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"As evangelical scholarship has come of age and evangelical scholars confidently take their place in the mainstream academy, a danger lurks that we might lose any sense of what makes us *evangelical* scholars. This book sounds a much-needed warning against abandoning our evangelical moorings. Beale provides a penetrating critique of Peter Enns's challenge to evangelical notions of inerrancy, leaning on reputable Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern scholarship in doing so. He also presents invaluable original analyses to bolster his case in areas of his specialties—early Judaism, hermeneutics, and the Old Testament in the New. I highly recommend this book."

—David M. Howard Jr., Professor of Old Testament, Bethel Seminary

The EROSION *of* INERRANCY *in* EVANGELICALISM

Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority

G. K. BEALE

CROSSWAY BOOKS

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my students—past, present and future—who live in a postmodern world in which conviction about anything is out of vogue. Even within significant sectors of the so-called evangelical church and its institutions, a conviction that all of Scripture is true has been eroding over past decades. This book is written with the hope that it may contribute in some small way to a conviction that the entire Bible is God's truthful word.

The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority

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Introduction

Imagine a discussion between two biblical scholars. Let us call the first Tom. He comes from an evangelical background and holds to fairly conservative and traditional views of the Bible. He is having a discussion with his friend Pat. Pat comes from a very similar evangelical background, but his views are more progressive. Tom (the traditionalist) and Pat (the progressive) are discussing differing evangelical views about the authority of the Bible.

> Progressive Pat: I am sure that you are aware that some significant Christian colleges and seminaries are becoming much more flexible in the way they define the authority of the Bible, and yet others want to continue to hold to a definition that includes inerrancy. What do you think about that?
>
> Traditionalist Tom: Well, it does concern me that there is an ongoing redefinition of what should be the standard "evangelical" meaning of the authority of Scripture. I think the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy is a good statement,[1] which at that time was the general consensus of understanding in evangelicalism.
>
> Progressive Pat: The doctrine of inerrancy, including the formulation of it in the Chicago Statement, is really a part of evangelicalism's fundamentalist past. It is now an outdated statement for twenty-first-century evangelicalism. Shouldn't we begin with a positive statement about Scripture's authority rather than begin with a focus on why it does not have mistakes? What I mean is that the doctrine of inerrancy expresses too much of a negative concern for denying "errors" in the Bible instead of first espousing a more positive robust view that God has inspired the Bible, so that it has divine authority

1. The Statement can be found in appendix 2.

Traditionalist Tom: But if God has truly inspired the whole Bible and he is a God who is flawless, then should we not conclude that his Word will be without error? Thus, part of proclaiming the positive fact that the Bible is divinely inspired is to make clear that this written Word is fully truthful and contains no mistakes. This is especially important since there have been many over past years who have contended that the Bible does contain errors.

Progressive Pat: I am not sure that your assumption about God's flawless character must carry over and be applied to the Bible. And, furthermore, what do you mean by *error*? Who is to say that our modern definition of *error* is the right one? Perhaps ancient biblical people had a different view of what constitutes an error. In fact, the attempt to defend the Bible's reliability by denying that it has errors can be done only by assuming that our modern definition of *error* is correct and then reading this modern view into the ancient biblical text.

For example, some Christians wrongly assume that our scientific understanding of the world and modern view of history writing—whereby, for instance, all the historical facts have to be presented in the order that they occurred—is the same view held by the ancient people who wrote the Bible. Whereas modern people would never believe that two statements that clearly contradict one another could still be true, it appears that such a phenomenon can be found in the Bible; for example, some parallel accounts in the synoptic Gospels contain such contradictions either in what Jesus said or what is described as happening. We just cannot assume that our definition of *error* is the same as that of ancient people.

Traditionalist Tom: Why can't we assume that our definition of *error* is the same as the ancient definition? And furthermore, how do you understand that ancient people defined *truth* and *error*, if you think it to be different from our modern view? If you are going to make this claim, don't you need to explain the ancient standard in order to contrast it with the modern one?

Progressive Pat: Well, that is difficult to say because the Bible is not a scientific textbook or a philosophical treatise propounding abstract propositional formulations about truth and falsehood. Instead, the Bible is the redemptive-historical story about God who has worked to redeem people from sin and bring them back into relationship with him. The idea of inerrancy has distorted this beautiful storyline by focusing on Scripture primarily as a set of propositional truths rather than as "living oracles" (Acts 7:38), which confront people with God's very being and existence.

There are literary genres expressing relational realities such as exhortation, warning, poetry, and apocalyptic, which have the goal of bringing

people into relationship with the living God. Thus, the Bible's ultimate purpose is to confront people with the presence of God and not merely (or even primarily) with descriptions about God or reports about biblical history.

Traditionalist Tom: I agree that the Bible confronts us with God's very presence, which, as you said, is the point of Acts 7:38. And it is certainly true that the Bible is about how God has worked to bring sinful humanity back into relationship with him, but the Bible says that he has done this *in history*, and this account of history contains events reported by biblical writers. Is there not some way that we can discern whether these historical reports are true? And does not Scripture assume the veracity of these reports as being important for how God has conveyed his presence to his people in past biblical history?

