

GOD'S WORD
IN HUMAN
WORDS

GOD'S WORD IN HUMAN WORDS

AN EVANGELICAL APPROPRIATION OF
CRITICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

KENTON L. SPARKS



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To my father,
who taught me that God is big enough for our questions

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PREFACE

I RECALL THE MOMENT well. I was 14. It was a hot summer evening in the woodlands of Georgia, where I was attending yet another week of Christian service camp. While sitting on a tree stump during the “quiet time” hour, I read these words from Exodus 6:3: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.” Instinctively, I flipped back through the book of Genesis, ready to observe the black-and-white evidence for this, yet another mystery from Scripture. But what I found was not mystery but rather mystery upon mystery. While Exodus clearly said that the patriarchs did not know the divine name, numerous texts from Genesis seemed to confirm that they surely did know that God was “the LORD.” Although I did not realize it at the time, this was my first bout with historical criticism, or at least with the kinds of data that give rise to historical criticism.

It would be some thirteen years before an answer for this conundrum was inadvertently presented to me, in a set of study notes from the hand of the evangelical scholar Kenneth Kitchen. It was Kitchen’s purpose to explain why the prevailing notion in biblical scholarship, that Genesis and Exodus were composed from several different sources, was completely wrong. The theory was not entirely new to me. I had heard this theory before from my graduate professor at the University of North Carolina, John Van Seters. Van Seters explained that there were two major sources in Genesis and Exodus, one in which the divine name was known to humanity more or less from the beginning of history, and another in which the divine name was revealed to humanity only at the time of Moses. When these two narratives were combined, he said, this produced the odd effect that I noticed on that old tree stump as a teenager. Of course, I did not believe Van Seters. He was not any sort of evangelical Christian, and I had been warned about the deceptive and beguiling ways of the biblical critics. Paradoxically, it was Kitchen himself—not Van Seters—who convinced me that the critics were right.

I have read numerous books by Kitchen, and though he is a fine Egyptologist, it is my experience that he generally does a poor job of presenting the views of critical biblical scholarship. But in the study notes to which I refer here, Kitchen's presentation was adequately clear. Indeed, by the time he had fully explained the critical theory of sources in the Pentateuch, I could hardly believe how reasonable and sensible the theory seemed. So I turned to the next page of Kitchen's notes with great anticipation, looking forward to a robust and convincing rebuttal of the critical deception. Then came the moment of disappointment. Having already shown me the earth from an orbiting spaceship, Kitchen then proceeded to argue that the earth was flat. For the first time it began to dawn on me that the critical arguments regarding the Pentateuch were far better, and carried much more explanatory power, than the flimsy broom that Kitchen was using to sweep them away. At that moment I began to doubt that evangelical scholars were really giving me the whole story when it came to the Bible and biblical scholarship.

Looking back on these events some years later, I can only say with regret that my early suspicions have often been confirmed. Though I can point to thoughtful evangelicals who have admitted that the critical arguments are often good (a pioneer in this regard was the late Ray Dillard of Westminster Theological Seminary), these scholars have been few and far between. Only now are we witnessing the emergence of a new generation of evangelical scholars who are willing to admit that the standard critical arguments are often much better than the ill-advised apologetic that evangelicals have aimed at them. If one cares at all about the truth, then this is a welcome development.

I count myself a member of this new generation of evangelical scholars, and the present volume is a modest contribution to their work. Its purpose is to provide resources that I have found helpful during my own intellectual pilgrimage, as I have tried to navigate the sometimes precarious path that takes both faith and critical thinking seriously. The path is precarious because, as Scripture has warned us, those who teach in the church will be especially culpable for their errors. So here, as in other ways, I work out my salvation with fear and trembling. But when I fearfully exercise my duty as a teacher, it means that I must make good judgments about the kinds of dangers that can arise when I err in my work. For the old-school evangelicals, the chief danger to be feared has been that our teaching might explicitly or implicitly undermine the authority of Scripture, and this is a concern that I very much share. But there are other threats to the gospel that this generation of scholars has not taken seriously. Chief among them is the possibility that their version of the Christian faith might harbor false ideas and beliefs that, because they are mistaken, serve as barriers to faith for those who see our evangelical errors. As one example, evangelicals often fail to recognize the possibility that, by arguing strenuously for the strict historicity of Genesis 1, they are more or less shutting their church doors to countless scientists and scholars who might otherwise have come to faith. In essence, the old-school evangelicals have been so sure that they are right that they no longer consider seriously the possibility that

they are *too* conservative; “conservative,” not in the sense of theological orthodoxy, but in the sense that they are unable to really think critically about whether their traditions are intellectually adequate and spiritually healthy.

