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Reflections (Personal and Otherwise) on Protestantism’s Uneasy and Diverse Response to Higher Criticism

Peter Enns

Middle Protestants

EACH OF US HAS BEEN ASKED to address some important questions about the *intersection* of our own faith traditions and higher criticism—an apt metaphor, since “intersections” are where collisions often happen. This brings me to my topic, Protestantism and higher criticism, a messy subject to be sure.

There is hardly a single Protestant perspective on anything. The iterations of Protestantism number in hundreds or even thousands of diverse and even opposed denominations and theologies that stubbornly resist unification. These persist, rather, *in order* to be distinct, to lay claim to a more correct expression of the Christian faith. The irony is well noted: a movement founded on the divinely inspired—and therefore authoritative and presumably perspicuous—Holy Scripture yields a staggering number of very much un-unified, embattled versions competing for supremacy. So to our question: how have Protestants engaged higher criticism? In every way imaginable.

For the purpose of this roundtable discussion, permit me to narrow our scope by focusing on one particular group of Protestants for whom our question is most pressing. Though conscious of reductionism, I

think of three general groups of Protestants, the first of which can be put to the side quickly: fundamentalism. Whatever spectrum of beliefs might well be represented by that term, these Protestants are not asking the question we are asking here because they essentially reject higher criticism as hostile to faith. A dialogue like ours is not seen as a constructive way forward but as evidence of going astray, or even as an attack upon the Christian faith and therefore to be shunned. At the other end of the spectrum are Protestants referred to conventionally as liberal or mainline Protestants. For them higher criticism is a given, a part of their history, even if that history has not always been navigated well. We will return briefly to this group later on, but suffice it to say that these Protestants, though still working through the aftermath of the historical-critical revolution of the nineteenth century, are far beyond the crisis stage, and so we will find there a lesser sense of urgency about how a religious reading of Scripture can coexist with higher criticism.

The third group of Protestants—those that most overlap with the purpose for our roundtable and with whom I am more closely aligned—make up a large and somewhat diverse middle group: mainstream to moderately progressive evangelicals. These Protestants are genuinely committed to “taking the Bible seriously” (a common self-designation), which routinely includes a robust study of the Bible in historical context.¹ But that historical interest invariably brings these readers into contact with historical criticism in one way or another. As a result, on some level these “middle Protestants” live with the tension between devotion to Scripture and facing the challenges of historical study.

Judging by evangelicalism’s history, it is most fair to say that higher criticism has posed more of a destabilizing threat to faith than an ally and supporter of faith. As I see it, the challenge of higher criticism can be expressed thus: *higher criticism undermines the evangelical*

1. One need only examine most any evangelical study Bible and glance at the notes and maps. “Backgrounds” study Bibles in particular have been popular among evangelicals, for example: *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016); *IVP Bible Background Commentary* [both Old Testament and New Testament volumes] (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000 and 2014); *NIV Archaeology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

expectation that the Bible, as God's word, provides an intellectually defensible historical record of the past and therefore a stable intellectual foundation for faith. The evangelical expectation is understandable given the premodern roots of Protestant dogma and concomitant assumptions made about Scripture's historical accuracy, but that is precisely the point of tension: premodern dogma coming to terms with modern methods that have proven quite persuasive.

Princeton Theological Seminary: Faith and intellect in harmony

I would like to illustrate this tension by my own professional experience—namely, leaving my tenured position at Westminster Theological Seminary in 2008.² My purpose for doing so is not to bring unnecessary focus on myself but to give a concrete example of a recurring *pattern of conflict* and the underlying *reasons* for that conflict among the middle Protestants that I segmented above. Neither the pattern nor its causes are adequately addressed within evangelicalism, with the result being the regular, almost rhythmic manifestation of internal conflict.

Westminster Theological Seminary was founded in 1929, a time when Protestant biblical inerrantists were vigilant about scanning the horizon for possible threats to the Christian faith in the wake of the Scope Monkey Trial. Westminster was formed specifically as a protest against the rising liberalism of its parent school, Princeton Theological Seminary, which had been founded over one hundred years earlier in 1812 for the purpose of propagating the Reformed (Calvinist) faith, which claimed to be the most intellectually rigorous and biblically consistent expression of Christianity.³ Princeton's liberalization, namely, its

2. The precipitating factor was the publication of *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005). The second edition (2015) contains a postscript where I engage the book's reception, both positive and negative.

