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EVANGELICAL FAITH  
AND THE CHALLENGE  
OF HISTORICAL  
CRITICISM

Edited by  
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*This book is dedicated to our children*

*Angela Ramona Ansberry*

*Benjamin Daniel Ansberry*

*Judah Caleb Hays*

*Asher Caedmon Hays*

*Zoe Genevieve Hays*

*‘They were yours, and you gave them to me,  
and they have kept your word.’ (John 17.6)*



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Christopher M. Hays

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Christopher B. Ansberry

# Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
' <i>Abot R. Nat.</i>	' <i>Abot de Rabbi Nathan</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ANE	Ancient Near East
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
<i>Apoc. Mos.</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Moses</i>
Augustine, <i>Pec. merit.</i>	Augustine, <i>De remissione peccatorum et meritis</i>
<i>2 Bar.</i>	<i>2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)</i>
<i>B. Bat.</i>	<i>Baba Batra</i>
<i>Ber.</i>	<i>Berakot</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Bible Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
<i>1 Clem.</i>	<i>1 Clement</i>
Col.	Colossians
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Dan.	Daniel
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Ecclus.	Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)
' <i>Ed.</i>	' <i>Eduyyot</i>
<i>1 En.</i>	<i>1 Enoch (Ethiopic Apocalypse)</i>
Eph.	Ephesians
esv	English Standard Version
Eusebius, <i>H.E.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
Exod.	Exodus
Ezek.	Ezekiel
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
Gal.	Galatians
Gen.	Genesis

*List of abbreviations*

HKAT	Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
Hos.	Hosea
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
IBC	Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
Ignatius, <i>Eph.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Ephesians</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Irenaeus, <i>Haer.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus Haereses</i>
Isa.	Isaiah
Jas.	James
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCS</i>	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
Jer.	Jeremiah
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
Josephus, <i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
Josh.	Joshua
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
Judg.	Judges
<i>L.A.B.</i>	<i>Liber antiquitatum biblicarum</i> (Pseudo-Philo)
LCC	The Library of Christian Classics
Lev.	Leviticus
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
2 Macc.	2 Maccabees
Matt.	Matthew
<i>MSJ</i>	<i>Master's Seminary Journal</i>
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
Neh.	Nehemiah
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>

*List of abbreviations*

NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Old Testament Studies
Pet.	Peter
PG	Patrologia graeca
Phil.	Philippians
Phlm.	Philemon
Polycarp, <i>Phil.</i>	Polycarp, <i>To the Philippians</i>
Ps./Pss.	Psalm/Psalms
<i>PSTJ</i>	<i>Perkins (School of Theology) Journal</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
Rom.	Romans
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
Sir.	Sirach
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
StBL	Studies in Biblical Literature
SVTQ	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>T. Adam</i>	<i>Testament of Adam</i>
Tertullian, <i>Marc.</i>	Tertullian, <i>Adversus Marcionem</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Tim.	2 Timothy
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
Wisd.	Wisdom of Solomon
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>Yad.</i>	<i>Yadayim</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
Zech.	Zechariah

# 1

## Towards a faithful criticism

CHRISTOPHER M. HAYS

### Current relations between evangelicals and historical criticism

This is a book about historical criticism. This is not a book about inerrancy. What is tricky, however, is that one can hardly address the topic of historical criticism without at least reflecting on whether and how Scripture might be authoritative and true.

Scholars at the more conservative end of the guild contend that the Scriptures are inerrant, unswervingly true and accurate not only on issues of faith and morals but also on matters of historical fact. The Bible is, they aver, a historical document, but under divine care the Bible has been preserved from the erroneous vulnerabilities of other mundane historical documents. So, when conservative scholars approach Scripture as the word of God, they have a dual commitment to apprehending its theological message and affirming its factual integrity.

At the other end of the halls of the academy are the historical critics. While many of these scholars would indeed affirm that Scripture is the word of God, they do not feel the need (or, indeed, the freedom) to see the Bible as historically pristine. So, when they approach Scripture as a historical document, they bear dual commitments to understanding the message of the text itself and to investigating whether there might be slippage between the way that the Bible describes historical events and the way those events actually occurred in time and space.