The new generation of evangelicals is generally more comfortable than the last with raising serious questions about the evangelical tradition, especially when mounting evidence suggests that certain aspects of that tradition are symptomatic of an intellectual “scandal” (as one prominent evangelical expressed it).¹ But let me be clear on this point. By saying this, I am not denying that our faith should involve a kind of scandal. For I would affirm with the apostle Paul that the truest power of God is revealed most vividly in the scandal of the cross. My chief concern is that we should avoid a grave theological error, which uses the *legitimate scandal of faith* as a basis for our *illegitimate intellectual scandals*. If the fear of God is to play a role in our Christian thinking and teaching—and I affirm that it should—then let us realize that our intellectual and doctrinal errors can be of many types and head in many directions. Very conservative evangelicals are right to be vigilant in their defense of biblical authority. But, as I hope to show, biblical authority is a complex matter, and it is only one of many theological matters that require our thoughtful vigilance.

As I make my case for this and some of the other positions that I will take in this book, one of my objectives along the way is to demonstrate that my viewpoints are not wholly new but, in important respects, stand in continuity with the long-standing traditions of Christian theology and with important strands of the evangelical tradition. Doing so reflects my firm conviction that whole-cloth theological innovation can never pass the canons of orthodoxy. One way of demonstrating this connection with the past is to cite authors from those traditions (whether ancient fathers like Augustine or evangelicals like James Orr) whose views comport with mine to some extent. Now, my citations are necessarily selective, and one could as easily find quotations from Augustine and Orr that disagree with my conclusions in various ways. But of course the main point is not that my views will or should suit any particular author all of the time; the rather more modest point is that many of the things that I say resonate with things that other Christians, with unquestionable faith pedigrees, have already said. This does not mean that I will ignore contrary voices in my discussion, however. For as a rule much of this book is given to an engagement with those viewpoints that I find wanting in whole or part.

Since I plan to quote, I might as well begin now. Although I often disagree with the viewpoints of Alexander Campbell, namesake of the Campbellites, there is at least one instance where I find that his wisdom is dead on. In his first reply to Robert Owen in the famous Campbell-Owen debate, Campbell declared: “I know, indeed, that there is no circumstance in which any person can be placed more unfavorable to his conviction, than that which puts him in a public assembly

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

upon the proof of his principles. The mind is then on the alert to find proofs for the system which has been already adopted, and is not disposed to such an investigation as might issue in conviction. Arguments and proofs are rather parried than weighed; and triumph rather than conviction is anxiously sought for.² Campbell's point is clear enough: even in matters of faith, all of us should be prepared to accept the fact that we can be wrong. This is true of you as a reader, but I know that it is also quite true of me as a writer. So, while I do hope to make some points that readers will find helpful, I am painfully aware that my own views are always a work in progress.

Before I begin my discussion in earnest, I have a long list of accrued debts that I can only confess but never repay. First on the list are my valued colleagues at Eastern University: Steve Boyer, Eric Flett, Chris Hall, Betsy Morgan, Dwight Peterson, Margaret Peterson, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Randy Colton, and especially Phil Cary, Carl Mosser, and Ray Van Leeuwen. I should mention as well my research assistant, Greg Klimowitz, who gave me a student's perspective on the manuscript. Others who have read the manuscript, or discussed with me its substance, include John Goldingay (Fuller Theological Seminary), Peter Enns (Westminster Theological Seminary), Leo Sandgren (University of Florida), Jim Kinney (Baker Academic), and an anonymous (but insightful) reader acquired by Baker Academic on my behalf. Whether those listed here actually agree with my conclusions is another matter, but there is no question that I have benefited from their expertise.

