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Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism (Book Review)

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One of the saddest aspects of the story of the Religious Right's turn against Carter is the perfidy of some of its most influential and admired leaders. As Balmer tells the story—citing sources—Billy Graham is just plain two-faced, as he cozies up to Carter while at the same time pledging support to Ford and later Reagan. Jerry Falwell tells a bald-faced lie about Carter to make political hay. A few months after professing his great love for President Carter in a personal note to him, columnist Cal Thomas signs on with Falwell's Moral Majority, "the purpose of which was to thwart Jimmy Carter's reelection" (118).

The result of all the strategizing by the Moral Majority was that fewer evangelicals voted for Carter in the 1980 Presidential election, in which he was defeated by Ronald Reagan. But it was hardly the last of Jimmy Carter. In the final chapter, "Stepping Stone," Balmer suggests that Carter is probably the only president to use the White House as a stepping stone to greater accomplishments. And while it is true that since he left the White House, Jimmy Carter has accomplished amazing things, including the winning of the Nobel Peace Prize, to say that he did more as an ex-president than as president is not quite fair.

To start with, there was and is the testimony of his personal life and faith. Having just experienced the corruption of the Nixon years, the American people were uplifted by a leader who was a model of public and private morality. But beyond that, he or-

chestrated the remarkable Camp David Accords between Egypt (Sadat) and Israel (Begin) that survives to this day; he negotiated the second Panama Canal treaty; he refused to go to war with Iran (though he was urged to do so) because such a war would violate Just War principles; he signed SALT II with Leonid Brezhnev; and he established a foreign policy that was "more collaborative, less interventionist, and sensitive above all to human rights" (79).

I have just one note of criticism about this otherwise excellent biography: Balmer suggests in an "epilogue" that Carter, as a boy, naval officer, Georgia governor, and president, was "driven...by a kind of works righteousness." After his defeat, says Balmer, Carter "reaffirmed his commitment to works righteousness" (191). To me this is sheer speculative nonsense. Carter stated countless times that his salvation was through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He was born again, as he said, born to good works, not because they would make him righteous but because they were a natural response to the righteousness imputed to him by Jesus Christ.

Though the political right continues to defame Carter for his perceived political failures, I can think of no American citizen of the last sixty years who better exemplifies a life of Christian service in both the public and private spheres than the Jimmy Carter we see in this biography.

Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry (editors), *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2013. Paperback, 241 pages, including Bibliography. ISBN: 978-0-8010-4938-5. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt College.

The historical-critical approach to Scripture is not a recent one. It had clearly emerged by the late seventeenth century. Arguably, it was one of the consequences of the open Bible for which the Reformation had struggled. The problem was that the expanding historical consciousness of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was brought to scholarly expressions on the basis of the rationalistic assumptions of the Enlightenment. Inevitably, this had an immense and problematic impact on the scrutiny of the biblical texts. The self-revelation of God to his covenant people was purportedly reduced to the developing monotheistic religious sensibilities of the Hebrew people. The resulting "higher critical" biblical scholar-

ship—sometimes employing highly refined philological techniques—has been the bugbear of much evangelical Christianity for well over a century. It seems to rob them of the Bible they need to proclaim the gospel. This is particularly so for revivalist preachers of the fundamentalist and dispensationalist variety.

The editors of *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*—Christopher Hays, professor of New Testament at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia, and Christopher Ansberry, Lecturer in Old Testament at Oak Hill College, London, England—are well aware that the problem lies not so much in the "historical critical" approach *as such*, but in the enlightenment assumptions that have typically been

the basis of its utilization and application (7, 205-6). Their volume presents a series of studies in which some of the more thorny questions of higher criticism are addressed. Other writers co-author some of the contributions to this volume, specifically Michael J. Daling, Stephen Lane Herring, Jerry Hwang, Edward W. Klink III, Aaron J. Kuecker, Kelly D. Liebengood, David Lincicum, Seth B. Tarrer, Casey A. Strine, and Amber Warhurst. But the Ansberry-Hays partnership clearly forms the backbone of the collaboration. They state their purpose clearly at the outset: “this book discusses the theological challenges that confront the biblical interpreter who engages in historical criticism” (5).

A short review does not permit an extensive consideration of the chapter-by-chapter discussion of each issue. An overview is therefore appropriate. On the historicity of Adam and the fall, readers are reminded that some narratives are parabolic (30), and that the Pauline utilization of the Genesis narrative in Romans 5:12-21 does not present any difficulty to such a reading (43)—it is the legacy of Augustine that can be problematic (47-49). On the historicity of the Exodus the authors acknowledge the difficulties presented by Pentateuchal numerics (59-60) and steer a middle course between the maximalist and minimalist positions (67-69) while insisting that the central focus should be on the meaning of the Exodus event (70-71). The issues surrounding the dating and status of Deuteronomy and cognate Deuteronomistic-style historical narratives are confronted, with well-made warnings not to assume the exclusive validity of our modern notions of individual authorship (93). All of which leads into the question of pseudepigraphy, of one author assuming the persona of another. Here the authors argue that a careful assessment of the practice can actually refine our understanding of the Spirit’s inspiration of the written word (157). The discussion of prophecy emphasizes that we are not dealing with simple prediction, and prophetic utterance may be conditional and fulfillment deferred (103, 114). The “hot topic” of the setting and dating of Daniel is unavoidable. The authors prefer a late date and conclude that in this work we are provided with pseudepigraphic commentary on recent and current events

in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (104-110).

Historical critical probing of the New Testament might at times seem less threatening but is equally as challenging. Here the big questions include Jesus’ self-understanding and proclamation, as well as the possible prophecy of the imminence of his second advent (159-165). Here some readers will detect an unevenness of view across the volume (117, cf. 162, 215). Without question, though, the authors view the resurrection as pivotal (180). After the four gospels and their inter-relationship, a further issue is the relationship between the narratives of Acts 11 to 15 and Galatians 1-2 (182-189). Here we are counseled to keep the chronological and doctrinal questions in perspective, remembering that there is nothing here that overthrows the faith as confessed in the ecumenical creeds (188).

In all of this it is necessary to recognize that we have the scriptures the Holy Spirit has been pleased to give us (6, cf. 217). At the same time, historical scholarship is not going away and has to be faced (181). History and historical understanding are not the enemy. As the editors put, “it is in history that God revealed himself; it is in history that God inspired and enscripturated his people’s reflections on their encounter with him; and it is in history that we encounter that Scripture” (204).

This book stands on the shoulders of Carl E. Armerding’s *The Old Testament and Criticism* (1983) and the immensely more comprehensive contribution by Kenton L. Sparks in *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (2008). Of course, everyone in this field works in the shadow of giants such as Henning Graf Reventlow (1928-2010), whose *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (1984) and four volume *History of Biblical Interpretation* (2009-11) are of abiding significance. Yet this book is more than overdue and highly recommended. Seminarians and other serious Bible students should consider it indispensable. Its contributors, unlike many others, have faced the questions and do not simply make faces at them and then storm off a doctrinal huff. In truth, we are no more required to sacrifice faith on the altar of history than to sacrifice history on the altar of faith.