

EVANGELICALISM, INERRANCY, AND CURRENT OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

by
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Back in the mid-1970s when I was in seminary, I decided to major in OT for one main reason: while there seemed to me to be a plethora of excellent evangelical NT commentaries, there was a relative dearth of commentaries on the OT from an evangelical perspective. I thought at that time that there was a greater need for evangelical scholars in the OT than in the NT. In the last 40 years that picture has decidedly changed. There is now an abundance of OT commentaries (both single volumes and series) written by evangelical scholars. While that is heartening, there is another trend in OT evangelical scholarship that I find quite troubling. It is my contention that over the past 40 years there has been a marked difference in the approach of evangelical biblical scholars towards the text of Scripture and issues of inerrancy. And that seems to be especially true in the field of OT studies.

When I began teaching in 1977, I was well aware of the critical approach to the OT: Israel's religion gradually evolved from polytheism to monotheism; the Bible is the product of human authors whose writings were flawed and contradictory; and many of the OT biblical books (such as the Pentateuch, Isaiah, and Daniel), were not written by individual authors (Moses, Isaiah, and Daniel), but in fact were written over a period of many years in a collaborative process (with numerous expansions of the original text), with the final form culminating hundreds of years after the death of the purported author. Specific predictive prophecy was denied, with the biblical prophet simply a rather gifted man among men, but with no capacity to predict the future in a precise way. Furthermore, the NT writers often wrenched the OT out of its proper context, and simply appropriated the OT in any manner that they saw fit, without regard to the original meaning in the OT. In short, the difference between critical OT scholarship and evangelical OT scholarship was clear: critical scholars viewed the Bible as a whole (and the OT in particular) as a flawed work of human origin; while evangelical scholars viewed the entire Bible as God-breathed and inerrant.

This important distinction between evangelicalism and critical scholarship may be seen from the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical

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Inerrancy. At that time there was a broad consensus among evangelicals concerning this issue, with over 300 evangelical leaders signing the statement. The Evangelical Theological Society doctrinal statement (“The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs”) was reaffirmed in 2006, with the passage of a bylaw (Bylaw 12) that used the 1978 Chicago Statement as its definition of inerrancy. In the context of this essay, I would like to highlight three of its 19 Articles of Affirmation and Denial. First, Article V states that “We affirm that God’s revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive. We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it.” Second, Article XII states that “We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.” Finally, Article XVIII states, “We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching or rejecting its claims to authorship.”²

My approach to this topic will be to look at three particular areas where modern evangelical OT scholars seem to have deviated from the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy: (1) the use of the OT in the new; (2) the historicity of Genesis 1–11; and (3) the authorship of various biblical books, especially Isaiah. My contention is that in each of these areas, many OT evangelical scholars do not appear to hold to the tenets of the Chicago Statement, and instead appear to be closer to the positions held by critical scholars on these issues. Space will limit the discussion of these issues dramatically (each could be an essay in and of itself), but hopefully this essay will foster further discussion and reflection on the state of OT evangelical scholarship today.

THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Article V of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy states that “We affirm that God’s revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive. We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it.” Similarly, Article XVII of the parallel Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (adopted in 1982), states: “We deny that later writers of Scripture misinterpreted earlier passages of Scripture when quoting from or referring to them.”³ That means that

²For the full Chicago Statement, see http://www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago_Statement.pdf (accessed 12 December 2013).

³For the complete statement, see <http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/>

the NT writers' use of OT texts may amplify what is given in the OT context, drawing out a fuller meaning, but cannot misinterpret the OT passages. Today, however, there seems to be in the minds of some evangelical scholars a major "disconnect" between the OT passage and the NT interpretations. For example, Peter Enns states: "By modern conventions, there is often a 'disconnect' between what an OT passage means in its context and how it is employed by NT writers."⁴