3. The triumphalist tone of this claim, though not universal, is nonetheless common enough and unfortunate. As recently as 2003 we read: "All sound religion is Reformed in its essence and implications. Reformed distinctives are truth held in trust for the other traditions, and Reformed theology, while it is certainly capable of growth and of

growing acceptance of the methods and conclusions of higher criticism, was seen by Princeton New Testament professor and founder of Westminster, J. Gresham Machen, as a betrayal of Christian orthodoxy and Princeton's high calling to defend it.

We are glimpsing this period of history because, among conservative Protestants to this day, the founding of Westminster in response to the liberalization of Princeton Theological Seminary stands tall in collective social memory as a foundation myth for the duty of defending traditional biblical faith against the attacks of heterodox higher criticism. The great fear at Westminster nearly a century later during the so-dubbed "Enns controversy" was repeatedly and explicitly articulated as the fear of replaying Princeton's failure to remain true to its biblical moorings. Conservatives today outside of the Calvinist tradition, when it comes to formulating a response to higher criticism, also see themselves as standing on the shoulders of so-called "Old Princeton," the preliberalized version (represented by such figures as B. B. Warfield and Charles Hodge). Those days are seen as something of a gold standard for "[contending] for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 1:3 NRSV). The shape of present-day intellectual Protestant evangelicalism is very much indebted to the drama played out at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It is worth emphasizing that this was no backwoods, hillbilly fundamentalism. Princeton's tradition was intellectual with (perhaps surprisingly) a genuine tolerance for subtle and progressive thinking. The Princeton theologians accepted Darwinian evolution, were realistic

learning from other traditions, is not so much working together with those traditions out of a common theological orientation, as it is seeking to correct them." Richard B. Gaffin, "Response to John Franke," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65/2 (Fall 2003): 327–28. Gaffin's sentiment finds precedent in nineteenth-century Princeton Theological Seminary theologian B. B. Warfield, whom Gaffin cites approvingly: "What is Calvinism? . . . It is not merely the hope of true religion in the world: it is true religion in the world—as far as true religion is in the world at all." Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University, 1931), 356 and 355 = *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1908), 2:359–64.

in their expression of biblical inerrancy, and saw themselves as taking seriously the historical-contextual study of Scripture, mainly through the mastery of biblical languages, the legacy of Calvin.⁴ Their views actually led them to be suspect to those on their right. Certainly there is a fundamentalism within this tradition (more so in recent generations among those who have either forgotten or choose not to embrace Princeton's theological flexibility), but by and large, the Princeton legacy is not "that kind" of conservative. And as for the seminary curriculum, I could go on and on about the level of academic rigor that would make most contemporary seminarians glad they weren't alive then.⁵

The Calvinism of the Princeton tradition not only saw itself as resting on a sound intellectual foundation but also, as mentioned above, as

4. "The Princetonians were keenly interested in science . . . [and their] commitment to both science and theology—and their essential unity—resulted in the establishment of a special professorship of science and religion in the college." David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 2:12. Likewise surprising, perhaps, the Princetonian understanding of biblical inerrancy included statements such as this: "It is not merely in the matter of verbal expressions or literary composition that the personal idiosyncrasies of each author are freely manifested by the untrammelled play of all his faculties, but *the very substance of what they write is evidently for the most part the product of their own mental and spiritual activities*. . . . As the general characteristic of all their work, each writer was put to that special part of the general work for which he alone was adopted by his original endowments, education, special information and providential position. Each drew from the stores of his own *original information, from the contributions of other men and from all other natural sources*. Each sought knowledge, *like all other authors*, from the use of his own natural faculties of thought and feeling, intuition and of logical inference, of memory and imagination, and of religious experience. Each gave evidence of his own *special limitations* of knowledge and mental power, and of his own *personal defects* as well as of his powers. Each wrote upon a definite occasion, under special historically grouped circumstances, from his own standpoint in the progressively unfolded plan of redemption, and each made his own special contribution to the fabric of God's word." A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 12–13, emphasis added. See also Peter Enns, "Preliminary Observations on an Incarnational Model of Scripture: Its Viability and Usefulness," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42/2 (2007): 219–36; "Bible in Context: The Continuing Vitality of Reformed Biblical Scholarship," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68 (2006): 203–18.

