

Settling for Less

God's Words in Human Words

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There are two basic approaches one can take when attempting to defend the authority and authenticity of the biblical record. One approach is to roll up one's sleeves, do the hard work of research, and come up with satisfying answers. The other approach is to throw up your hands, declare the problem impossible to solve, and compromise. This latter approach is exemplified in the works of leaders in the emergent church movement, like Brian McLaren and Carl Medearis, but also appears in pseudo-apologetic approaches like those of Randal Rauser, and Kenton Sparks, the author of the book we now consider here.

My judgment of Sparks which follows would have been more positive had Sparks shown any indication that he had followed his own advice given in the book. The problem is not that Sparks does not have a message worth hearing. Indeed, some critical portions of this book (which, because of Sparks' prolific prose, is overlong by at least five times the necessary length) could have been written by myself as a Christian apologist.

Sparks advocates a contextualized reading of Scripture, over and against a too-tight hyper-fundamentalist reading such as the one that occupied his own past intellectual horizon.¹ He is also an advocate of serious education, even in our churches, which I cannot help but applaud. The problem is that like many 'fundamentalist atheists', such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, Sparks has not quite cleared the room of every stick of hyper-fundamentalist furniture. The brighter

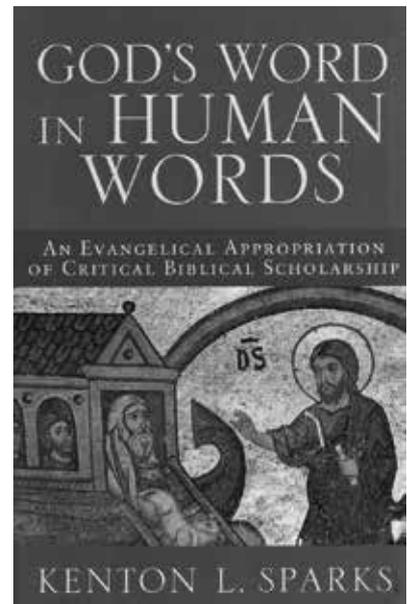
side of the equation is that Sparks, unlike many professed ex-Christian atheists who trod the same path, professes to remain a committed Christian. How has Sparks not followed his own advice? There are several areas in this book that fall within my focus of study as an apologist over the past decade and a half. Nearly every time Sparks raises some Bible difficulty that falls *within* my purview of study (and some of the issues he raises are *outside* that purview), I find that he has regrettably failed to do anything like the necessary digging to arrive at a full-orbed answer. As a result, Sparks compromises the integrity of an otherwise worthwhile message, as he all too often waves the white flag and surrenders to a sub-par solution in which the Bible 'accommodates' human perceptions to an excessive degree.

Feelings of adequacy

By way of clarification, I should refer the reader to the first article I wrote in service of this publication, in 1999.² There, I argued in reply to Paul Seely that the author of the Genesis account was inspired to write in such a way as to accommodate human finitude, without committing error:

"Truly enough, one can indeed read Genesis 1 and say that a solid sky is in mind. But one can also, with as much justification, read Genesis 1 and say rather that it comports exactly with what we know today of the atmosphere and the solar system, with or without adjustments made for phenomenological language, and this is because of the utterly equivocal nature of the language used in Genesis 1... .

"Where the line must be drawn is before the implication that inerrancy is not compromised by reading a solid sky into Genesis 1, and allowing no other interpretation.



It does not do to say that 'God has sometimes allowed his inspired penman to advert to the scientific concepts of their own day.' Seely confuses adaptation to human finitude with accommodation to human error—the former does not entail the latter."

In these terms, Sparks sides with the philosophy expressed by Seely, permitting Scripture to be errant in order to accommodate human finitude; hence, "God's Word in human words" means, paradoxically, God's Word with errors mixed into it. Unlike Seely, however, Sparks expands this principle to envelope not just Genesis but the entire Bible, and proposes that rather than inerrant words, God provided us with 'adequate' words (p. 55). The question naturally arises, "Adequate for what?" Having dealt with numerous biblical critics over the years, I can assure the reader that Sparks' designation of the text as 'adequate' will be taken as little more than desperate spin-doctoring, and will certainly persuade no-one to take the Bible more seriously.

Is Sparks any more justified in his views than Seely was, and does analysis of his criticism yield any more

successful results? In the final analysis, it does not. In this light, it is rather ironic that Sparks demeans certain evangelical scholars for not giving “the whole story when it came to the Bible and biblical scholarship” (p. 12) or presenting evidence “incompletely or unfairly” (p. 150). He has hardly read the whole story himself, or even a chapter of it in some instances. We can discuss a few examples in the process of a set of chapter summaries.