I see this especially in the treatment of OT messianic passages. The standard critical view was that in the OT context, the passage had nothing to do with the Messiah, but the NT writers often took a passage out of its context and improperly derived a Messianic connotation from it that was not originally there. Admittedly, this is a difficult topic, since some passages do seem to have a partial fulfillment in, for example, David, but a fuller or complete fulfillment in Christ. This may be true of a number of Psalms, including Psalm 16 and (probably) Psalm 22. But are there no exclusively Messianic psalms? Psalm 110 comes to mind as exclusively Messianic (and probably Psalm 2 as well). The NT evidence seems to seal that interpretation (see esp. Matt 22:42–45). Yet today, a number of evangelical scholars state that there are *no* exclusively Messianic psalms.⁵ This is troubling, since Jesus himself views Psalm 110 as Messianic, and it is difficult to see any human referent for "my Lord" of Psalm 110:1. Equally troubling are John Stek's comments recorded in the popular *NIV Study Bible*:

Christians have generally held that this is the most directly "prophetic" of all the psalms. If so, David, speaking prophetically (see 2 Sam 23:2), composed a coronation psalm for his great future Son, of whom the prophets did not speak until later. It may be, however, that David composed the psalm for the coronation of his son Solomon, that he called him "my Lord" (v. 1) in view of his new status, which placed him above the aged David, and that in so doing he spoke a word that had far larger meaning than he knew. This would seem to be in more accord with what we know of David from Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.⁶

ICBI_2.pdf (accessed 12 December 2013).

⁴Peter Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal," in *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 174. Enns argues that the NT writers were using Second Temple interpretive practices, so it is "incumbent upon us to do what we can to uncover those practices" (ibid.).

⁵For example, see Tremper Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 68: "No psalm is exclusively messianic in the narrow sense." Longman's book is an excellent introduction to the Psalms for the most part, but I disagree with his point here.

⁶John Stek, "Psalms," *The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 906. By contrast, Barry C. Davis affirms that the psalm is exclusively Messianic ("Is Psalm 110 a Messianic Psalm?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 [April–June 2000]: 160–73). Craig Blomberg similarly sees Ps 110 as a case of "straightforward prediction and fulfillment" ("Matthew," in

Leslie Allen's treatment is similarly disappointing. He writes, "The poet appears to celebrate the capture of Jerusalem and David's accession to the Jebusite throne.... One respects the worthy motives of those who seek to restrict the psalm to a messianic intent from the beginning. But it hardly accords with the pattern of historical and theological development discernable in the royal psalms in general and with the ancient cultural and historical royal references within Psalm 110. The issue of the priesthood in v 4 is a strong factor which predisposes the choice of a post-exilic date and also probably that of a purely eschatological interpretation."⁷

Similarly, Goldingay writes concerning the NT use of Psalm 22: "The Psalter presents it as a model for the prayer of ordinary Israelites or Christians when they experience affliction.... It is not a prophecy. The NT use of the psalm 'wrenches it out of its setting.' But that did enable it to illumine Jesus for the early church."⁸ How can the NT be wrenching Psalm 22 out of its setting, when Jesus himself quotes the first verse of Psalm 22:1 on the cross ("My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"—Ps 22:1 [Eng.; Ps 22:2 Heb]; Matt 27:46)?⁹

In a similar way, Goldingay and Payne hold that the Servant passages of Isaiah refer to the nation Israel, but also "on an interim basis" to the prophet himself.¹⁰ The final Servant passage, Isaiah 52:13–53:12, "has had a more colourful afterlife than most of the OT," but its original context is not Messianic: "We do not have to infer that the vision comes from someone other than the prophet; there is no reason why a

Commentary on the NT Use of the OT, ed. Greg Beale and D. A. Carson [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 84).

⁷Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 86, 84.

⁸John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 340–41. Goldingay's comment that the NT use of the psalm "wrenches it out of its setting" reminds me of S. V. McCasland's essay, "Matthew Twists the Scriptures," where he argues that Matthew deliberately misquotes the OT for his own purposes. For instance, he says that Matthew deliberately misinterpreted Isa 7:14 to infer a virgin birth from a passage simply talking about a birth which happened in Isaiah's own day (S. V. McCasland, "Matthew Twists the Scriptures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 [June 1961]: 143–48; reprinted in G. K. Beale, ed., *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 146–52). Of course, to my knowledge McCasland was not an evangelical, but my point is that Goldingay and McCasland appear to be saying virtually the same thing.

