Benjamin Sargent

*David Being a Prophet: The Contingency of Scripture upon History in the New Testament*

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Kenneth D. Litwak  
Covina, California

It is often suggested that the New Testament authors used scriptural texts without any regard for the contingent, historical origins of the texts they cited. Sargent sets out to demonstrate that in a small number of New Testament texts the historical origins of the scriptural citation have significance for the New Testament author’s hermeneutic. He sets out to explore the dependence of the hermeneutics of New Testament authors upon “other exegetical traditions in antiquity.” He argues that, for the most part, “historical hermeneutics in the New Testament represent an innovation dependent upon early Christian notions of *Heilsgeschichte*” (3). Sargent argues that the role of historical study in contemporary biblical hermeneutics must not be dismissed because of the assumption that the historical contingencies of biblical texts are a product of the Enlightenment and not “properly Christian.” Not only is this assumption properly Christian, but it may even be “distinctively Christian,” since this view of scriptural texts “marks a departure from the exegetical norms of early Semitic and Hellenistic-Jewish reading of Scripture” (3). The first three chapters in the book examine historical exegesis/hermeneutics (Sargent seems to use the two terms interchangeably) in Hebrews, Acts, and the *Davidssohnfrage* in the Synoptics, respectively. The fourth chapter considers the historical hermeneutic present in the New Testament and the “crisis” facing the historical-critical method in theology.
Chapter 1 examines Heb 3:1–4:13 and 7:1–28, as these are two of the longest and most detailed discussions of scriptural texts in the New Testament. In these passages the author of Hebrews is explicit about the exegetical approach that leads to the interpretation of biblical texts, which is valuable for understanding the hermeneutics of New Testament authors. Hebrews 3:1–4:13 interprets Ps 95:7b–11. The author of Hebrews attributes the words of the psalm to the Holy Spirit and regularly places the words from the Scriptures of Israel in the mouths of divine characters. Given this practice, it is “somewhat striking” that the author shows an awareness of the supposed historical settings of the biblical texts cited in Hebrews. The use of Ps 95 shows the author’s respect for scripture; it is unlikely that he modified the wording of the psalm to suit his own purposes. The warnings to the audience of Hebrews in this passage are based upon history: the fact of the failure of the wilderness generation to enter God’s rest. The argument in Heb 4:3–5 employs the characteristic rabbinic approach of gezerah shewah, which is the explanation of a problematic term by its use elsewhere in scripture. More noteworthy is the application in Heb 4:4–10 of the psalm to David’s time. Seeing it as a psalm spoken by David or at least in David’s time, the author of Hebrews saw God’s rest as still being available, and not something only for the wilderness generation.

A similar exegetical approach is taken with Heb 7:1–28, which Sargent understands to use Ps 110:4 within a historical framework to show the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood to the Levitical priesthood. Sargent argues that the “‘historical’ argument … is of most theological significance in the larger argument of Hebrews,” while it is also the most distinctive, being unparallel in its wider literary environment (17). Sargent argues that the historical argument of Hebrews depends upon Heilsgeschichte. He then argues that the argument based upon the identity of the author of the psalm texts is unprecedented, based upon an examination of suggested parallels in Philo, Qumran, and rabbinic literature. The historical arguments in Hebrews depend upon a theological interpretation of history that is unique to Hebrews.

Chapter 2, “Historical Exegesis in Acts,” examines Peter’s Pentecost speech in Acts 2:14–41, especially its treatment of Pss 16:8–10 and 110:1 in Acts 2:25–36 and the use of Ps 16:10 in Acts 13:33–37 in Paul’s speech at Pisidian Antioch. He argues that the historical reasoning used with these psalms is similar to that in Hebrews. The historical exegesis in these two passages is founded upon an assumption regarding the historical author of the psalm texts. While the hermeneutical approach in Acts 2:25–36 and 13:33–37 has some similarities to other first-century interpretive practices, it still represents “something of a Christian innovation,” which grows out of Luke’s “understanding of history as a linear process of promise and fulfillment” (45). The chapter begins with a consideration of the many questions surrounding the speeches in Acts. Sargent suggests that the use of Ps 16 in the manner these two speeches utilize it comes from the primitive kerygma.
In Acts 2:25–36, Pss 16 and 110 are read in light of their Davidic authorship, which is decisive in Acts’ interpretation of these texts. The assertions that David was a prophet and that therefore, since Ps 16 speaks of a deathless life and David is known to have died, David must have prophesied about someone in the future, are historical arguments. The notion here of history, while not that of historical criticism, uses details of the assumed author’s life to understand the meaning of his writings, analogous to the reconstruction of a life of Paul from his letters. Nearly identical exegesis is used by Paul in his speech at Pisidian Antioch, which is based upon a negative historical argument. The fact of David’s death gives Ps 16 its christological significance. Sargent argues that the historical, exegetical arguments of these two speeches is distinctive and not based on any of the usual literary sources that have been suggested, including Qumran, Josephus, or rabbinic texts.