As is always the case at the end of a project, I am very thankful for the support, encouragement, and patience of my wife, Cheryl, and of my two daughters, Emily and Cara Ellen. Among other things, Cheryl read and commented on certain parts of the manuscript and made it possible for me to put in some extra time in the office, especially toward the end of the project. As for the girls, the joy that they give us makes every labor of work a little less laborious.

I am very pleased that this book affords an opportunity to modestly express my deep gratitude to my father, Morris Sparks, to whom this book is rightfully dedicated. In many talks over the years, he has always taught me that critical thinking and faith in God go together. I knew long ago that he was right about this, but I had no idea just how right he was.

Soli Deo Gloria!

2. Alexander Campbell and Robert Owen, *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity* (London: R. Groombridge, 1839), 14.

INTRODUCTION

ALL OF US believe that the earth orbits the sun, and in this idea we find nothing deceptive, theologically dangerous, or heretical. Yet it is instructive to recall that this was not always so. When Galileo first joined Copernicus in intimating that the earth was not at the center of the universe, he was soundly rebuked by church authorities—Catholic and Protestant alike—who averred that Scripture, church tradition, and common sense clearly taught that the astronomer was wrong. Some of Galileo’s detractors even refused to consider the evidence by looking through his telescope.¹ The astronomer was eventually put on trial in a church proceeding, during which church authorities insisted that he recant his views. Galileo eventually yielded to their demands, but we can surmise that his words of repentance did not convince the gray matter in his head.

The significance of this moment in church history is elucidated by an instructive question. Were Galileo’s views really *dangerous*? We are tempted perhaps to insist that his ideas were true and hence could not be dangerous, but there is clear evidence that Galileo’s views—and the similar views of Copernicus—indeed spawned grave theological doubts in the minds of some people. This was a natural consequence of the fact that the church could not easily absorb the insights of Galileo and Copernicus when standard Christian doctrine contradicted their new astronomical insights on so many levels. From this we can reasonably conclude that even the truth can be dangerous and harmful to the church if this truth is not properly assimilated to the world of Scripture and faith. That is, in some measure we might say that “true facts” when wrongly understood turn out to imply all sorts of “false facts.” Yet it hardly seems possible to conclude that the church’s proper

1. For the whole story, see: Giorgio de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Maurice A. Finocchiaro, *Retrying Galileo, 1633–1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jerome J. Langford, *Galileo, Science, and the Church*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971).

response to new theories and insights, whether of Galileo or of someone else, is to ignore or deny them. Rather, what is sorely needed in every age—for the sake of believers and unbelievers alike—is a church that knows how to thoughtfully consider and assimilate the fruits of academic endeavors to its faith in Christ. In broad strokes, my aim in this volume is to help shape the intellectual contours of the church so that it can perform this scholastic duty better. However, my pursuit of this objective is prompted not by general concerns but rather by a more specific problem faced by the modern church.

The Church's Problem with Historical Criticism

My chief interest here is not in the astronomical views of Galileo and Copernicus. I am interested instead in considering another kind of scholarship that some corners of the church have found dangerous and unhealthy, namely, that approach to biblical scholarship that goes by names like “historical criticism,” “higher criticism,” or “biblical criticism.” Just as Galileo invited us to turn a critical eye toward the cosmos, so modern biblical scholars bid us to reflect critically upon our assumptions about the nature of Scripture and about how it should be read properly. Such a critical exercise should be a vital element in our study of Scripture because we are so apt, as finite and fallible human beings, to commit interpretive errors when we read the Bible. In many corners of the church, however, historical criticism has not been so helpful. Why not?

In order to answer this question in a preliminary way, let us briefly consider a few instances in which the church's traditional readings of the Bible have differed from the critical conclusions offered by most modern biblical scholars. We will consider three examples from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament (see table 1).

For instance if we inspect our first example more closely (the Pentateuch), it becomes rather clear that the differences between the traditional and the historical-critical readings are striking. Church tradition has assumed that the Pentateuch is an historically accurate document written by Moses during the second millennium BCE. Modern scholars, on the other hand, are very skeptical about the historical value of the Pentateuch, and they attribute these five biblical books to several authors working well after Moses would have lived. At this juncture we needn't debate the relative merits of these traditional and critical viewpoints; it is enough to appreciate why biblical criticism appears so different from—and threatening to—the traditional approach.