⁹Other portions of Ps 22 are cited by NT writers in reference to Christ as well. Verse 18 (19 Heb) is cited in John 19:24; Matt 27:35; Mark 15:24; and Luke 23:34; verse 8 (9 Heb) is cited in Matt 27:43; and verse 22 (23 Heb) is cited in Heb 2:12: all refer to the Messiah.

¹⁰John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 1:54–55.

prophet should not envisage his or her own suffering and death and incorporate it into a third-person vision.”¹¹ Yet, in the NT Jesus specifically quotes Isaiah 53:12 and refers it to himself (Luke 22:37); in fact, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, and 1 Peter all cite Isaiah 53 as Messianic.¹² Is that not enough evidence that Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is speaking about Christ? Or were Christ, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter all incorrect?¹³

Admittedly, the use of the OT in the NT is a complex topic, since the NT writers use the OT in a variety of ways. Each passage needs to be studied carefully: first the OT context, then the NT, to see how the writer is using the text.¹⁴ But for the evangelical scholar, if a NT writer cites an OT passage and interprets it in a certain way, we need to appropriate the NT data into our understanding of the original OT passage. Since the Bible ultimately has one author, the NT understanding of an OT passage is an important part of the picture—not simply how “Matthew” took it, or “Paul” took it, but how God intended it to be understood. I am not saying here that the NT understanding should trample on the original OT context; rather, it should be seen as in harmony with it. If we believe that the entire Bible is the Word of God, then it is not only permissible but essential to allow the NT writers to shed some light on an OT passage. There is ultimately one author for the whole Bible.¹⁵

THE HISTORICITY OF GENESIS 1–11

A second area where I see a significant shift among evangelical OT scholars today is in their approach to the historicity of Genesis 1–11, especially Genesis 1–2. As mentioned earlier, Article V of the Chicago

¹¹Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 2:281.

¹²See Matt 8:17; Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32–33; Rom 10:16; 15:21; and 1 Pet 2:22–25.

¹³For another sad treatment of this passage, see Watts, who views the Servant of Isa 53 to be Zerubbabel (of Ezra’s day). Yet he graciously states, “This identification should take nothing away from the model or symbol of Yahweh’s appointed one who patiently bears suffering even to death which means so much for NT christology. The importance of chap. 53 lies in showing God’s attitude toward and use of an innocent death to accomplish peace and healing for the community.... God is shown to be goal-oriented. His justice looks forward, not backward. His drive toward deliverance and salvation, toward restoration and fellowship, can use innocent death to achieve these goals for others” (J. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1987], 228, 233).

¹⁴For a helpful introduction, see Roger Nicole, “The New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in Beale, *Right Doctrine*, 13–28.

¹⁵It is, therefore, quite distressing to me to see OT commentaries that hardly mention the NT, even when a NT passage cites the OT passage being discussed in the commentary.

Statement on Biblical Inerrancy says, “We affirm that God’s revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive. We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it.” Similarly, Article XXII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics states, “We affirm that Genesis 1–11 is factual, as is the rest of the book. We deny that the teachings of Genesis 1–11 are mythical and that scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity may be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation.”¹⁶

While the precise interpretation of Genesis 1–2 has been a source of debate for many years among evangelicals (with the Gap theory, the Day-Age theory, and other views being heralded in years past¹⁷), it seems that more and more OT scholars are moving towards a more figurative view of Genesis 1–2. Thankfully, most evangelical scholars do not view Genesis 1–11 as myth, though Peter Enns comes close. Enns does indeed label this section as “myth,” defined as “an ancient, pre-modern, prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?”¹⁸ Since Abraham came from Mesopotamia, Enns argues, he

shared the worldview of those whose world he shared and not a modern, scientific one. 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...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.¹⁹

Enns concludes that it is a

fundamental misunderstanding of Genesis to expect it to answer questions generated by a modern worldview, such as whether the days were literal or figurative, or whether the days of creation can be lined up with modern science, or whether the flood was local or universal. The question that Genesis is prepared to answer is whether Yahweh, the God of Israel, is worthy of worship.... It is wholly incomprehensible to think that thousands of years ago God would have felt constrained to speak in a way that would be meaningful only to Westerners several thousand years later. To

¹⁶For the complete statement, see http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_2.pdf (accessed 12 December 2013).