Progressive Pat: Has not postmodernism taught us, at the least, that we moderns have different presuppositional perspectives from one another? Likewise, ancient biblical writers had their own assumptions or lenses through which they interpreted history. It is possible that they could so interpret a historical event that their interpretation distorted some of the actual details of how that event really occurred. That kind of history writing may not have been unacceptable to them, if, indeed, they were conscious of their presuppositions. But either way, the Spirit was inspiring them to interpret history in this manner. They (and the Spirit) may have been more interested in focusing on God's revelation of himself than upon all the pedantic historical details surrounding that revelation.

Traditionalist Tom: But what kind of criteria can we use to decide between what was really history and what was not? I think we are getting bogged down in some heavy, abstract, and theoretical philosophical issues about the nature of historical knowledge, which I doubt is going to be solved in this brief conversation. Though such issues are very important and need more discussion, let's try to get back to some concrete things about the doctrine of inerrancy that you think can no longer be held in the way that traditional evangelicalism of the twentieth century affirmed.

Progressive Pat: All right. I have been studying the book of Isaiah over the past few years, and I have decided on the basis of writing style and subject matter that chapters 40 to 66 were not written by Isaiah the prophet but by an anonymous writer, who lived during Israel's Babylonian exile or soon thereafter.

Traditionalist Tom: While I acknowledge that there are cogent arguments for the position you are taking, there are also, in my opinion, good, rea-

sonable, and more persuasive arguments within the book of Isaiah itself for the traditional view. Your view that Isaiah did not write all of the book attributed to him would mean that either the anonymous writer of chapters 40 to 66 was prophesying of Israel's restoration from Babylonian exile, which would occur only perhaps forty, thirty, or twenty years later, or the writer was recording recent history (the restoration from Babylon) as though it were prophecy.

Progressive Pat: Yes, that is correct. It is unlikely that Isaiah the prophet prophesied this restoration two centuries before it happened, since prophets usually prophesy or write what is relevant to the audience living in their own time—a hermeneutical rule about prophecy held by the majority of those in the Old Testament scholarly guild.

Traditionalist Tom: But if the writer of chapters 40 to 66 was living in the middle of the exile, then his prophecies would have been predictions only of imminent events thirty or so years later. Would not this amount to the writer appearing to be more like a weather prognosticator? While there are short-term prophecies found elsewhere in Scripture, there are repeated refrains in Isaiah 40–50 affirming that the prophecies there were announced long ago; God long ago prophesied the restoration from Babylon and that he would fulfill this prophecy (e.g., Isa. 46:10: "Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'").

On the other hand, if the writer of Isaiah 40–66 was writing after the exile, then he was making recent history—the restoration from Babylon—appear as though it were prophecy. This latter view, as you know, is that which appears to be held by the majority of scholars. This is especially unacceptable since the theme of Israel's restoration is repeated and underscored so much by Isaiah 40–50, in contrast to Babylon's inept idols that cannot predict anything. If this was not genuine long-range prophecy, then the polemic against the idols as false prophetic witnesses is diluted and not effective.

Progressive Pat: Well, we will just have to agree to disagree on this point. But let me add that nowhere in the book of Isaiah is there a claim that the prophet Isaiah wrote the whole book, though there are references that he probably wrote chapters 1 to 39 (Isa. 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; 20:2).

Traditionalist Tom: But could not Isaiah 1:1 imply this? ("The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz *and* Hezekiah, kings of

Judah.") This implication is made more explicit since Jesus and other New Testament writers often quote from both Isaiah 1–39 and 40–66 and say in each case that Isaiah wrote the entire book.

Progressive Pat: But Jesus was merely referring to a collection of writings known as "Isaiah"; this does not have to mean that Isaiah the prophet himself wrote the entire book.

Traditionalist Tom: But why does Jesus use individualistic, personalized phrases such as "Isaiah prophesied," "Isaiah said," and "what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah"? The most natural way to understand these introductory expressions is that a personal prophet by the name of Isaiah was the individual who was prophesying.

Progressive Pat: I understand your point, but these references to Isaiah in the New Testament may be explained in another way. In Jesus' day, it is true that all the Jewish people believed that Isaiah the prophet wrote the whole book of Isaiah, even though we now know today that this is not likely. Naturally, since Jesus was a part of this ancient culture that held beliefs that were built into it over centuries, these beliefs came also to form the human understanding and consciousness of Jesus. Thus, it is natural that Jesus reflected these beliefs, since he was not only divine but also fully incarnate as a human who spoke Aramaic, could read Hebrew, and had a Jewish mindset.

Or, alternatively, Jesus, as the God-man, may have known that Isaiah was not the author of the complete work attributed to him, but he "accommodated" himself to the false Jewish view in order to facilitate his communication of the truths from this book. To have addressed the false Jewish tradition of Isaianic authorship would have shifted the important focus from the point of the main theological message from Isaiah to a pedantic point about historical authorship, so Jesus adapted his message sufficiently to allow this belief to remain unchanged.