Chapter 3 examines “Historical Exegesis in the Davidssohnfrage: Matthew 22:41–46, Mark 12:35–37 and Luke 20:41–44.” The previous chapter argued that the speeches in Acts 2 and 13 make a negative case that depends upon David as a historical person and that he could not fulfill Pss 16 or 110:1. This chapter argues for a similar negative case visible in these Synoptic parallels concerning the Davidssohnfrage. In these texts Jesus is presented as interpreting Ps 110:1 by attributing the psalm to David and claiming that the Messiah cannot simply be the “son of David,” since David refers to the Messiah as kyriou. Sargent argues that this interpretation probably originated in Jesus’s actual teaching, which may be “responsible in some sense for the emergence of the Pss 16 and 110 sources or traditions employed in the Pentecost and Pisidian Antioch speeches of Acts” (92). One key difference, however, between Peter’s Pentecost speech and the Davidssohnfrage pericope is Peter’s historical exegesis that explicitly speaks of David as the author and therefore not the referent of the psalm, while Jesus is not presented offering this explicit exegesis. Sargent states that Jesus’s exegetical argument is unprecedented in the gospels, which generally use rabbinic or charismatic forms. He also notes that the argument is relatively unambiguous but the meaning of the pericope very ambiguous. He concludes that there is a good possibility that the Davidssohnfrage goes back to the historical Jesus, not least because there is no apparent purpose for it in the early church nor any exegetical parallels outside the New Testament. It is a credible possibility, argues Sargent, that the Davidssohnfrage not only comes from tradition connected to the historical Jesus, and most likely Jesus himself, but also that the pericope is the basis for early Christian interpretation of Pss 16 and 110, which is seen clearly in Acts 2:25–36 (especially 2:34–36) and Acts 13.

Chapter 4, “The Historical Hermeneutics of the New Testament and the Current Crisis Facing the Historical-Critical Method in Theology,” argues that “an interest in a text’s historical origins should be a permanent and valued feature of a Christian reader’s
approach to the Bible” (emphasis original) particularly in the area of theology (128). Sargent bases this on the arguments made in earlier chapters that the exegetical reasoning in Hebrews, Acts 2 and 13, and the Davidsohnfrage are distinctive when compared to rabbinic, Qumranic, pseudepigraphical, and Hellenistic Jewish literature, which is generally seen as influencing New Testament hermeneutics. Rather, these New Testament texts present an innovation in scriptural reasoning that is contingent upon historical author or context in which the scriptural text arose. These distinctively Christian exegetical practices likely came from the teachings of the historical Jesus and early Christian accounts of Heilsgeschichte. The historical-critical method has been subjected to significant and necessary critique in recent decades. However, while literary approaches to the Bible are not in opposition to historical criticism, historical study of the origins of a biblical text poses a greater challenge in systematic theology. This is particularly true in the recent trends in theological interpretation of Scripture. Sargent contends, however, that the historical reasoning based upon assumptions of contingency does not preclude theological interpretations. Rather, such an approach prevents a biblical text from being “too easily absorbed into the reader’s theological presuppositions” (131).

Sargent considers recent challenges to the historical-critical method. He notes first that the rejection of historical criticism by those engaged in the theological interpretation of scripture inappropriately includes any type of historical exegetical reasoning or method.

This chapter addresses two reasons for rejecting historical criticism. Some reject it because of its origins and shaping by philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Historical criticism is thought to be alien and hostile to Christian theology, and it claims—falsely—to be neutral and objective. Second, others reject historical criticism because of its assumption that determinate meaning is a property of texts. Sargent largely dismisses these criticisms and instead seeks to demonstrate problems with the theological interpretation of Scripture “school” for its lack of historical grounding.

This work addresses important issues related to historical research surrounding biblical texts. Sargent’s approach and conclusions are marked by cautious exegetical humility, sometimes to a fault, especially when addressing subjects of great controversy. He seeks to represent the variety of positions on issues. However, while he acknowledges that there are challenges to historical criticism, he seems to grant no real need for modifications to this approach. It must be asked, How can scholars in the twenty-first century ignore the huge philosophical problems of historical criticism? Nevertheless, the book will be of value to those engaged in researching the New Testament’s use of scripture and those interested in hermeneutical questions.