¹⁷The Gap Theory was popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible* notes, among other places. The Day-Age theory has also been popular among some evangelical OT scholars. See, for example, Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 200–203.

¹⁸Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 50. Though Enns calls Genesis 1–11 “myth,” he believes that it is a genuine revelation from God.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 53.

do so borders on modern, Western arrogance.²⁰

Enns is not alone in this approach. In his essay on “Creation,” John Walton spends most of the essay discussing the ANE documents rather than the biblical text. He states that

the theological message of the Bible was communicated to people who lived in the ancient Near Eastern world. If we desire to understand the theological message of the text, we will benefit by positioning it within the worldview of the ancient world rather than simply applying our own cultural perspectives.²¹

Later Walton states,

Nowhere in the ancient Near East did people think of creation primarily in terms of *making* things. It is only our post-Enlightenment, Western way of thinking that focuses so steadfastly and exclusively on physical structure and formational history.... The origin of matter is what our society has taught us is important (indeed that matter is all there is), but we cannot afford to be so distracted by our cultural ideas. Matter was not the concern of the author of Genesis.²²

In his commentary on Genesis, Walton adds, “It is fruitless to ask what *things* God created on day one, for the text is not concerned about *things* and therefore will not address itself to that question.”²³

A recent book by Miller and Soden seems to take a similar approach. They state, “We are not arguing for a figurative day or even a long creation day as much as for a generally figurative presentation of the entire week. We understand the whole week as a symbolic presentation.”²⁴ This approach seems to be typical of OT scholars today. In a two-day symposium, “Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation,” at Chattanooga, TN, sponsored by the Bryan Institute in the fall of 2011, of the five OT panelists, I was the only one who held to a literal view of Genesis 1–2.²⁵ The other panelists held different variations

²⁰Ibid., 55.

²¹*Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, s.v. “Creation,” by J. H. Walton, 156.

²²Ibid., 161–62.

²³John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 84.

²⁴Johnny Miller and John Soden, *In the Beginning... We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in its Original Context* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 164. Interestingly, their position shifts in Gen 2: “Understanding Genesis 1 (Gen. 1:1–2:3) symbolically does not also require a figurative understanding of everything in Genesis 2 (Gen. 2:4–25). In fact, Genesis 2 presents a different sort of account, one in which Adam and Eve are the historical ancestors of the human race” (167).

²⁵The symposium was held on Sept 30–Oct 1, 2011. A book encapsulating the five views represented at the symposium has recently been

of a figurative approach.

I have discussed this matter rather thoroughly elsewhere, giving my reasons why a literal understanding of Genesis 1–11 is the most consistent hermeneutical approach.²⁶ I do find it amazing that someone can say that Genesis 1 has nothing to do with “matter” or “things,” when in fact there are 22 things created in Genesis 1 alone. Kaiser notes that Genesis 1–11 contains 66 geographical names, 88 personal names, 48 generic names, and 21 identifiable cultural items such as gold, bdellium, onyx, brass, iron, harp, pipe, and so forth. He observes that Genesis 10 alone has five times more geographical data than that of the entire Koran.²⁷ To suggest that Genesis 1–11 is simply a parable or story and is not concerned with things or history has no support whatsoever in the text of these chapters.