5. Marion Ann Taylor, *The Old Testament in the Old Princeton School (1812–1929)* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992).

representing the best expression of orthodox biblical Christian faith. These two components, intellectual rigor and theological orthodoxy—intellect and faith—were harmonious and inseparable, which is the key point here: the academic study of Scripture *supported* the faith tradition. The Bible, regardless of paradigm-shifting moments like evolution, nevertheless provides a solid *intellectual foundation* for a robust and confident Christian faith. This alliance of faith and intellect is a vital component of that tradition's social identity and remains so in many present iterations of Protestantism.

The challenges of the nineteenth century

But we need to go a bit deeper than this casual observation and ask a crucial diagnostic question that is commonly overlooked, at least by defenders of the Old Princeton tradition: *Why* was there ever a shift at Princeton all? It is certainly true that Old Princeton “abandoned inerrancy” or “orthodoxy” as it lined up with European higher criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but this pedestrian observation is only that, an observation and not an explanation for *why* higher criticism came to be so influential to such a heretofore confidently robust intellectual tradition in the first place.

I would suggest that in the latter half of the nineteenth century specifically, several issues—some new, some long-standing—converged to raise very serious and sweeping intellectual challenges to any traditional iteration of the Christian faith, but particularly Princeton Calvinism, which so identified itself with resting faith on a solid, albeit premodern, intellectual foundation. Even if it can be argued that things were taken too far too quickly (which can easily happen when fresh paradigms are introduced), these forces simply could not be ignored nor could they be accounted for within older paradigms.

The issues hardly need to be rehearsed. With respect to the New Testament we see, for example, the blossoming of historical-critical study of the Gospels, including the late origins of the Gospels, their diverse and contradictory reports of the life of Jesus, the quest for the

historical Jesus, and the division between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The authenticity of an uncomfortable number of Paul's letters was also questioned, and much was made of the theological distance between Paul's gospel and what we read in the canonical Gospels. Study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament brought along its own famous challenges, the three most important of which were evolution, date and authorship issues of the various books (source criticism), and biblical archaeology. Alone, each of these was enough of a headache, but their convergence was a series of quick blows to a theological tradition thought to be on intellectually safe and permanent ground. I will say that contemporary evangelicalism is still recovering from these blows. Addressing the fallout of these and other hot-button issues still raises the temperature in the room because these battles are still being fought in classrooms and churches.

The net effect of higher criticism was the direct threat it posed to the so-called "trustworthiness of Scripture," which means a trust in the Bible to provide essentially reliable historical information about everything from Adam to Jesus and Paul, and thus to secure a solid intellectual foundation for faith. This belief concerning the Bible was the cornerstone of Princeton's theological structure. So the battle for the Bible was on: to attack the Bible's historical trustworthiness—to "cast doubt" on the Bible—is to attack Princeton Calvinism, which is an attack on truly orthodox Christianity and therefore on God. It all begins with the Bible.

Perhaps we can put ourselves sympathetically in the place of nineteenth-century Calvinists, committed to the notions that the Bible was intellectually defensible as an essentially inerrant description of historical events and that this inerrant Bible was a nonnegotiable foundational necessity for Christianity to be intellectually defensible and therefore true. The changing intellectual landscape called into question that heretofore blissful marriage of intellect and faith. Academic rigor, once an ally, had turned on them. After all, things had been moving along so nicely. Then along comes Darwin's 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*, a theory of human origins (common descent and

natural selection) that was quickly adopted by the best scientific minds of the time and that also happened to undermine and render essentially useless the historical value of the early chapters of Genesis and therefore, potentially, of Christianity.⁶