As is typical in human disagreements, members of these opposite parties tend to caricature each other, polarizing conversations even

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Note: I am grateful to Dr David Lincicum for lending his formidable insight, guidance and (occasionally) prose to this chapter. If ever the thoughts herein rise above the pedestrian, there is a good chance that as much owes to his influence.

further. Historical critics frequently construe conservative inerrantists as woefully naïve or wilfully ignorant fundamentalists. The nasty rhetoric that sometimes accompanies this dim view is often the consequence of autobiographical chagrin, as many more-liberal critics are themselves ‘lapsed’ conservatives. Conversely, conservative inerrantists sometimes lambast historical critics as godless atheists, arrogantly derogating the divine voice. This hostility often derives from a protective impulse, insofar as conservative scholars have tearfully witnessed bright and promising students engage with liberal research and then abandon their faith entirely.

The reality is that neither denunciation is baseless, though neither is fair. Perhaps the people who know this best are the evangelicals, as we stand somewhere between these two poles, oftentimes bleeding into one camp or another, while feeling the tug of each. It is most of all for such students, seminarians, pastors and scholars, that we write this book.

As we said, this is a book about historical criticism, not inerrancy; yet we recognize that, for evangelicals, these are not entirely separable issues. In fact, modern debate about inerrancy is (among other things) a *reaction* to the rise of historical criticism. In the US, the writings of late nineteenth-century historical critics sparked heated disputes, as those critics impugned the historical veracity of the biblical depictions of numerous events. Sadly, the 1920s and 30s witnessed the retreat of the predecessors of American evangelicalism from the cutting edge of the discussion. Conservative Christian academics forged intellectually infelicitous alliances with popular revivalism and dispensational fundamentalism. Even the best conservative scholars of that generation left historical criticism to Harvard and Princeton in favour of founding Westminster Theological Seminary and, shortly thereafter, Fuller Theological Seminary.<sup>1</sup> In the ensuing decades, however, the schools founded by proto-evangelicals came to produce first-rate students, who, in varying degrees, re-appropriated the tools, the literature and the assumptions of the biblical academy. The question that we now face is: how exactly do we relate to the historical criticism that drove our predecessors away from the universities in the first place?

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<sup>1</sup> Here I offer the briefest paraphrase of Mark Noll’s masterful summary of the ebb and flow of evangelical biblical scholarship in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2nd edn (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), pp. 32–61.

Opinions vary, but Mark Noll has helpfully schematized the range of perspectives on historical criticism within the evangelical camp. He makes a major division between ‘critical anti-criticism’ and ‘believing criticism.’<sup>2</sup> The critical anti-critics, Noll explains, are inerrantists whose academic research engages with the broader academy in an apologetic endeavour to protect traditional interpretations of Scripture; critical anti-critics typically consider inerrancy to be the epistemological foundation of Christian theology.

In contrast, believing critics are scholars who allow that higher critical research may require the revision of some traditional evangelical beliefs. Believing critics come in different stripes. The more conservative variety is but a slightly less-dogmatic version of the critical anti-critic, only theoretically entertaining the possibility that traditional evangelical beliefs be overturned, though not thinking as much to be demanded by the evidence. The second group of believing critics asserts that certain traditional interpretations of scriptural texts should be revised, but in a manner putatively in keeping with the intention of the biblical documents. And the third group of believing critics not only allows for the reinterpretation of a given passage in Scripture but also agrees with the broader academy that certain errors do exist in the biblical text. Nonetheless, Noll clarifies, ‘on other important matters – belief in the truth-telling character of Scripture, its realistic interpretation, its substantial historicity, its ultimate authority – these critics align themselves with evangelicals who are conservative on critical matters.’<sup>3</sup>

### **Shifting the conversation: the theological entailments of historical criticism**

It is not our intention to offer our pennyworth to the inerrancy debate. Evangelicals have mulled over the vexed subject of the historical reliability of Scripture for well over a century<sup>4</sup> (and even though this

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<sup>2</sup> Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 156–60.

<sup>3</sup> Noll, *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 156–60.

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of the discussion’s progression and some comments on the current state of the debate, see Jason S. Sexton, ‘How Far beyond Chicago? Assessing Recent Attempts to Reframe the Inerrancy Debate’, *Them* 34.1 (2009), pp. 26–49. Prominent Christian opponents of inerrancy include, e.g., James Barr, *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1984), pp. 1–7, 37–9, 75–6, 129; Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation:*

has been a largely ‘in-house’ debate, all too often we have allowed the conversation to disintegrate into rather sharp-tongued disparagement of our opponents’ lucidity and charity). In reflection of this diversity within evangelicalism, the present volume includes the insights of collaborators on both sides of the inerrancy debate. Notwithstanding our diverse views of Scripture, we are all convinced that our biblical scholarship cannot be conducted in indifference towards historical-critical questions. So, for the time being, we would like to set aside the subject of inerrancy, especially because evangelicals have been leery of joining in historical criticism for *another* reason: *fear of heresy* (i.e., fear of beliefs that imperil the legitimacy of one’s claim to Christianity).