Traditionalist Tom: On the other hand, part of Jesus' mission was to explode the false assumptions and beliefs that had been held and had come to be accepted by the Jewish culture. So, why would Jesus go along with this false Jewish tradition and not expose it?

Progressive Pat: When Jesus introduced quotations referring to Isaiah, it is unlikely that his intended point was that the historical person Isaiah made the prediction; he was primarily concerned about the meaning of the prediction itself. Thus, when particular prophets are quoted in the New Testament, the focus is mainly on their message more than on the identity of the prophet himself.

Perhaps an illustration could help here. When biblical writers say that "the sun rose," it is unlikely that they were attempting to make a scientific statement about the motion of the sun, even according to the scientific standards of their time, but stating what appeared to be the case phenomenologically to their eyes. Similarly, Jesus' reference to Isaiah is not an attempt to make a historically accurate claim about the authorship of the book of Isaiah but a reflection only of what was commonly held by the populace, whether or not he was ultimately aware that Isaiah did not write the whole book. Just as the point is not that the "sun rose" but the meaning of the overall narrative, so Jesus' point is not that Isaiah wrote this passage but the meaning of the passage that is being quoted.

Traditionalist Tom: Your analogy of the appearance of the sun rising is not close enough in nature to the issue of referring to Isaiah. It is like comparing apples to oranges. That is, it is relatively easy to understand the sun illustration as a mere way of describing the world as it appears to the eye, since even we use that idiom often today. On the other hand, the Isaiah issue is not analogous, since, according to your view, Isaiah the prophet did, indeed, write the majority of the book (chaps. 1–39), but another writer(s) wrote the remainder. Thus, if your position is correct, then sometimes Jesus and the New Testament writers are historically, i.e., scientifically, correct in some of their references to Isaiah (the references to Isaiah 1–39) but not in others (Isaiah 40–66).

In addition, the rising sun reference is an attempt to describe external phenomena as they appear to the human eye, but the mention of Isaiah refers to purported historical reality as it is perceived by the collective mind's eye of tradition, which was believed to be really historically true but was not. In contrast, there is a true sense in which the rising sun expression is true.

Consequently, if it is the case that Jesus merely reflected the false tradition of Judaism, then can we really say that Jesus' and the apostles' affirmation that what "Isaiah the prophet" wrote was "inspired" by God? Is it the untrue and irrelevant husk that contains the true message of the particular passage quoted? And if this is so, then not only do we have a limited view of the inspiration of Scripture but also a view where Christ himself could make errors in his statements even about the Bible itself.

Progressive Pat: Well, I cannot continue this stimulating conversation, since I have to finish an article that I am writing on the authorship of Isaiah. Let's continue this discussion later.

Traditionalist Tom: All right. I also have to finish a lecture that I am writing on how Jesus quoted the book of Isaiah. Pat, I would like to read your article when you have finished. Let's continue our discussion later.

The Aims of This Book

The preceding dialogue is only a small peek into a much broader discussion about the authority of Scripture today among evangelical biblical and theological scholars. There is afoot an attempt to redefine what is an "evangelical view of scriptural authority." In 1949, the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) was founded, and its doctrinal basis was formulated in the following way: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." In 1978 there was a broad consensus among American evangelical scholars about the inerrancy of Scripture.[2]

This consensus was formulated in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which most saw as a good elaboration of the one sentence ETS inerrancy statement. If the reader is unacquainted with the Chicago Statement, then it is advisable that it be consulted before much more of this book is read, since the Chicago Statement represented at the time what was considered the benchmark for an evangelical view of the inspiration of Scripture (the Statement is found in appendix 2 at the end of this book).

For several reasons that need not be enumerated here, the Evangelical Theological Society saw a need to give greater clarity to its statement about inerrancy. Consequently, a bylaw was proposed and passed at the 2006 annual meeting by about 80 percent of the voters present. The bylaw ("bylaw 12") essentially referred members to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy for advice "regarding the intent and meaning of the reference to biblical inerrancy in the ETS Doctrinal Basis." Some scholars at noteworthy evangelical institutions, however, now believe that with the passing of some thirty years the Chicago Statement is outdated in some very important respects,[3] and some of these institutions

2. Nearly three hundred evangelical, scholarly leaders played a role in the formulation of this statement.

3. E.g., see K. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *JETS* 48 (2005): 89–114, who offers critiques of what he considers the traditional view of inerrancy but does not give any substantive criticism of the Chicago Statement; however, note his rather pedantic criticism of the Chicago Statement's Article XI, "It [the Bible] is true and reliable in all matters it addresses": "Strictly speaking, however, 'it' neither affirms nor addresses; authors do" (ibid., 106). But I doubt whether the authors of the Chicago Statement meant to downplay either human or divine authorship here; rather, they were using an accepted stylistic convention for referring to such authorship in the Bible. One can easily recall, for example, Billy Graham's repeated refrain in his evangelical sermons, "The Bible says . . . ," not to speak of Jesus' own repeated reference, "Scripture says . . ."(John 19:37; so also John 7:38, 42; 19:28). Perhaps, ironically, Vanhoozer, who criticizes inerrancy as too literal of an approach and as underemphasizing different genres in Scripture, should realize that he may be misinterpreting the genre of this expression used in the Chicago Statement; i.e., he takes it much more literally than was intended.

do not discourage their faculty from having a critical view of important elements of the document.