Over the years there have been three basic responses to the tension between traditional views of Scripture and modern biblical scholarship. First, in some circles, the embracing of biblical criticism has had the effect of desacralizing the Bible. According to this view, the results of biblical scholarship provide “sure evidence” that Scripture is a thoroughly human product rather than a divinely

Table 1

Text	Traditional Reading	Modern Scholarship
The Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy)	This historically accurate narrative was written by Moses during the 2nd millennium BCE	Myth, legend, and other ancient traditions have been written or assembled by several authors who lived long after Moses
Isaiah	Written by the prophet Isaiah in the 8th century BCE	Written by several prophets over a period of several hundred years
Daniel	Written by the prophet Daniel during the 6th century BCE	A pseudonymous work written in the name of Daniel by a scribe (or scribes) living during the 2nd century BCE
The Four Gospels (Matthew–John)	The four Gospels present historically compatible pictures of Jesus’s life	The Gospels provide four different, sometimes quite different, portraits of Jesus’s life. Moreover, some of these Gospel traditions are fictional rather than purely historical literature.
Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy, Titus)	Written by Paul during the 1st century CE	Pseudonymously attributed to Paul by another author during the 2nd century CE
Revelation	Predicts that the parousia (second coming) of Christ will come at some unknown point in the future	Wrongly predicts that the parousia of Christ would come during the Roman period

inspired book. Thus divested of its authority, the Bible becomes just another of many religious texts for scholars to study, dissect, and critique. Although this response might strike us as thoroughly irreligious, there are interpretive communities within Judaism and Christianity that embrace this skeptical posture toward the Bible. Because of its tendency to secularize the Bible, I prefer to call this response to biblical criticism the *secular* response.

Second, at the other end of the spectrum, we find the *traditional* response. Included in this camp are Jews and Christians—as well as many evangelicals—who have rejected the standard results of biblical scholarship because they believe that these results, if true, would represent a serious threat to biblical authority. Traditionalists normally argue that theories of biblical criticism are wrong because they rest on poor scholarship or, worse, upon the naive, naturalistic assumptions of the Enlightenment. Although the traditional and secular responses are obviously poles apart in their perspectives on biblical authority, it is worth noting that the two views agree on an important point: biblical criticism seems to strike a blow against the Bible’s authority. They disagree only on whether biblical criticism’s judgments about the Bible are correct (the secular view) or incorrect (the traditional view).

Between these two perspectives—but quite different from both—one finds various efforts to forge a *tertium quid* option, in which traditional faith and critical scholarship are somehow integrated into a healthy whole. This program has yielded mixed results, as we will see in chapter 5. But the underlying impulse of *tertium quid* scholarship is its dual confidence in the divine origins of Scripture

and in the usefulness of modern biblical scholarship. In view of this dual commitment, let us call this third response to biblical criticism the *constructive* response. So the three responses to modern biblical criticism may be neatly contrasted like this: the *secular* response (which rejects biblical authority on the basis of biblical criticism), the *traditional* response (which rejects the results of biblical criticism to protect biblical authority), and the *constructive* response (which attempts to integrate biblical criticism to the faith). Because of its twofold commitment to faith and scholarship, the constructive response is sometimes referred to as *believing criticism*, which is a label I like to use.

The theological tradition in which I live and serve is American evangelicalism, a modern sociological and religious movement whose roots lie in the Christian fundamentalism of America's nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although it is fairly accurate to describe its view of the Bible as "traditional," there are strong tendencies within progressive evangelicalism to seek out a "third way" that integrates faith with modern scholarship. This move is in some respects new to the American scene, but it has been a fixture in British evangelicalism for some time. Consider these words of F. F. Bruce, written in 1947: "In such critical *crucis*, for example, as the codification of the Pentateuch, the composition of Isaiah, the date of Daniel, the sources of the Gospels, or the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles, each of us is free to hold and proclaim the conclusions to which all the available evidence points."²

It is fascinating to compare this comment, which reflects no anxiety about critical conclusions concerning the book of Isaiah, with the comments recently offered by Richard Schultz, an American evangelical, on the same issue: "The gates have been opened wide, and applications of historical-critical methods and conclusions are flooding evangelical biblical studies. Such irrigation can foster growth initially, but ultimately it may cause destruction."³