Then, in 1878, after about a two-hundred-year gestation period, Old Testament source criticism matured in the troubling yet highly influential work of German scholar Julius Wellhausen and his four-source Documentary Hypothesis.⁷ According to Wellhausen, the Mosaic law wasn't written in the middle of the second millennium BCE as the Bible implies and tradition affirms, but one thousand years later, no earlier than the sixth century. The law was not only a latecomer but actually introduced a distorted bureaucratic Jewish legalistic system of complex sacrifices and other duties to a simple faith (many have noted the anti-Semitic tone of this).⁸ If Wellhausen was right (and most scholars seemed to think he was at least on the right track), the Torah—the heart of the entire Hebrew Bible—is little more than late propaganda and of little historical value. On top of these stressors, archaeologists had been unearthing tablets with writing on them from Mesopotamian cultures far older than Israel and containing bizarre mythic stories of creation and a flood that also looked suspiciously similar to Genesis. Scholars quickly connected the dots: Genesis cannot be read in isolation from

6. A helpful summary of the effects of evolution on Christian faith is Karl W. Giberson, *Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008). I noted above Princeton's willingness to absorb evolution into their thinking about the Bible, but doing so was not problem-free. B. B. Warfield, for example, did not question that Adam was the first man, despite his general acceptance of an evolutionary framework.

7. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian, 1957). A cogent and popular explanation of classic source criticism is Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1987).

8. Solomon Schechter, "Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism," in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark, 1915), 36–37; Jon D. Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987): 281–307, reprinted in Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 33–61.

its ancient environment. When placed next to these older stories of origins and the flood, Genesis looks like just another ancient story, not history but myth.⁹

None of these three factors is seen today in exactly the same light as they were back then—theories have been refined through extensive debate—but they remain key pillars of higher criticism, nonetheless. And for poor and battered nineteenth-century intellectual inerrantists it was a formative moment, to say the least. Darwin, Wellhausen, and Mesopotamian myth converged to make one point: the Old Testament, especially Genesis and the Pentateuch (not to mention the Gospels) are not *historically reliable*. To find the history, one must peel back the layers of the text and read against the grain to see what lies obscured beneath the writer's agenda. If you have a theology, as Princeton did, that placed the very truth of the gospel on the foundation of an inerrant historical Bible, a book that, because it is God's word, speaks plainly about what God did and when he did it, a book that shapes one's personal and community narrative—well, fierce retaliation is to be expected. One might say that the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century shift at Princeton is conservative Protestantism's 9/11—there is a before and an after, and evangelicals show sympathy toward the attackers at their own risk. Attempts by insiders to revisit theological questions thought to be long and permanently settled are not met with a glad hand but with a suspicious eye or a pink slip. That polemic, born here in the nineteenth century, became encoded in the evangelical DNA, which can be seen by the number of Bible churches and Bible colleges that began springing up like weeds in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that persist even today.

9. Perhaps the best known of these is the Babylonian creation myth conventionally referred to by its first two words *Enuma Elish* ("when on high"). It was discovered in 1849 but not published until 1876 after it had been deciphered and translated. George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1976).

Addressing the tensions

Addressing these recurring tensions so that they stop recurring requires more than simply circling the same block again and again. Each generation of evangelicals seems caught in replaying these same battles. In my experience, the reason for this cyclical drama, as mentioned above, is that significant aspects of higher criticism continue to be compelling explanations for various and sundry biblical phenomena. These issues, then, continue to be reintroduced into evangelical life: evangelical colleges and seminaries continue to send their best and brightest graduates to study “Bible and the Ancient Near East” or “Christian Origins” in research universities, and these students come to see the value and explanatory power of higher criticism. Every time this scenario plays out, evangelicals register shock about why these old battles need to be fought yet again! But this scenario keeps playing out precisely because higher criticism has provided models for Scripture that a critical mass of evangelicals continue to find more compelling than the familiar alternative—or at least compelling enough to take seriously. What is needed in my view is a willingness among middle Protestants as a whole to accept the challenge of higher criticism and conceive of the nature of Scripture differently, not as a depository of essentially eyewitness and therefore historically accurate accounts of the past, which has run up against one wall after another, but more as a contextually situated articulation of genuine faith that must be carried forward anew as contexts change—in other words, to come to terms with and attempt to synthesize higher critical insights.