With reference to the opening dialogue above about the authorship of Isaiah, let us look at part of Article XVIII of the Chicago Statement:

> *WE DENY* the legitimacy of any treatment of the text . . . that leads to . . . rejecting its claims to authorship.

Yet, as we will see, a variety of evangelical scholars do not believe that a biblical book's claim of authorship necessarily represents the true past historical reality. But, again, this is just one of a number of points in the Chicago Statement that are currently being rejected.

What has happened in the last thirty years to cause such a desire to revise what had been considered the standard North American evangelical statement on Scripture? I think it is safe to say that, at least, two things have contributed significantly to this reassessment. First, the onset of postmodernism in evangelicalism has caused less confidence in the propositional claims[4] of the Bible, since such claims have to be understood only by fallible human interpreters. This influence has also resulted in an attempt to downplay the propositional nature of Scripture itself and to overemphasize the relational aspect of biblical revelation, i.e., Scripture is not some dry set of impersonal propositions but a living communication from God himself, whom we meet in Scripture. For this reason, Karl Barth's relational view of Scripture has seen a revival of interest, especially among evangelical systematic theologians, though most of these theologians would not like the nomenclature of "systematic" anymore, since it smacks of the study of propositional revelation that needs to be systemized.

A second factor leading to reassessment of the traditional evangelical view of the Bible's inspiration is that over the last twenty-five years there has been an increasing number of conservative students graduating with doctorates in biblical studies and theology from non-evangelical institutions. A significant percentage of these graduates have assimilated to one degree or another non-evangelical perspectives, especially with regard to higher critical views of the authorship, dating, and historical claims of the Bible, which have contributed to their discomfort with the traditional evangelical perspective of the Bible. On the other hand, these same scholars, while significantly qualifying their former view

4. By the term *proposition* is meant a statement describing some reality that is either true or false; propositions may be expressed through various literary genres, whether that be straightforward didactic discourse, parables, historical narrative, warnings, prophecy, apocalyptic vision, etc.

of inerrancy, have not left their basic position about the truth of the gospel and the Bible's basic authority. Thus, they continue to want to consider themselves "evangelical" but at the same time reformers of an antiquated evangelicalism, represented, for example, by the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy.

In fact, there is an increasingly popular attitude that the Chicago Statement and the term *inerrancy* carry significant "fundamentalist baggage," with all the negative associations that go with the word *fundamentalism* (e.g., narrow, obscurantist, anti-scholarly, unsophisticated). I have found that this perspective is also shared by some more conservative biblical and theological scholars. This is not the place to discuss the origins of the word *fundamentalism* and the development of the use of the word. Suffice it to say that what appears to be "fundamentalist" is in the eye of the beholder.

J. I. Packer in his *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* has given a nice, brief discussion of the origins of fundamentalism and how the word has come to be used. Though that was written in the late 1950s, his basic points still hold. There he distinguishes a fundamentalist view of Scripture from an evangelical view, the latter of which he subsequently identified with the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy since he himself was one of the more well known among its signatories in 1978.

The aims of this book are limited. I want to focus on a specific debate that bears upon the broad issue of biblical authority that has arisen recently in evangelicalism. In particular, this is a debate that I have had with another biblical scholar, who has posed what I consider to be some new challenges to the standard evangelical view of biblical inerrancy. In 2005 Peter Enns published a book titled *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker). I did not read the book when it first came out, and I had not heard much about it. I suspected that it would espouse views similar to some articles that he had written in previous years, especially on the use of the Old Testament in the New.

One was on the Old Testament and Jewish background of Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 10:4 to Christ's being the "rock which followed" Israel in her wilderness wanderings.[5] Peter Enns actually sent an offprint of that article to me personally. One of the main points of the article, if not the main focus, was that Paul was referring to a Jewish myth, which he believed to be historical reality, and that he was inspired as a biblical writer in doing so. The conclusion is that God can use myth in this way to reveal his theological truth through his inspired apostles.

5. "The 'Moveable Well' in 1 Cor. 10:4: An Extrabiblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996), 23–38.

The second article was about how the New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament.[6] One of the main conclusions, if not the primary point, was to contend that New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament in a manner different from the original meaning of the texts they were interpreting, because they were influenced to use the non-contextual interpretative method of the Jewish culture around them.