The different temperaments toward critical scholarship that we see in Bruce and Schultz epitomize what Schultz correctly sees as a new and serious tension that is emerging within evangelical circles, as traditionalists labor to protect evangelical hermeneutics from historical criticism, while other evangelicals invite modern historical criticism to the table of debate. Let me say quite clearly that the concerns of those who are suspicious of biblical criticism are not unfounded. Historical criticism has been around for only a few centuries, yet it seems clear enough that its work has often undermined the perception of Scripture's authority, leaving many destructive effects in its wake: believers have lost their faith, churches and seminaries have abandoned creedal orthodoxy, and unbelievers have found reasons to doubt the authenticity of the Christian

2. F. F. Bruce, "The Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research," *Evangelical Quarterly* 19 (1947): 58–59.

3. Richard L. Schultz, "How Many Isaiahs Were There and What Does It Matter?" in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent E. Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 150–70.

message.⁴ One could easily speak of “the death of Scripture.”⁵ These negative assessments of historical criticism are not evangelical alone but appear as well in many nonevangelical Christian communities, as we will see. So it seems to me—and to many others—that historical criticism has often been a dangerous and destructive force in the life of the church.

The Paradox of Biblical Criticism

So we face a curious paradox. If biblical criticism leads to false and destructive results, and if it is indeed as intellectually bankrupt as some conservative theologians aver, then why have so many thoughtful believers entered university graduate programs with a vibrant devotion to God only to emerge on the other side of their studies with a dead or failing faith, and with the firm conviction that historical criticism easily bests the traditional viewpoint? Do Christian graduate students succumb to the deceptive power of university professors? Are they easily swayed to sacrifice their faith on the altar of academic respectability? Is hubris so endemic to academic inquiry that most graduate students—even Christian graduate students—arrogantly use critical scholarship to escape God’s claim on their lives? Perhaps. But even if these questions direct our attention to important issues, there are other questions worth asking, questions that traditionalists sometimes overlook. Is it possible that the persuasive power of historical criticism rests especially in its correctness? Could it be that historical criticism—like the astronomy of Galileo—has been destructive not because it is false, but because the church has often misunderstood its implications? If so, then we may eventually have to face a tragic paradox: the church’s wholesale rejection of historical criticism has begotten the irreverent use of Scripture by skeptics, thus destroying the faith of some believers while keeping unbelievers away from the faith. If this is indeed what has happened and is happening, then nothing less is needed than the church’s careful reevaluation of its relationship to historical-critical readings of Scripture. That reevaluation is my agenda here.

Given this agenda, I would like to remind the reader where I am coming from. I am an evangelical, committed fully to the Bible as God’s authoritative Word, to the doctrines of historic creedal orthodoxy, to the unique significance of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and to the hope of his return. I would go even further than this by confessing my profound appreciation for the

4. Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Walter Sundberg, “The Social Effect of Biblical Criticism,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller, SHS 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 66–81; James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

5. Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 44–61.

evangelical tradition, for its emphasis on Christian living, its practical commitment to evangelism and missions, and also its doctrinal commitment to the inerrancy of God's Word. So I would not be writing this book, with evangelical readers in mind, were it not for the profound spiritual vitality that marks the character and mission of evangelicalism. At the same time, as I have just mentioned, few would deny that considerable tensions are now emerging within the evangelical fold. In many respects these tensions can be traced back to the problem that I wish to consider here, the problem of modern biblical criticism.

Historical Criticism: An Example

I have so far assumed that readers have some familiarity with the spirit and practice of historical criticism, but it cannot hurt before moving on to be more specific about it. I would like to do so by providing a very old but straightforward example of historical criticism, which dates from the fifteenth century.