The sum of the matter

Chapter 1 offers an informative survey of the history and types of biblical criticism. As such, it is not at cross-purposes with any particular view of Scripture, and can be counted as a positive for the book. We can also agree with Sparks that it is not productive to throw out every form of historical criticism. Indeed, certain forms of it yield beneficial results.³

Chapter 2 is setting the table for what follows, as Sparks discusses processes of historical criticism in the field of Assyriology which have resulted, in some cases, in the dehistoricization of certain Assyrian sources. This is in preparation for a grand *non sequitur*, to the effect that if Assyriologists use a certain process of criticism or line of reasoning, then biblical scholars are permitted the same processes. This leaves unanswered the question of whether the Assyriologists are engaging in fallacious reasoning with their own forms of criticism, as well as whether the respective situations in Assyriology and biblical criticism are any more than surface correspondences.

Old Testament turns

Chapter 3 is where Sparks turns to biblical criticism, and it is here where he fails to follow his own advice. The chapter reads like a litany of standard arguments against biblical authenticity, mostly of the sort that have been



Figure 1. Kenton Sparks believes that God provided adequate rather than inerrant words in inspiring the Bible.

promulgated by liberal scholarship for decades (and have long since been answered by qualified scholars). A few of the objections would even be better suited to a populist source like the Skeptics’ Annotated Bible (a notoriously virulent village-atheist website⁴) than to a book by a professing Christian scholar.

For example, Sparks dismisses literature comparing Deuteronomy to earlier Hittite treaties, purporting that this better reflects the provenance than later Neo-Assyrian treaty forms, with a supposition that some of the parallel material (such as Deut. 1–4) that reflects Hittite structure was added later (p. 91). It seems a remarkable coincidence that someone added a portion to Deuteronomy that happened to reflect customary forms from hundreds of years in the past. He also claims that Deuteronomy better mirrors neo-Assyrian forms better in features such as, for example, “the emphasis placed on the vassal’s wholehearted fidelity to the covenant” (p. 89). Apparently Sparks has done little study on the social world of the Bible: wholehearted fidelity was a cardinal virtue of the biblical world, from Genesis all the way into the New Testament era, and was demanded

by the participants in *any* covenant agreement (if not in explicit words, then implicitly by the very nature of their society). Indeed, the contextual meaning of ‘faith’ is that of covenant fidelity, or *loyalty*. An emphasis on the fidelity of a vassal (or in the New Testament era, a ‘client’) would hardly be exclusive to any particular biblical historical milieu.

New Testament turns

Turning to the New Testament, Sparks raises commonplace grievances against passages like 1 Cor. 14:34–35 and 1 Tim. 2:11–15 (pp. 246, 344–345) as ‘anti-woman’, but shows no evidence of having even heard of contextualizing analyses of either passage. While some continue to argue for traditional interpretations of these passages, there are other options which Sparks does not even consider. For example, there is a good amount of evidence that 1 Cor. 14:34–35 reflects Paul quoting back a view held by the Corinthians, which he then refutes. To be fair, Sparks does indicate awareness of the view that the passage is an interpolation, which is another option held by some interpreters.

In terms of 1 Tim. 2:11–15, there has been substantial work done showing that this passage was written to respond to a particular ‘hyper-feminist’ heresy that was present in Ephesus at the time of Paul’s letter to Timothy. But Sparks shows no awareness of this option, either. While we are in the Pastorals, we may also note that Sparks rejects their authorship by Paul (p. 113), using a series of oft-refuted arguments.⁵ He also shows no awareness of arguments that they were written for Paul by Luke, acting as Paul’s scribe—an answer which would do away with most critical arguments against Paul’s authorship in a single swipe.

For these and many other issues—Gospel harmonization, the authenticity of Daniel, slavery in the Bible, eschatology, and so on—Sparks shows little indication of having seriously consulted or critically compared opposing views. Even when he does so, however, Sparks’ residual hyper-fundamentalism restrains him from seeing beyond a narrow horizon of possibilities. This is clearly shown in chapter 4, where Sparks engages what he refers to as traditionalist responses to biblical criticism.

Someone’s in the kitchen

For example, the prestigious Old Testament scholar and Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen is pilloried for not dealing with (in his case for the unity of Isaiah) the fact that “Isaiah’s name, though frequent in Isaiah 1–39, does not appear at all in Isaiah 40–55” (p. 147). What rule has determined that it is a required practice for authors to name themselves in a text, and do so with a specific degree of uniformity, especially according to the measures of chapters as we have divided the work thousands of years later? Why not also deny ascribing Isaiah 3–6, 8–12, 14–19, and 21–36 to Isaiah, since his name appears nowhere in those chapters? Would it happen to make any difference that Isaiah mostly uses his own name in

narrative contexts, while Isaiah 40–66 has so little of that?