After reading the first article some years ago, I wanted to respond and I set out to do so. But other writing obligations crowded out the effort. Nevertheless, I intended at some point to try to get a reply out, even if it were years later. When Enns's second article came out, I believed that there were a number of inaccuracies in it which needed response. I decided, however, that I did not want to respond, since I thought there were some significant ambiguities about Enns's own viewpoints and positions, which I believed could be difficult to clarify. When Enns's book *Inspiration and Incarnation* came out, I surmised that it likely had some of the same ambiguities, and, accordingly, I did not feel a compulsion to read the book.

In the fall of 2005, however, I attended an academic meeting where a professing evangelical scholar was giving a review of Peter Enns's book. Consequently, I decided to read the book and take notes on it before this meeting occurred in order that I might better be able to follow the review and interact in the question-and-answer session afterward. After summarizing the book, the reviewer offered some critiques but also concluded with a generally favorable view of the overall approach of the book, saying something to the effect that Enns had sailed between the coasts of fundamentalism and liberalism, achieving a nice balance on the issue of biblical authority in relation to some of the difficult historical and literary features of the Bible.

In the light of this reviewer's generally favorable response to the book and the mostly positive reviews of the book at the time, I decided also to take pen in hand and give my own written response. The response grew and grew, and I ended up publishing two responses. One evaluated the bulk of the book, focusing on issues of history and various kinds of literary features in the Old Testament that Enns set forth as inconsistent with the traditional evangelical view of scriptural inspiration. The second article reviewed the last main and very lengthy chapter in his book about the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament. Enns responded

6. "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond the Modern Impasse," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 263–87.

to both the first and the second review, and I wrote counter-responses to each of his replies.

It is these exchanges that will form a significant part of this book. The dialogue of these debates will be set out as they were composed in the journals in which they originally appeared.[7] The purpose is to set forth the debates in these articles as somewhat typical of the kind of debates that are emerging in the beginning of this century within the so-called evangelical scholarly community,[8] though such notions were already beginning to be formulated toward the end of the last century by scholars considering themselves to be still within the evangelical fold.

There are other issues pertinent to this debate that this book will not discuss, and there are other books and articles recently written that challenge a traditional evangelical view of Scripture, but limitations of space do not allow for summary and evaluation of such works.[9] This book is but a brief snapshot of the types of dialogue being conducted within what has usually been considered the most conservative sectors of Christianity. For example, when Ennis published his book, he was in his twelfth year of teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, long considered to be a bastion of evangelical orthodoxy.

Since, as we will see, Peter Enns has said that he wants to influence a more popular Christian audience by the ideas of his book, I also have written this book to help interested laypeople, students, and pastors to be able to understand better his arguments and what I believe are the fallacies inherent in them. And, like Enns, I have in mind, secondarily, a scholarly audience, whom I hope also will benefit from the discussion. Ultimately, I have decided to write this book because I believe that the issues discussed in it are very important for Christian faith and confidence in our Bible.

7. Though Enns's responses will be summarized as accurately as possible, they will not be reproduced in their original form; nevertheless, readers are highly encouraged to consult these responses in their original journal form.

8. I use the phrase "so-called evangelical" and similar phrases at times, since I am unsure about what constitutes the definition of *evangelical* today. So many people of a variety of theological stripes, especially with respect to their stand on the nature of Scripture, take on the name.

9. Representative examples of such books include John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005); Andrew McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives* (Apollos [Inter-Varsity], 2007). D. A. Carson has given helpful summaries and reviews of the first two books, and provides references to other recent books of relevance and an extended review of Peter Enns's book, *Inspiration and Incarnation*. See "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," *Trinity Journal* 27NS (2006): 1–62. For a good review of McGowan's book, see J. R. deWitt, "The Divine Spiration of Scripture—A Review," *Banner of Truth* (June 2008). Along similar lines to Enns's approach, see Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

After laying out my dialogue with Peter Enns in chapters 1 to 4, I will discuss in the remaining chapters (1) the problem of the traditional understanding of the authorship of Old Testament books, especially that of Isaiah; (2) whether the Old Testament's concept of the cosmos is irreconcilable with a modern scientific view; (3) the problem of the nature of the Christian's certainty and confidence in the authority of the Bible and in the task of interpretation itself; (4) the Chicago Statement of Inerrancy which represent generally my own understanding of what should be considered the evangelical view of the authority of Scripture; and (5) quotations from Karl Barth on the limited nature of the authority of the Bible. The quotations from Barth are included since his perspective on the authority of Scripture is appealed to by some evangelicals as a good model.

CHAPTER ONE

Is a Traditional Evangelical View of Scripture's Authority Compatible with Recent Developments in Old Testament Studies? *Part 1*

Below, with minor revisions, is my initial review, "Myth, History, and Inspiration: A Review Article of *Inspiration and Incarnation* by Peter Enns,"[1] which appeared in *JETS* 49 (2006): 287–312.

Introduction[2]

Peter Enns has written a stimulating and yet controversial book on the doctrine of Scripture. Scholars and students alike should be grateful that Enns has boldly ventured to set before his evangelical peers a view of inspiration and hermeneutics that has not traditionally been held by evangelical scholarship.