In my 2005 book *Inspiration and Incarnation* (see n. 2 above), a book intended for a general evangelical audience, I attempted such a rearticulating of the nature of Scripture by drawing on the ancient analogy between the mystery of the incarnation (Jesus as fully divine and human) and Scripture inspired by the Spirit (divine) and yet thoroughly part of its ancient settings (human). The key point of the book was this: If evangelicals can accept (as they surely must) that the divine Christ (the Word) was nevertheless, albeit mysteriously, *fully* human, then they have theological permission, so to speak, for accepting Scripture (the

word) as *fully* bearing the marks of its historical settings. If Jesus as an olive-skinned, bearded, sandal-wearing, Aramaic-speaking, first-century Galilean, Judean peasant-preacher is well within Christian orthodoxy, then surely one can accept Scripture reflecting the historical contexts of its writers. In fact, given the centrality of the mystery of an incarnating God for Christian orthodoxy, it might seem not only reasonable to do so but utterly orthodox. An incarnational model of Scripture sketched in this way is my attempt to create some theological space for bringing Christian faith and currents of higher criticism into at least some meaningful conversation. It is only *a* way, not the only way, to be sure, but a way forward nonetheless. The response to my proposal was mixed, as one might expect, though on the whole the support was strong both within evangelicalism and without.

Resistance took several forms, but one anecdote is particularly instructive for us. Not long after the book was published, a friend of mine, who taught systematic theology at an evangelical seminary, told me of a faculty meeting held specifically to discuss it. The discussion was led by a kind but rather conservative biblical scholar, who pointed out for the benefit of his colleagues, "You know, there's really nothing new here in Pete's book. We've known these things all along"—which, of course is not only true of the book, but largely the entire point of it. My friend chimed in, "Wait a minute. There's nothing new here? I've never heard of any of this and I have a PhD in systematic theology from an evangelical seminary! In fact I graduated from here with my master's and had *you* as a teacher! So why don't I know any of this?!" The Bible professor replied with admirable candor: "Our job is to protect you from this information."

To broaden our discussion, consider the following. As mentioned above, promising evangelical students are often encouraged to pursue doctoral work at major research universities with the expectation that they would return broadened but unscathed and able to defend more vigorously evangelical boundaries. So, infiltrate their ranks, learn their ways, expose their weaknesses, and appropriate whatever in critical scholarship can aid the cause and battle courageously against the

rest—“plunder the Egyptians,” as it is often put.¹⁰ So we have three postures toward the threat posed by higher criticism: gatekeeper, spy, or plunderer. What lies beneath these postures is a deep distrust of higher criticism with a long history, as we have glimpsed above.

It might help to contrast this posture with that of postcritical mainline Protestantism and its effort to recover Scripture for the church in the wake of the historical-critical revolution, a movement known as “theological interpretation” or “theological exegesis.”¹¹ This is no rejection of the academy. What’s done is done. We’ve passed through what Walter Wink in 1975 called the “acid bath of criticism,” which has done the necessary job of stripping us of our naïve premodern biblicism.¹² But now, what’s left? What do we *do* with the Bible? How does it function in the church? What does it say about God? What should we believe, and how should we live? Evangelicalism by contrast hasn’t gone through the acid bath of criticism but has chosen to keep it at bay. It is not seeking Paul Ricoeur’s “second naïveté.”¹³ Evangelicals are certainly willing to acknowledge that critical scholarship has shed *some* light on Scripture, but the overall critical “posture” is generally not accepted:

10. See, for example, John Ji-Won Yeo, “Plundering the Egyptians: The Old Testament and Historical Criticism at Westminster Theological Seminary (1929–1998)” (PhD, University of St. Michael’s College, 2007).