During the latter part of the Middle Ages, papal authority in the Christian West was partially secured by an appeal to the Donation of Constantine. This document purported to be an imperial edict of Constantine (fourth century CE), in which he donated all of the Western Roman Empire to the authority of the pope. At about the same time, however, scholars of the Middle Ages were becoming increasingly interested in the study of technical philology. Scholars studying the languages of ancient texts began to notice that human languages have a history. Latin of the first century was different from Latin of the sixth century, and so forth. As a result, texts could be dated on the basis of their grammar, vocabulary, and dialect; one could even demonstrate that supposedly ancient texts were actually forgeries, falsely written in the name of some famous person. Such was the case when the Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla (c. 1406–1457) deduced that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery.⁶ Valla had a fine enough sense of Latin's historical development to discern that the text could not have been written during the fourth-century reign of Constantine but was instead a much later forgery.

Valla's work is often cited as one of the earliest instances of historical criticism.⁷ As the example shows, historical criticism is really, at its heart, nothing other than an interpretive method that appreciates the historically contingent nature of human discourse. That is, when it comes to interpreting verbal discourse, that discourse is a product of—hence dependent upon—the changing currents and tides of language, religious belief, social structure, cultural values, and political realities. Now in this case it will not surprise us that the Reformers, particularly Martin Luther, loved Valla's critical impulse. For the work of Valla embodied what

6. "Donation of Constantine (*Constitutum* or *Donatio Constantini*)," *ODCC* 499; "Valla, Lorenzo," *ODCC* 1677–78.

7. Carlo Ginzburg, "Lorenzo Valla on the 'Donation of Constantine,'" chap. 2 in *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 54–70.

would become standard practice for the Reformers: radical historical criticism. Historical research was the primary method used by the Reformers to expose much of the Roman Church's doctrine and power base as medieval accretions rather than biblical teaching. So far so good for conscientious Protestants—but the other shoe was still to fall. Though these early Protestants were accustomed to thinking that good historical scholarship was on their side, their heirs were not really prepared for the way that historical-critical scholarship would eventually affect the reading of the Bible itself.

Conclusions

We live in the era of historical consciousness, which emerged during the Renaissance and Reformation and then reached full bloom during and after the Enlightenment. As a result, all of us are historical critics of a sort, or at least believers in many ideas that were produced by historical criticism. So while we should for good reason be cautious about embracing everything that passes as “historical and critical,” perhaps it is reasonable to consider the merits of historical criticism more carefully. But let me be clear from the outset. I have no desire to bring the methods and results of historical criticism directly into our local churches, or to have its critical conclusions carelessly preached from pulpits or taught in Sunday school classes. Nor do I wish to defend historical criticism at all cost, as if modern biblical scholarship is in all respects healthy and helpful. It is clear to me—and to many others—that certain kinds of biblical criticism reflect neither of these qualities. No, my objective in this book is more modest. There are at present two major impulses within the evangelical tradition regarding biblical criticism. One of these accepts the criticism as a legitimate way to study Scripture, and the other more or less rejects the criticism. I write to suggest that one of these paths is healthier than the other, and also to suggest how that path can be fruitfully traveled by Christians. In the end, it is for the reader to judge whether and to what extent my conclusions are sensible and right.

Let me conclude by returning to the example of Galileo. The church eventually realized that his astronomy was correct and integrated his new insights into its worldview. This had the positive effect of rendering Galileo's ideas theologically safe. My purpose in this volume is similar. I would like us to consider the possibility that historical criticism—in spite of its potential faults and negative import—might offer a relatively accurate portrait of Scripture that will be of theological value once the church correctly understands its insights. Here is how I will proceed. In the chapter that follows I will consider various epistemological and hermeneutical issues that are to my mind prerequisite to our discussion of historical criticism. I do not believe that one can understand or evaluate historical criticism apart from this background. Chapter 2 will discuss historical criticism per se, followed in turn by a discussion of biblical criticism in chapter 3. In chapters 4

and 5 I will outline a variety of Christian responses to historical criticism before I attempt to forge a healthier set of solutions in chapters 6 through 9. In chapter 10 I will test these solutions by applying them to a set of specific problems raised by historical criticism. My deliberations will then end with prospective comments in the concluding chapter. Among other things, in this concluding chapter I will give special attention to how the subject of biblical criticism ought to be managed in the life of the local church and in the curricula of Christian institutions of higher learning. The ultimate goal of this agenda is to fashion a Christian response to modern biblical criticism that is intellectually satisfying as well as theologically and spiritually healthy.