After his introduction, in chapter 2 Enns discusses the parallels between ancient Near Eastern myths and accounts in the Old Testament. He says that the Old Testament contains what he defines as "myth" (see his definition later below), but, he affirms, this should not have a negative bearing on the Old Testament's divine inspiration. God accom-

1. P. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

2. I am grateful to several scholarly friends around the country who have graciously read this review article and have offered very helpful comments in the revising stage.

modates himself to communicate his truth through such mythological biblical accounts.

In chapter 3 Enns discusses what he calls "diversity" in the Old Testament. He believes that the kinds of diversity that he attempts to analyze have posed problems in the past for the doctrine of inerrancy. He asserts that this diversity must be acknowledged, even though it poses tensions for the inspiration of Scripture. This diversity is part of God's inspired Word.

In chapter 4 Enns shifts to the topic of how the Old Testament is interpreted by New Testament writers. He contends that Second Temple Judaism was not concerned to interpret the Old Testament according to an author's intention or to interpret it contextually or according to modern standards of "grammatical-historical exegesis." This hermeneutical context of Judaism must be seen as the socially constructed framework of the New Testament writers' approach to interpreting the Old Testament, so that they also were not concerned to interpret the Old Testament contextually. Accordingly, they interpreted the Old Testament by a "christotelic hermeneutic," which means generally that they had a Christ-oriented perspective in understanding the purpose of the Old Testament, including the meaning of specific Old Testament passages. This also means that "the literal (first) reading [of an Old Testament text] will not lead the reader to the christotelic (second) reading."[3]

The final chapter attempts to draw out further implications from the earlier chapters for Enns's understanding of an "incarnational" doctrine of Scripture.

At various points throughout the book, Enns appeals to this incarnational notion, contending that since Christ was fully divine and fully human, then so is Scripture. Accordingly, we need to accept the "diversity" or "messiness" of Scripture, just as we accept all of the aspects of Jesus' humanity. Also at various points in the book is the warning that modern interpreters should not impose their modern views of history and scientific precision on the ancient text of the Bible. Such a foreign imposition results in seeing problems in the Bible that are really not there.

The origin of Enns's book and its strength derive from the author's attempt to wrestle with problems that evangelicals must reflect upon in formulating their view of a doctrine of Scripture.

Enns has attempted to draw out the implications of postmodernism for an evangelical doctrine of Scripture further than most other evangeli-

3. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 158; page references cited in text pertain to this work.

cal scholars to date. He argues that liberal and evangelical approaches to Scripture both have held the same basic presupposition: that one can discern the difference between truth and error by using modern standards of reasoning and modern scientific analysis. He is proposing a paradigm for understanding scriptural inspiration that goes beyond the "liberal vs. conservative" impasse (pp. 14–15). He wants to "contribute to a growing opinion that what is needed is to move beyond both sides by thinking of better ways to account for some of the data, while at the same time having a vibrant, positive view of Scripture as God's word" (p. 15). This, of course, is a monumental task that Enns has set for himself. Enns says we must go beyond this impasse, and he presents himself as one of the few having the balance or the new synthesis that solves these age-old debates.

The book is designed more for the layperson than the scholar but is apparently written with the latter secondarily in mind. He says his thesis is not novel, but, in reality, the main proposal for which he contends throughout is "novel": he is trying to produce a synthesis of the findings of mainline liberal scholarship and an evangelical view of Scripture. Many who will judge his attempt a failure would probably wish that he had written a book that goes into much more depth, and even those who agree with him would probably wish for the same thing.

There is much to comment on in his short book. At some points, especially in the first three chapters, Enns is ambiguous, and the reader is left to connect the dots to determine his view. What follows here is an attempt not only to summarize and evaluate his explicit views but also to connect the dots in the way I think Enns does in areas where he is not as explicit. Thus, I quote Enns sometimes at length in order to let readers better assess his views and to try to cut through the ambiguity.

This chapter will focus primarily on the first part of Enns's book, which deals with Old Testament issues.

Enns's Incarnational Model for Understanding Biblical Inspiration

In Relation to History and Myth

Perhaps the overarching theme of Enns's book is his conception of divine accommodation in the process of scriptural inspiration. For Enns, Scripture is very human, which means that God meets his people in a very human way in his Word. Enns repeatedly compares this to Christ's incarnation: "As Christ is both God and human, so is the Bible" (p. 17; likewise pp. 18, 67, 111, 167–68). It is out of the incarnational analogy that Enns develops his view that "for God to reveal himself means that he accommodates himself" (p. 109; cf. p. 110). Enns is certainly right

to underscore that the divine word in Scripture is also a human word. What this means for Enns is that much more "diversity" in the Bible should be recognized by evangelicals than has been typically the case in the past.

In particular, he is concerned that conservatives have not sufficiently recognized ancient Near Eastern (ANE) parallels with the Bible, particularly the parallels with the Babylonian myth of creation and the Sumerian myth of the cataclysmic flood (pp. 26–27). Enns says that "the doctrinal implications of these discoveries have not yet been fully worked out in evangelical theology" (p. 25). For example, he says that if the Old Testament has so much in common with the ancient world and its customs and practices, "in what sense can we speak of it as revelation?" (p. 31). But, as he acknowledges, these discoveries were made in the nineteenth century, and evangelical scholars have been reflecting on their doctrinal implications ever since the early nineteen hundreds.

