical scholarship, so that readers might fairly weigh these claims in the balance of good judgment” (76). Sparks writes as one convinced by those standard conclusions, and he seeks to show their reasonableness and cogency. He surveys a large number of standard “problems,” most of them relating to the Hebrew Bible: (1) the Pentateuch (authorship, chronological errors, sources, etc.); (2) Israelite historiography (which does not offer “perfectly accurate histories of events as they unfolded in ancient Israel” [104]); (3) Isaiah (multiple authorship); (4) Ezekiel’s Tyre prophecy (unfulfilled); (5) the New Testament Gospels (various perceived historical or theological contradictions); (6) the Pastorals (authorship); (7) prophecy in Daniel and Revelation; (8) the Bible’s theological and ethical diversity; and (9) exegetical method in the Bible.

Chapter 4, “Traditional Responses to Biblical Criticism,” is largely given over to describing various evangelicals’ attempts to offer “Critical Anti-Criticism” (Sparks’s phrase). Not surprisingly, the author weighs these efforts in the balance and finds them wanting. He argues that this scholarship is widely characterized by various flaws, including “artificial presentation of evidence,” “selective and illegitimate appeals to critical scholarship,” “misleading use of test cases,” and “pleading ignorance and obfuscating the issues.” The chapter flirts with being dismissive; see my critical comments below.

“Constructive Responses to Biblical Criticism” (ch. 5) briefly surveys how some modern scholars have attempted to synthesize the results of biblical criticism and a meaningful understanding of the Bible’s authority in the life of the church. Barth, von Rad, Childs, and others are briefly surveyed; a glance at the Roman Catholic communion’s attitude toward biblical criticism also appears.

Sparks’s own positive attempt at synthesis occupies the remainder of the book: “Genres of Human Discourse” (ch. 6); “Genres of Divine Discourse” (ch. 7); “Context of the Whole and Biblical Interpretation” (ch. 8); and “Negotiating the Context of the Whole” (ch. 9). A brief tenth chapter (“Biblical Criticism and Christian Theology”) offers several attempts to apply Sparks’s proposal to issues of importance for the church today, and chapter 11 (“Biblical Criticism and Christian Institutions”) speaks briefly to the issue of how to integrate the knowledge of biblical criticism in the local congregation and in Christian institutions of higher learning.

In “Genres of Human Discourse,” Sparks emphasizes the importance of generic considerations both for evaluating the informational value of a document and for estimating the document’s intended impact on readers. The next chapter on “Genres of Divine Discourse” is the core of Sparks’s own attempt to bring together biblical criticism and genuine scriptural authority for faith and life. Sparks highlights the concept of “accommodation,” describing it as “God’s adoption in inscripturation of the human audience’s finite and fallen perspective.” This concept serves as a kind of umbrella to encompass and deal with problematic elements in the biblical literature as diverse as anthropomorphic language for God and gross historical inaccuracies on the part of biblical authors. Arguing that accommodation as a principle was well known to many in the early church, Sparks suggests to his fellow evangelicals, “Accommodation is theologically and philosophically necessary, carries a long-standing historical pedigree, and can help us provide better answers for many of the problems we face in the sacred text” (258).

In “Context of the Whole and Biblical Interpretation” (ch. 8), Sparks discusses the relationship between general and specific revelation and argues strongly for a more prominent role and function for general revelation. “Negotiating the Context of the Whole” (ch. 9) is a breathless survey of immensely important topics that range from the relationship of the ecumenical creeds to the Bible, “biblical authority and theology beyond the Bible,” “biblical theology and the Christian metanarrative,” “the spiritual and psychological health of the interpreter,” “reason, faith, and mystery,” and “miracles, history, and historical criticism”—all in the span of fifty pages.

A work as ambitious and as far-reaching as this is difficult to evaluate in a brief review. Its positive contributions are several. Sparks's overview of basic epistemological and hermeneutical issues in chapter 1 is extremely clear and helpful. He straightforwardly and vigorously presents among the most important resultant claims of mainline biblical scholarship over against "problems" in the Bible in chapter 3. His challenge to traditional evangelicals, published through a major evangelical book house (Baker), will be sure to gain notice, stimulate conversation, and, indeed, provoke strong reactions of various kinds.

The major weakness of Sparks's endeavor may be the very scope of his project. He attempts both to overthrow a particular view of biblical authority (a naïve and uninformed modernist approach to biblical "inerrancy") and to construct a major positive proposal to take its place. Chapter 9 was simply unsatisfying to read: too much attempted in too small a compass. I also found myself dissatisfied in chapter 7 with the vague and all-encompassing function of the concept of "accommodation." It is one thing, for instance, to suggest that at times God accommodates divine purposes and meaning so as to use human language: anthropomorphisms, metaphor, and other nonliteral use of language. It is, it seems to me, a thing of a different order to say that God uses human authors who thought they were writing narratives with genuine historical referents—but those authors were mistaken about what they themselves were actually doing. More precision in defining and applying the key concept of "accommodation" is needed, it seems to me, before Sparks's proposal can be regarded as cogent and coherent.

To his great credit, Sparks keep a level tone throughout his discussion, no mean achievement in dealing with such potentially explosive topics as he does. I was disappointed, however, at his presentation of "Critical Anti-Criticism: Conservative Evangelical Biblical Scholarship." If Sparks faltered somewhat in his attempt at fair-minded presentation, it would be here in chapter 4. He did not, it seems to me, take the time to actually present the views of various scholars before critiquing them (see, e.g., the brief and inadequate description of Craig Blomberg's work on 162–63).

Sparks has taken up a topic of great importance, and his discussion is one that will be sure to spark much interest. He has launched a major frontal assault against a certain view of biblical authority. All who are interested in these questions can benefit from his learned discussion, whether they begin the book convinced of the rightness of his conclusion or leave unsatisfied by his proposals.