11. Theological interpretation/exegesis is certainly not limited to the mainline church, though in evangelical iterations it is typically framed as a movement to bridge the gap between exegesis and theology, not as an attempt to address the fallout from higher criticism. A helpful summary of theological exegesis may be found in S. A. Cummings, “The Theological Exegesis of Scripture: Recent Contributions by Stephen E. Fowl, Christopher R. Seitz and Francis Watson,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 2/2 (2004): 179–96. For evangelical treatments, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); and Kevin Vanhoozer, gen. ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

12. Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm in Bible Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 11.

13. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1969). “Second naïveté” refers to reading the biblical text and accepting it on the level of metaphor and symbol rather than as a necessarily literal description of events, as with the “first naïveté.”

it is largely a mistake that one should be suspicious of, guard against, infiltrate, or plunder. The evangelical reading of Scripture seems more at home in the precritical world, lamenting the slow erosion of biblical authority and inerrancy at the hands of higher critics.

If forced to choose between the two, I would rather be postcritical and wounded than precritical and defensive, but this is not to say that the mainline project of theological interpretation necessarily holds the key to binding together church and the academy—at least I don't see it yet. We may warmly remember Brevard Childs's 1974 commentary on Exodus as an early example of theological interpretation.¹⁴ He acknowledges throughout the insights of historical-critical methods and even explains the text's incongruities on the basis of source critical analysis. But, as others have documented, Childs ignores or even marginalizes his learned critical analysis when he turns to the theological appropriation of the text for the church. Critical analysis, it seems, gets in the way.¹⁵ A lot has happened since Childs, to be sure, and although I am sympathetic, my experience of theological interpretation in general is that the relevance of higher criticism for the church's life and faith can be hard to discern. It is not always clear to me how the academy is brought constructively and intentionally into the theological life of the church.¹⁶ Higher criticism seems to function as more of a negative boundary marker to distinguish the mainline from the religious right, but where is the payoff for taking higher criticism "seriously?"

As I see it, the academy and the Protestant church have at best an uneasy relationship when it comes to the Bible, whether for evangelicals or mainliners. As for a path for moving forward, as I see it, the fear that

14. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974).

15. James Barr, a strong critic of Childs, sees little difference between Childs's approach and fundamentalism's dismissal of higher criticism. James Barr, "Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 (1980): 14.

16. I develop my thinking on this in "Some Thoughts on Theological Exegesis of the Old Testament: Toward a Viable Model of Biblical Coherence and Relevance," *Reformation and Revival Journal* 14/4 (2005): 81–104.

the academy poses for both groups, but especially for evangelicals, can hope to be assuaged only if it can be shown how higher criticism can on some level contribute positively to the faith and practice of the church. I see one area in particular with promise toward that end.

The Bible's inner dynamic

Biblical scholars routinely view the book of Deuteronomy as a layered work that arose in its present form out of the late monarchic and postexilic periods. This certainly disrupts the traditional view that Deuteronomy is an eyewitness account of the middle to late second millennium BCE, but I see in this scholarly insight significant theological payoff of another sort that is directly relevant to every believer walking the earth today: *Israel's ancient theologians deliberately, consciously, recontextualized earlier traditions for the benefit of present communities of faith*. Scripture is replete with such a recontextualizing posture. The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, to give another example, represent a radical and deliberate reshaping of Israel's story for a late postexilic audience. Or taking a step back, the Old Testament as a whole has as a recurring theme the exaltation of the tribe of Judah, which reflects the present-day questions and answers of the postexilic Judahite writers and editors who produced it.

Scripture does not work well as a historically accurate record of the ancient past. But it does work very well as something entirely different, the value of which no contemporary person of faith should underestimate. It *models* an intentionally innovative, adaptive, and contemporizing theological dynamic—the authoritative text of the past is not simply *received* by the faithful but is necessarily *adapted and built upon*.¹⁷ Or similarly, Paul Hanson refers to the biblical pattern of “form” leading to “reform,” where deeply liberating and positive religious rituals or traditions can over time become encrusted or stale and in need of reform.¹⁸

17. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1986).

18. Paul D. Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

One example is the prophetic critique of the perfunctory adherence to the law of Moses during the monarchic period, a problem addressed by the prophets.