It is important to remark at this point that (1) some evangelical scholars have seen the presence of similarities to supposed ANE myth due to *polemical intentions*,[4] as have some non-evangelical scholars, or to direct repudiation of pagan religious beliefs and practices. (2) Others see the presence of similarities as rising from a *reflection of general revelation* by both pagan and biblical writers, and only rightly interpreted by the latter.[5] (3) Still others have attributed purported ANE mythical parallels in the Old Testament to a *common reflection of ancient tradition*, the sources of which precede both the pagan and biblical writers, and the historicity of which has no independent human verification (like the creation in Genesis 1) but is based ultimately on an earlier, ancient, divinely pristine revelation that became garbled in the pagan context and reliably witnessed to by the scriptural writer.[6] (4) Yet another view is that revelation did not always counter ANE concepts but often used them in productive ways, though still revised in significant manner by special revelation. For example, ANE concepts may have helped give shape to the theology of sacred space in the building of Israel's tabernacle

4. E.g., see in this respect the article by G. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *EQ* 46 (1974): 81–102. Cf. A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1954), 82–140. Hasel does not believe there is enough evidence to be certain that the Old Testament creation narrative was dependent on the Babylonian one and concludes that some of the significant differences in the former are unparalleled in either the Babylonian or the Assyrian cosmogonies.

5. Enns's discussions of wisdom literature and law in chapter 3 of his book would appear to be consistent with this viewpoint.

6. E.g., see D. I. Block, "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology," in *Biblical Faith and Other Religions*, ed. D. W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 43–78, who, in essence, affirms these first three views, though the majority of the article elaborates on the first perspective. See also Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 139, who cites a scholar representing the third view.

and temple, e.g., the eastward orientation, the placement of important cultic objects, the designation of areas of increasing holiness, the rules for access to the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, etc.[7]

Of course, another option, in contrast to the preceding four views, is that the biblical writers absorbed mythical worldviews unconsciously, reproduced them in their writings, and believed them to be reliable descriptions of the real world and events occurring in the past real world (creation account, flood narrative, etc.) because they were part of their socially constructed reality.[8] Divine inspiration did not limit such cultural, mythical influence.

Does Enns agree with this latter view, still nevertheless contending that God used myths to convey truth? Does Enns believe that these Old Testament "mythical accounts" do not contain *essential historicity*, so that he uses the word *myth* with its normal meaning? The following analysis of Enns will contend that his view, while sometimes consistent with some of the four above views, does not primarily align itself with any of them. He appears to give an affirmative answer to the preceding two questions, though one must work hard at interpreting Enns to come to these conclusions, since, at crucial points in his discussion, he is unclear. It would have been helpful to readers if Enns had acknowledged the above variety of ways that the Old Testament interacts with ANE myth and where precisely he positioned himself with respect to various Old Testament passages.

According to Enns, the ancient peoples around Israel asked questions about their ultimate being and meaning, "so, stories were made up," especially about the creation (p. 41). The Genesis account of creation "is firmly rooted in the [mythological] worldview of the time" (p. 27); in other words the Genesis passage presupposes and utilizes the mythological creation stories circulating in the ANE (including, presumably, the background of the account about "Adam's" creation?). The main point, according to Enns, is to show that Yahweh is the true God and not the Babylonian gods (p. 27). The same conclusion is reached with respect to the flood account (pp. 27–29).

7. E.g., see J. H. Walton, "Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies," in *Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, ed. K. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 42; see the entire article (pp. 40–45), which is helpful. Walton registers agreement also with the preceding three perspectives on ANE parallels, though aligning himself most with this fourth view. See also Block, "Other Religions in Old Testament Theology," 47–48, who also appears partly to align himself with this fourth view.

8. See Walton, "Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies," 43. Walton repudiates such unconscious absorption and use of myth in the Old Testament while affirming that "God's communication used the established literary genres of the ancient world and often conformed to the rules that existed within those genres," 41.

Enns likes the use of the word *myth* to describe these biblical accounts, but how does he define *myth* precisely? Enns says that not all historians of the ancient Near East use the word *myth* simply as "shorthand for 'untrue,' 'made-up,' 'storybook,'" a position with which he appears to align himself (p. 40). Yet, enigmatically, he goes on to define *myth* in the ANE as something apparently very close to this. His formal definition of "myth" is as follows: "Myth is an ancient, premodern, prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?" (p. 50; so likewise p. 40).