I would simply echo three points that I have made elsewhere that are particularly germane to this discussion.²⁸ First, the ANE worldview should not be the yardstick against which we measure the words of Scripture. Yes, it is true that Moses was familiar with this worldview. But these are *not* primarily the words of Moses: they are not the descriptions of Moses, since he was not there during any of the events of Genesis 1–11. These are the words of God. And no, they were not simply written to the group of Israelites who escaped from Egypt in the second millennium B.C.; they are written to all who would listen, from that time forth even until today. It is a mistake to consign these words to an ANE worldview, especially since God continually warned his people to *stay away* from their religion, their idols, and their worldview.²⁹ Why would God give Moses a creation account containing a worldview that he emphatically told the Israelites to reject? We come, once again, to the big question: are these the words of the man Moses, trapped in an ANE mindset, or are these the words of the divine Author giving these words to Moses? That does not mean that we cannot learn some things from ANE culture, but the events of Genesis 1–11 were in a cultural milieu all their own.

published: J. Daryl Charles, ed., *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013).

²⁶See Todd S. Beall, “Contemporary Hermeneutical Approaches to Genesis 1–11,” in *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*, ed. Terry Mortenson and Thane Ury (Green Forest, AZ: Master, 2008), 131–62. See also idem, “Reading Genesis 1–2: A Literal Approach,” in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. J. Daryl Charles (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 45–59. Also see idem, “Genesis 1–11: A Plea for Hermeneutical Consistency,” presented at Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, 19 November 2010.

²⁷Walter Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 82.

²⁸See fn. 26, above.

²⁹See, for example, Exod 23:20–33; 34:10–17; Deut 18:9–14.

Second, if we want to understand Genesis 1–11 more thoroughly, should we not turn to the NT texts that deal with these chapters? I note at least twenty-five NT references to Genesis 1–11, all of which take the accounts as historically accurate. Should not we do the same? In my response to Walton’s essay in *Reading Genesis 1–2*, I observed that Walton does not cite even one NT passage dealing with Genesis, but he has nine extensive quotations of ANE texts (comprising over 10% of his essay). That is an imbalanced approach.³⁰

Finally, we need to have a consistent hermeneutical approach to Genesis 1–11, because if we do not, where are the boundaries? Genesis 1 is not poetic in form: it is prose, so one cannot pretend that it should be taken figuratively while the rest of Genesis 2–11 should be taken literally. If I were to say that *anything* in these chapters might be considered figurative language, I would be drawn to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life, and the talking serpent of Genesis 2–3. But no, usually in these chapters evangelicals feel compelled to take them literally, because of the vast implications if they do not.³¹

One of the ironies of the 2011 symposium held in Chattanooga, TN, is that on the first day I was all alone embracing a literal hermeneutic, with the other four OT scholars arguing for a figurative view of Genesis 1. However, on the second day, all but Tremper Longman abandoned the figurative approach for Genesis 3. Longman himself agreed with me that these other panelists had suddenly changed their hermeneutic. I agree with Longman here: one cannot have a figurative hermeneutic for Genesis 1 (or Genesis 1–2) and then all of a sudden switch to a literal hermeneutic in Genesis 3. And indeed, one of the pitfalls of the figurative hermeneutic is that the inevitable next step is a denial of the historical Adam. That is where Longman seems to be headed. He writes, “It is not necessary to conclude that Adam is an historical individual for this text to be without error in what it intends to teach.”³² Enns certainly goes further in his denial of an historical Adam: “The Adam story must be understood first and foremost as an ancient story that addresses ancient Israelite questions in ancient ways.”³³ Enns

³⁰Walton has one ancillary reference (Col 1:16–17 is mentioned but not explained), and two references to Paul and Hebrews, but no passages cited. My essay in the same volume contained around 40 NT references. Admittedly, Walton is trying to establish parallels with ANE literature, but why not also deal with the NT texts? Miller and Soden’s work demonstrates a similar imbalance, with extensive summaries of ANE literature from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan, but almost no mention of the NT.

³¹Notice the shift in tone in Miller and Soden’s work once we get to chap. 2. See fn. 24, above.

³²Tremper Longman, “What Genesis 1–2 Teaches (and What it Doesn’t),” in *Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation*, 122. Note that Longman says that he has not come to a settled conclusion on the matter.