Sparks’ other rebuttals to Kitchen are equally without dimension. He cites Isaiah 48:20:

“Go ye forth of Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter it [even] to the end of the earth; say ye, The LORD hath redeemed his servant Jacob.”

This is said to be ‘convincing’ to many scholars in terms of saying that Isaiah 40–55 was post-exilic, but it does not occur to Sparks that Kitchen did not provide a refutation because none was needed. A directive to ‘flee’ does not make a great deal of sense directed towards captives who are not free to leave. Could it have escaped Sparks that this might be a warning to flee the impending and predicted invasion by Babylon (Isaiah 39:7)?

Completing the collection of non-sequiturs, Sparks observes that Jeremiah never cited Isaiah’s prophecies in his predictions of the Babylonian exiles (p. 148), and takes this as evidence that Isaiah’s prophecies did not exist in Jeremiah’s time, as the traditional chronology requires. Why Jeremiah would be obliged to refer to Isaiah is not explained. If Jeremiah believed he had the voice of God in his own consult (e.g. Jer. 1:2,4,7, etc.), what need will he have had to repeat or appeal to the words of Isaiah?

Kitchen is also criticized for saying that scholars would never parse other Ancient Near Eastern texts as they do the Pentateuch. The problem with that analogy, Sparks says, is that the texts Kitchen uses as examples are ‘stone inscriptions’ (p. 151) rather than material copied on something like papyrus. Apparently Sparks cannot conceive of this as hardly forming a barrier to the creative hyper-critical mind: It is a simple solution (permit me to wax sarcastic for a moment!) that the stone version is the ‘final’ version which had previously undergone redaction

and editing on more perishable media now lost to us.

Further on, evangelicals are criticized for using works by critics of the JEDP theory like Whybray⁶ (p. 153–154) who also reach other conclusions that evangelicals would disagree with. This ‘all or nothing’ approach is especially odd from Sparks to the extent that he willingly quotes as authorities persons he would otherwise disagree with on other issues. Sparks also merely dismisses Whybray’s approach as “unusual and idiosyncratic” (p. 154), which is again little more than a refusal to engage his arguments.⁷

Finally, an issue raised concerns the silence of Egyptian records on the subject of the Exodus. A solid answer to this silence is that the Egyptians tended not to record their defeats. Sparks rejects this argument as ‘specious’, and insists that, surely, Egypt would somehow have recorded the event, even if they just put a positive ‘spin’ on it, like, for example, reinterpreting the Exodus events as some sort of victory. One wonders what Sparks is thinking here. The events of Exodus, reinterpreted as a victory for Egypt? I would like to see Sparks rewrite, for example, the death of Osama bin Laden as some sort of victory for al-Qaeda; if he succeeds, perhaps they could hire him on as a publicist!

Extracting a valuable lesson

To be sure, Sparks is correct to suppose that many evangelicals are unwilling to look past their modern, decontextualized readings of the Bible. I know this from having to explain to people that, for example, the NIV in their laps is not inerrant. It is also fair to note that some of Sparks’ points are indeed valid (e.g. Moses was more likely a compiler of much of the Pentateuch, rather than a direct author. However, Sparks seems to be notoriously missing that in such a case, he would be regarded as the ‘author’ as ancient people understood

the concept. Also, many of those he would dismiss as ‘fundamentalists’, including young-earth creationists, have likewise argued that Moses was the editor of Genesis.^{8,9} This suggests that he’s knocking down a straw man of his own ‘fundamentalist’ past (p. 78). Then again, not all of Sparks’ arguments in this regard are sound. He falls, for example, for the standard canard that in Numbers 12:3, Moses is “unlikely to have described himself” as meek. While this may well reflect the use of a scribe writing under Moses’ authority, the passage itself is far from serving as proof that it is. In the social world of the Bible world, frank and open assessment of one’s abilities was normal and expected, unlike today when Moses would be accused of egotism. If indeed Moses was meek—and had the evidence to back it up—then there is no reason why he would not have noted it.

To that extent, then, I agree with Sparks that we need to be more generous in understanding how God accommodated human limitations and spoke to us using genres with which biblical peoples were familiar. Like Seely, however, Sparks simply goes too far, in claiming that God actually uses errors. Clearly Sparks does so because he has not gone far enough in the first option of rolling up his sleeves and seeking solutions.

Touching on science ... and getting burned

In the last few chapters, Sparks discusses various issues of genre that he believes provide solutions to the alleged conundrums presented in prior chapters. For the reader of *Creation*, there will not be much of interest in terms of issues related to science. Sparks’ interpretive sentiments are made clear when he says that there is no problem of conflict between science and God’s Word, but rather between “human interpretations of creation (science) and human interpretations of Scripture (biblical interpretation)”

(p. 275). From a strictly literary perspective, Sparks defends theories of the composite authorship of the Pentateuch, including the long-refuted supposition of two contradictory creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, but he does not engage in issues related to science at all.