Note well that there is no reference to history or actual events in this definition. But then Enns proceeds to affirm, despite his earlier apparent qualification about "made-up" stories, that ANE myths were "stories [that] *were made up*" (p. 41, my italics) and were composed by a process of "telling stories" (p. 41), and that "the biblical stories" of the "creation and flood must be understood first and foremost in the ancient contexts." This means, interpreting Enns by Enns, that the biblical stories had "*a firm grounding in ancient myth*" (p. 56, my italics); to reiterate, with specific reference to the Genesis creation account, he says it "is firmly rooted in the [mythological] worldview of the time" (previous page). So, what is Enns's view of myth in relation to real events of the past?

In this respect and in connection with some of Enns's directly preceding statements, he poses a difficult question:

> If the ancient Near Eastern stories are myth (defined in this way as prescientific stories of origins), and since the biblical stories are similar enough to these stories to invite comparison, does this indicate that myth is the proper category for understanding Genesis? (p. 41)

He answers this by asking another question:

> Are the early stories in the Old Testament to be judged on the basis of standards of modern historical inquiry and scientific precision, things that ancient peoples were not at all aware of? (p. 41)

He answers by saying that it is unlikely that God would have allowed his Word to come to the Israelites according to "modern standards of truth and error so universal that we should expect premodern cultures to have understood them." Rather, more probably, God's Word came to them "according to standards *they* understood" (p. 41), which included mythological standards of the time. Recall once more that part of Enns's definition of *myth* includes stories that were made up. He concludes that

the latter position is "better suited for solving the problem" of how God accommodated his revelation to his ancient people (p. 41).

Enns acknowledges that beginning with the monarchic age (1000–600 BC) more historical consciousness arises, so that history "is recorded with a degree of accuracy more in keeping with contemporary standards" (p. 43). He immediately adds, however, that a negative answer must be given to the question, "Can we not also conclude that the same can be said for Genesis and other early portions of the Bible?" (p. 43). He continues, "It is questionable logic to reason backward from the historical character of the monarchic account, *for which there is some evidence*, to the primeval and ancestral stories, *for which such evidence is lacking*" (p. 43). He says the same thing even more explicitly on page 44:

> One would expect a more accurate, blow-by-blow account of Israel's history during this monarchic period, when it began to develop a more "historical self-consciousness," as it were. It is precisely the evidence *missing* from the previous periods of Israel's history that raises the problem *of the essential historicity* of that period [my italics].

So, in one respect, we are on somewhat firmer ground when we come to the monarchic period because it is there that we see something more closely resembling what one would expect of good history writing by modern standards: a more or less contemporary, eyewitness account.

Likewise, Enns says a little later:

> The Mesopotamian world from which Abraham came was one whose own stories of origins had been expressed in mythic categories. . . . The reason the opening chapters of Genesis look so much like the literature of ancient Mesopotamia is that the worldview categories of the ancient Near East were ubiquitous and normative at the time. Of course, different [ancient] cultures had different myths, but the point is that they all[9] had them.
>
> The reason the biblical account is different from its ancient Near Eastern counterparts is not that it is history in the modern sense of the word and therefore divorced from any similarity to ancient Near Eastern myth. What makes Genesis different from its ancient Near Eastern counterparts is that . . . the God they [Abraham and his seed] are bound to . . . is different from the gods around them.

9. It is probable here that Enns is including the patriarchs and Israel in this "all."

> We might think that such a scenario is unsatisfying because it gives too much ground to pagan myths. (p. 53)

> God adopted Abraham as the forefather of a new people, and in doing so he also adopted the mythic categories within which Abraham—and everyone else—thought. But God did not simply leave Abraham in his mythic world. Rather; [*sic*] God transformed the ancient myths so that Israel's story would come to focus on its God, the real one. (pp. 53–54)

> The differences notwithstanding [between Babylonian myths and the Genesis creation and flood accounts], the opening chapters of Genesis participate in a worldview that the earliest Israelites shared with their Mesopotamian neighbors. To put it this way is not to concede ground to liberalism or unbelief, but to understand the simple fact that the stories in Genesis had a context within which they were first understood. And that context was not a modern scientific one but an ancient mythic one.

> The biblical account, along with its ancient Near East counterparts, assumes the factual nature of what it reports. They did not think, "We know this is all 'myth' but it will have to do until science is invented to give us better answers." (p. 55)

> To argue . . . that such biblical stories as creation and the flood must be understood first and foremost in the ancient contexts, is nothing new. The point I would like to emphasize, however, is that such a firm grounding in ancient myth does not make Genesis less inspired. (p. 56)

It is important to note three things that Enns says in these extended quotations. First, if ancient Old Testament writers did not record history according to modern historical and scientific standards, it means that they did not recount historical events that corresponded with actual past reality but that corresponded to ANE myth; indeed, Enns wants to "emphasize" that "such a firm grounding in ancient myth does not make Genesis less inspired" (p. 56)! Thus, uncritical and unconscious absorption of myth by a biblical author does not make his writing less inspired than other parts of Scripture.

Second, and in connection with the first point, Enns says that "the evidence *missing* from the previous [pre-monarchic] periods of Israel's history . . . raises the problem of the essential historicity of that period," which, in the light of all Enns has said above, most likely means for him that these pre-monarchic accounts are not to be viewed as containing "essential historicity."