The spectre of heterodoxy deters the engagement of many scholars who are otherwise intrigued by critical questions. These scholars’ reasonable concern is as follows: if the Bible might be historically inaccurate in *some* regards, then how can we trust it in *any* regard?<sup>5</sup> How can we know that Jesus really rose from the dead? How can we believe that God led the Israelites out of Egypt? How can we know that God is truly loving, committed to the salvation of his people? If the Bible could be ‘errant’ at some point, then how do we know if it is not errant at every point? This argument from the slippery slope appears frequently in discussions of

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*Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); James D. G. Dunn, *The Living Word*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 71–111. But inerrancy has found defenders in, e.g., Roger Nicole, ‘The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield’, *Churchman* 97.3 (1983), pp. 198–215; ‘The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield (Continued)’, *Churchman* 98.1 (1984), pp. 7–27; ‘The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture: J. D. G. Dunn versus B. B. Warfield (Continued)’, *Churchman* 98.3 (1984), pp. 198–208; G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008); Mark D. Thompson, ‘The Divine Investment in Truth: Toward a Theological Account of Biblical Inerrancy’, in James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (eds), *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), pp. 71–97.

<sup>5</sup> This reasoning appears early on in A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, ‘Inspiration’, *Presbyterian Review* 2 (1881), pp. 225–60 (241–2), and is pervasive in later evangelical thought; see, e.g., Gleason L. Archer, ‘The Witness of the Bible to Its Own Inerrancy’, in James Montgomery Boice (ed.), *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 85–99 (92); R. C. Sproul, ‘Sola Scriptura: Crucial to Evangelicalism’, in James Montgomery Boice (ed.), *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 103–19 (116–17). Also criticized in Barr, *Escaping*, pp. 37–9.

inerrancy.<sup>6</sup> And once the guard rail of inerrancy is removed, the proverbial slippery slope seems dizzyingly steep.

Consequently, *this book discusses the theological challenges that confront the biblical interpreter who engages with historical criticism*. We hope to show that the ‘slippery slope’ is neither pitched at such a terrifying angle nor composed of such shifting soil that negotiating it is an impossible feat. There is some tricky terrain to be crossed, without a doubt. But evangelicalism has produced some sure-footed explorers, and we are, of course, not without a divine guide to help us on our trek.

Still, it might be better to problematize the image of the slippery slope altogether. As J. D. G. Dunn aptly observed, some of us have demanded that Scripture rise to such unnecessary heights of precision that we now find ourselves at an altitude from which descent feels hazardous.<sup>7</sup>

It is precisely because some evangelicals pitch their starting point too *high*, that the only way to progress in knowledge of God and of his truth for some of their disciples is *down* what they regard as the ‘slippery slope’ – a slippery slope which has been created more by their elevation of their interpretation of Scripture *above* Scripture (human tradition above the Word of God) than by anything else.<sup>8</sup>

If one comes to think that there may be historical inaccuracies in scriptural documents, then one is compelled to trudge down the slope, to assess the accuracy of the historical claims of the Bible, not as an apostasy from or assault on Christianity, but in the service of Christianity. This is a labour done through historical criticism; this has been the intention of many historical critics. But the long hiatus of evangelical biblical scholarship from the historical-critical fray means that historical criticism still appears threatening to us. As such, *it is the goal of the present volume to illustrate that historical criticism need not imperil any of the fundamental dogmatic tenets of Christianity*.

We are not alone in disputing the centrality of inerrancy to Christian dogma. Even the great Princetonians A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, in their landmark work ‘Inspiration’, make a salutary distinction

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Carl F. H. Henry, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part Three*, vol. 4, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), pp. 170–1, 76, 80–1, 84, 88–9, 93–5.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Barr, *Escaping*, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, *Living Word*, p. 100.

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I would like to thank the British Academy for funding my postdoctoral research, for it was under the aegis of the British Academy that this book came to completion. In addition, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Warden and Fellows of Keble College, and to the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Oxford. These scholars have been inspiring colleagues and friends for three lovely years in Oxford, and their camaraderie, wit and wisdom have helped pen the happiest chapter of my life thus far.

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