The closest he does come to the subject is disastrous for him: In a rather pretentious attempt to compare himself to Galileo, Sparks falls for the myth that some of Galileo’s opponents were so stifled by biblical faith that they refused to even look through his telescope and consider the evidence (p. 17).¹⁰ Sparks’ further treatment of the Galileo affair (p. 285) reflects a similar lack of depth.^{11,12} Suffice to say, Giorgio de Santillana (1902–1974), philosopher/historian of science at MIT, pointed out, “It has been known for a long time that a major part of the church’s intellectuals were on the side of Galileo, while the clearest opposition to him came from secular ideas.”¹³

We may certainly acknowledge that Sparks does a service to readers by calling for the application of contextualizing material to the interpretation of the biblical text. He is also correct in applying certain particulars of interpretation. For example, concerning the Bible’s reaction to slavery (p. 293), Sparks is right to see a sort of ‘trajectory’ approach in the treatment of slavery. Rather than a direct (free the slaves now!) approach, the Bible took a more subtle (and we may say, in a positive way, infectious) approach in which slaves were humanized and treated as equals, in such a way that slave owners were forced to confront the morality of their use of slavery and wrestle with it.¹⁴ In the final analysis, however, Sparks’ own shortcomings as a contextualizer undermine the integrity of this message as he has presented it.

References

1. By ‘hyper-fundamentalist’, I refer to persons who resist any attempts to inform our understanding of Scripture with external information, supposing the Bible to be sufficient to stand on its own without any interpretation other than its own ‘plain language’.

2. Holding, J.P., Is the *raqiya* (‘firmament’) a solid dome? Equivocal language in the cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: a response to Paul H. Seely, *J. Creation* (formerly *Creation Ex Nihilo Technical Journal*) 13(2):44–51, 1999; creation.com/raqiya.
3. For example, the basic process of genre study as a type of historical criticism helps us define the intentions of biblical authors and in turn refute certain claims of error. A classic example would be those who find Proverbs 26:4 and 26:5 at odds, under the premise that they give openly contradictory advice for dealing with fools. Such an argument ignores the fact that Proverbs is in the genre of (naturally!) proverbs, which are not always meant to be taken as absolutes. Please see my article, *Proverbial Literature*, tektonics.org/lp/proverbiallit.html.
4. It is so shoddy that it deserved only a parody to refute, which is still thorough—see tektonics.com/test/parody/sab.html.
5. On this, please see my chapter on the Pastoral epistles in *Trusting the New Testament*, Xulon Press, 2009.
6. Whybray, R.N., *The Making of the Pentateuch*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, UK, 1987.
7. For example, Gordon Wenham, Professor of Old Testament at Cheltenham and Gloucester College, states, “Whybray’s work on the Pentateuch could be viewed as the logical conclusion of the direction in which most pentateuchal criticism has been moving in the last three decades. More and more studies have been insisting on the sixth century as the time in which the whole work took shape, and there has been an ever stronger trend to unitary readings and a reaction against minute dissection. On the other hand, he could be viewed as the embodiment of the English common-sense tradition as opposed to the continental love of complex theorizing. His book is a powerful and valid critique of the methods that have been taken for granted in pentateuchal criticism for nearly two centuries. However, though I think his model for the composition of the Pentateuch is essentially correct, i.e. that of one major author using a variety of sources, he has not demonstrated this by giving detailed attention to the texts, nor has he shown that it was composed so late and should be regarded as fiction.” *Pentateuchal Studies Today*, *Themelios* 22(1):3–13, October 1996; biblicalstudies.org.uk.
8. Phelan, M.W.J., *The Inspiration of the Pentateuch*, Twoedged Sword Publications, Waterlooville, UK, 2005.
9. See also Holding, J.P., Debunking the Documentary Hypothesis (review of Phelan, ref. 8), *J. Creation* 19(3):37–40, 2005; creation.com/documentary.
10. This is a modern myth frequently promoted by atheists. For a response see Hannam, J., Who Refused to Look Through Galileo’s Telescope?, *bedejournal.blogspot.com/2006/11/who-refused-to-look-through-galileos.html*, 20 November 2006.
11. Schirrmacher, T., The Galileo affair: history or heroic hagiography? *J. Creation* 14(1):91–100, 2000; creation.com/gal-affair.
12. Sarfati, J., Galileo Quadracentennial: myth vs fact, *Creation* 31(3):49–51, 2009; creation.com/gal-400.
13. de Santillana, G., *The Crime of Galileo*, p. xii, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1955.
14. The technique here might be profitably compared to the ‘passive resistance’ mode of change used by great moral leaders such as Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, to resolve social and political injustices in their own respective milieu.