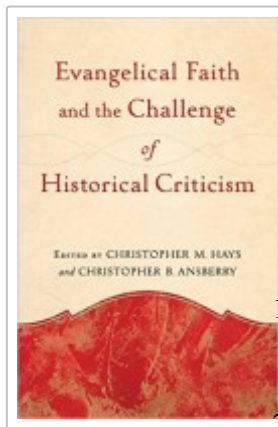


Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism (book review)

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This book was published by Baker Academy in 2013 (ISBN 978-0-8010-4938-5). It is a collection of essays by a number of progressive evangelical authors edited by [Christopher M. Hays](#) (Seminario Bíblico de Colombia, New Testament) and [Christopher B. Ansberry](#) (Oak Hill College, Old Testament). The main purpose of the book is stated in its title: To find out how historical critical approach to the Bible challenges evangelical faith. Or to put it another way, to explain current state of historical criticism, as adopted by progressive evangelicalism, in its furthest theological consequences.

1. The opening chapter is trying to set up some epistemological rationale of the book, i.e. to open a new space for historical critical inquiry within the evangelical tradition. (Or maybe to show that there's always been such space.)
2. In the chapter named **Adam and the fall** Christopher M. Hays and Stephen L. Herring perform a hermeneutical experiment of omitting Adam out of the world's history in order to see whether the Christian theology wouldn't collapse. The experiment showed that it would not. The authors demonstrate with remarkable clarity that historicity of Adam is demanded only by the doctrine of original guilt, not by the reality of human concupiscence.
3. In the chapter on **Exodus** C. M. Hays portrays the difference between maximalist and minimalist methodologies, introduces the concept of cultural memory and argues that “minimalist conception of the exodus as a fictional account penned in the Persian or Hellenistic periods not only erases ancient Israel's pre-exilic identity; it also undermines her future hope and diminishes our Christian confidence in the liberating faith to which it bears witness.” I must say that I was surprised by such a strong affirmative statement on the historicity of exodus penned by a critical scholar!
4. In the chapter on the origins and function of **Deuteronomy** Ansberry and Jerry Hwang introduce the reader into the history of critical research in Deuteronomy and play with the question of its authority once it would be proved that its “mere pious fraud” composed either by the time of Josiah or during the exile. They make an interesting case in favor of redefining the locus of Deuteronomy's authority from the notion of historical (Mosaic) authorship to “the content of the document in general and the Holy Spirit's work through authorized tradents in particular.”
5. In the next chapter Amber Warhurst, Seth B. Tarrer and C. M. Hays explain how unfulfilled **prophecies** are helping us to understand their broader purpose. While explicitly admitting that some prophecies were pointing to the future and were literally fulfilled, they take up some examples from Jeremiah, Jonah and especially Daniel to show that prophecy may be conditioned by human actions, or composed after the fact (so called *vaticinium ex eventu*), which was, as they demonstrate, common practice of the day. They contend that whatever the explanation of unfulfilled prophecies might be, prophecy is much more than prediction-fulfillment process as it does reveal “the essential will of God” even if unfulfilled.
6. In the next chapter on alleged **pseudepigraphy** in the Bible, C. B. Ansberry, C. A. Strine, E. W. Klink III and D. Lincicum present overview of discussion about literary origins of the Pentateuch, the Book of Isaiah, the Fourth Gospel and the Pauline corpus. They propose that our modern notion of robust authorship is forcing some scholars of both conservative and critical camps to overstate the consequences of pseudoeypigraphy on the authority of the Bible. As they wrote: “If the biblical documents locate authority in the content and canonization of the inspired text rather than their ‘author(s)’, then historical criticism helps us to problematize modern conceptions of authority and to understand the nature of the biblical text.”
7. In the chapter on **historical Jesus** research M. J. Dalinger and C. M. Hays address some explosive questions concerning Jesus' earthly ministry: Was Jesus conceived by the Holy Spirit? Why did he not affirm his deity too often? Was he God without even knowing? Did he understand himself rather as a Jewish eschatological prophet? Did he perform miracles? Did he have a physical body after the resurrection? And what if resurrection didn't happen at all? While exploring theological ramifications of various critical positions on these subjects, these authors come up with some strong affirmations of the necessity of physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As they had put it: “Christian faith can bear all sorts of debate about the historicity of given events in the life of Christ. It can shrug off

dispute over the order in which people claimed to have experienced the resurrected Christ and can even accommodate disagreement about what precisely they experienced. But the facticity of Jesus' unique and divinely effected resurrection from the dead in space and time is the defining trait, the *conditio sine qua non*, of the Christian faith.”

8. In this chapter A. J. Kuecker and K. D. Liebengood introduce the reader into the problems of differing chronologies and diverse theologies ascribed to **the Apostle Paul in Acts** from those described in his own epistles. They try to quench these problems a little by reminding us about huge differences in genre, audience, occasion and moment of writing of Acts and the epistles. After debating some major scholarly proposals on these issues, these authors tend to give credit to congruity and complementarity of “both Pauls” and to so called canonical critical approach which “tend to be less interested in ‘staying behind the text’ for the sake of comparing reconstructed histories or theologies based upon the results of historical-critical investigation.”
9. In the last chapter C. B. Ansberry and C. M. Hays describe historical **criticism as a tool** which brings benefit according to our ability to wield it.

By asking and responding to questions like “what if historical criticism is right on this or that matter” the authors want to demonstrate that the authority and uniqueness of the Christian Scripture may retain its greatness in spite of approval of many critical remarks. This refreshing proposal stands in contrast with classical inerrantist view of the Scripture as a monolithic block of glass, where a tiny crack on one side could penetrate down to its heart. According to this classical view, denying accuracy of some records in the OT is putting the resurrection of Jesus in jeopardy. Not because there is a particular dependence, but because of general homogeneity of the Bible which implies that accuracy of one passage demands accuracy of other passages as well. Although this kind of epistemological argument remains unaddressed throughout the book, the position of the authors is quite clear: The Bible may not be a block of glass. That's our modern rationalistic construction. And should it be a block of glass, we will only figure that out through historical critical research!

Despite its modest and popular style, the book doesn't read well because of the immense density of elaborated stuff. The authors are excellent in their effort to push a camel through the eye of a needle, but subject matters that are debated here just didn't allow them to push it too far. Therefore I would not recommend this book to everyone. Not because of some sort of higher critical venom which can only be neutralized by a skilled apologist, but because of its implicit prerequisite for basic orientation in its numerous fields of inquiry. I would recommend this book to a graduate student who has already been introduced into the problems of biblical criticism and who has contemplated the role of history in biblical interpretation. I would readily recommend it to students of the conservative provenance as it could clarify all kinds of misunderstandings caused by unguarded pronouncements of their zealous teachers (like me) and orthodox textbooks. This is not to say that this book stands for some salvific role in God's plan of salvation of evangelicals. On the contrary, it calls to be debated. But I suspect that approach of these progressive Bible scholars is so honest and their agenda is so transparent that it deserves our keenest attention.

I have taken some notes while reading. They are available under the link below. Yes, it clearly is an unintelligible ballast and I don't recommend it unless you are desperately wanting to study book's statements on individual subject matters without the book itself.

- [Reading notes in HTML](#)

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