Whatever one might call it, this pattern of innovation and adaptation is enthusiastically reflected in the Hebrew Bible and early Judaism,¹⁹ which includes the New Testament. For example, scholars agree that the Synoptic Gospel writers were dependent on each other, but rather than slavish adherence to a base text, they willingly—and with apparently little reservation—“rewrote” earlier versions of the life of Jesus to suit the theological needs of their communities. More telling, the Gospel writers, as well as Paul, profoundly and of theological necessity recontextualized, reshaped, and thus reinterpreted Israel's story around the unexpected circumstance of Jesus of Nazareth, a crucified and risen messiah. This pattern of adaptation also plays out, perhaps unwittingly but also unavoidably, throughout the history of Christianity, beginning with the reshaping of the ancient Semitic story of the Old and New Testaments in Greek and Latin philosophical categories, giving us the Catholic creeds. Through the entire history of the church, then and now, the faithful cannot help but ask the very same question asked by biblical authors like the Deuteronomist, the Chronicler, and Paul: how does that back there and then speak to us here and now? Answering that question is a transaction between the believer's present and the scriptural past, which always involves some creative adaptation.

As I see it, Protestants have in their very own authoritative Scripture a dynamic worth paying attention to. This pattern of adaptation should not be seen as a regrettable situation to be avoided. Rather, it is a biblically sanctioned means of ensuring a continued deep fidelity to the heart—not the letter—of their faith. Evangelicals have remarkable biblical precedent to honor their own familiar theological traditions while at the same time understanding those traditions—*at the outset, and with warm expectation*—as impermanent, as one day needing to be

19. For a compendium of examples, see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

reformed when circumstances call for it. I repeat, on the basis of biblical and church historical precedent, Protestants can—dare I say *must*—see that theological movement and flexibility are a *demonstration* of fidelity to biblical authority, not as a source of proof texts but as modeling adaptive reading strategies. In other words, what is needed in my view is some movement toward that first awkward embrace of an alternate model of what it means to be “biblical.”²⁰

It is fair to ask at this juncture what mainliners have been asking in the wake of the higher-critical revolution: “Yes it’s great to have a liberating model of Scripture, but now what? What do we do?” This is an important question that cannot be ignored, and let me say that I am not advocating willy-nilly embrace of any and all changes. Wise reform is a matter of community discernment over time that cannot be scripted, predicted, or contained fully in a doctrinal statement, no matter how detailed. I don’t really know “what’s next,” but I will say that it is vital for evangelicals to create cultures where its people will be able to talk this through all of this, including the perceived failure of how evangelicals conceive of the nature of Scripture. It would make a profound difference among these middle Protestants if theological conversation, disagreement, and reassessment were expected as part of the tradition’s commitment to the tradition by means of healthy and periodically necessary self-criticism—and more important, to tie those efforts *positively* to contributing toward spiritual formation rather than seeing it as a destructive force.²¹ I see this as a wise path forward, albeit a paradoxical one: Take Scripture “seriously” as God’s word and at the same time embrace what God’s word itself models—a moving rather than static theological process. After all, the question is never simply,

20. Working off of the incarnation, C. S. Lewis articulates well such a model: “For we are taught that the Incarnation itself proceeded ‘not by the conversion of the god-head into flesh, but by taking on (the) manhood into God’; in it human life becomes the vehicle of Divine life. If the Scriptures proceed not by conversion of God’s word into literature but by taking up of a literature to be the vehicle of God’s word, this is not anomalous.” Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986), 116.

21. This is a central theme in Peter Enns, *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016).

What did God do then? but What is God surprisingly, unexpectedly, counterintuitively, in complete freedom, doing now?

Finding some breathing room

What does higher criticism have to do with all this? It helps us understand something of this dynamic within Scripture. Knowing roughly when, why, and under what circumstances the Bible was written and edited illustrates how the changing course of history affects the appropriation of antecedent Scripture or tradition. Higher criticism does not get a free pass—and I'm thinking here for example of Brueggemann's critique of unguarded claims to "objectivity" in the history of higher criticism.²² But with all the standard caveats, higher criticism is not simply the enemy to be guarded against or plundered, nor is it the awkward relative you talk about but don't invite over for dinner. It is a compelling means of understanding and embracing the complex actualizing dynamic of the Bible as a whole.

But precisely here is the conundrum for our "middle Protestants." For them the dynamic quality of the Bible is more a problem to be solved than a theological guide, tolerable but only in small doses, not as a positive theological strategy. All theology is an equal measure of sociology and psychology, and so this protective narrative among Protestants runs deep. Their challenge, nevertheless, is somehow to create a culture where critical self-reflection about how they see the Bible is valued rather than deemed a threat. Higher critical insights disturb familiar theological categories and are perhaps not always communicated in helpful ways (think renegade atheist college professor). But protecting boundaries as the default mode may not be the best way to preserve faith. There is actually more at stake by not thinking synthetically and creatively about some long-standing higher critical issues. Stubbornly defending tradition ironically damages that tradition and those

22. Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

in it. Willingness to change and adapt is actually necessary to preserve any identity.

Such reexamination will likely mean looking outside the Protestant story to see what wisdom can be modeled by other faith traditions. For example, evangelicals could take a cue from Judaism about encountering God in conversation with (or even debate over) the Bible and its various voices, rather than treating the Bible as a sourcebook of plain and simple infallible and timeless information that demands unified agreement. The Jewish tradition broadly considered has been able to remain deeply engaged in Scripture as authoritative while at the same time debating its meaning and accepting various and contradictory explanations. This very process is reverently recorded and preserved in their sacred tradition (particularly the Talmud) where there is little need to resolve all interpretive tensions. Learning to be comfortable with such a dialogical approach to engaging the Bible rather than stressing about “getting it right” might provide some breathing room for engaging higher criticism positively.

Put another way, Protestants may have to rethink what it means to have a “biblically centered” faith. After all, the Bible really is not the center of Christian faith. God is—for Christians more specifically, God as mediated through Christ. Therefore, knowing and encountering this God is about much more than ironing out the wrinkles of our sacred text, especially one that has so admirably resisted unanimity in interpretation. Along those lines, Protestants can learn much from some contemplative traditions that have been part of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.²³ Needing to get the Bible right and fretting over whether one is getting it right and what God thinks of us should we get it wrong are not spiritually healthy (or mature) postures but stem from a false, frightened, and wounded self. Spiritual masters, not only

23. Accessing the wisdom of contemplative traditions is not foreign to the evangelical experience though it has been largely a peripheral (though growing) movement. See Richard J. Foster, ed., *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); and Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978).

of Christianity but of other faiths, are quick to remind us that living in our heads like this hinders communion with God and spiritual growth. It is a great Protestant irony that one's devotion to Scripture can wind up being a spiritual barrier.

In conclusion, the only way I know that higher criticism and Protestant faith can coexist is by deliberately creating honest—I will say brave—cultures that embrace and respect the tensions and ambiguities of Scripture as not only inevitable but as healthy pointers to a deeper journey of faith, namely one that does not rest on epistemic certainty about the Bible. In my opinion, the energy for creating these cultures would need to come from the people in the pew. I don't think it can effectively be driven top down by its prominent leaders, since their status is typically tied to maintaining the Protestant status quo of an authoritative Bible. From where I stand, however, such a program would actually evoke the true spirit of the Reformation, but now turned inward, not simply on the enemy lurking outside the walls. Critical self-evaluation, rather than merely self-preservation, is the first step to a more healthy view of Scripture and thus to allowing true engagement with higher criticism.

Put differently, perhaps Protestants must realize and own that all our attempts to describe ultimate reality are dim reflections. Even a "biblically centered" Christian tradition must surely recognize that there is mystery in revelation and ambiguity in interpretation. Having the word of God written does not—cannot—end serious theological reflection and reformation. In fact it guarantees the opposite, to which the theological diversity of the church over time, throughout the world at this very moment, bears witness. The Bible, which itself sports diverse theologies, does not end the church's deliberations but begins them. The Protestant predicament, however, is that this may also be the hardest to accept. Where all this is headed is beyond me, but I will certainly be eager to watch it unfold.

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