³³Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 140.

has no use whatsoever for a historical Adam, since there is no “Adam” in the evolutionary scheme.³⁴

So I would ask once more: where are the boundaries to a figurative approach to Genesis 1 (or Genesis 1–2, or Genesis 1–11)? If one is to take these accounts figuratively, there should be some hermeneutical “marker,” but there is none. I do think that in this whole discussion, we should give greater credence to the NT texts: “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (Heb 11:3). That may not answer all of our questions concerning Genesis 1–3, but it is a better place to start than ANE cosmology.

THE AUTHORSHIP OF ISAIAH

One final area where I see a major shift in the thinking of OT evangelical scholars is in the area of the authorship of biblical books. Once again, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy will provide the backdrop for our discussion, most notably Article XVIII: “We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching or rejecting its claims to authorship.” Thus, according to this statement, the claims to authorship made by the biblical writers need to be taken at face value.

Such was the position of evangelical OT scholars when I began my teaching ministry in 1977. As Beale correctly observes, “until the late 1970s, the consensus among evangelical scholars was to accept the Bible’s claims about the human authorship of some of its books, whether that be Isaiah’s authorship of the entire prophecy, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, or the attribution of the psalms to David.”³⁵ Schultz similarly states, “Not too many decades ago, the authorial unity of Isaiah—that is, that there was only one Isaiah—was considered an evangelical litmus test of biblical orthodoxy, as was the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the pre-Maccabean origin of Daniel.”³⁶ Indeed, back in 1974 the first paper I wrote in seminary was a 52-page defense of the authorship of Isaiah. And my 1977 Th.M. thesis was also a more specific defense of the authorship of the Servant passages in Isaiah. But my opponents back then were critical scholars, *not* evangelical OT scholars. So it is indeed somewhat ironic that now, nearly forty

³⁴Ibid., 138.

³⁵G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 124.

³⁶Richard L. Schultz, “How Many Isaiahs were There and What Does It Matter?” in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura Miguelez, and Dennis Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 151.

years later, I am choosing to write briefly once again on the authorship of Isaiah, as a representation of the new authorship controversies—not from critical scholars, but from evangelicals.

Indeed, as Beale states, in the 1970s, evangelical OT scholarship was nearly unanimous in favor of the authorship of the entire book of Isaiah by the eighth-century prophet. The standard OT Introductions and introductory books on the prophets all strongly defended that view: Archer, Young, Freeman, Harrison, and others.³⁷ But the picture today is quite different. Since students turn to the Internet first for their up-to-date-and-always-accurate-research (!), let us turn there first. Here is what one blogger, Matthew Hamilton, states (under the blog title, “Why is multiple authorship of Isaiah still an issue?”) that he attended a class at Asbury “taught by Dr. John Oswalt, who might be the only remaining scholar alive who argues for the single authorship of Isaiah.”³⁸ While that was a bit of hyperbole, still, this student was annoyed at Oswalt for holding the line on Isaianic authorship when no one else did. In fact, as Beale points out, “It is noteworthy that in almost as brief a period as thirty years, there has arisen in American evangelical scholarship a willingness to accept formerly liberal, higher critical views of the Bible’s claims about authorship of particular biblical books such as Isaiah.”³⁹

One need only to look at recent Old Testament introductions to see the shift in evangelical thinking. Strident defense of Isaianic authorship has in general been replaced by lukewarm acceptance or uncertainty. For example, J. Daniel Hayes states that evangelical OT scholars “remain divided.” But he goes on to stress that critical scholars and evangelicals “both agree that the book is a literary and theological unity” and there is similar agreement “in regard to the message and theology reflected in the book.”⁴⁰ Hill and Walton offer a lukewarm endorsement of a single author of Isaiah: “We would therefore consider

³⁷See Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* 3rd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 365–90 [note that the section on Isaiah is not substantially different from the second edition, published in 1974]; E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 202–11; Hobart Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 196–203; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 764–95. Note that Harrison was open to Cyrus in Isa 44:28 and 45:1 being a later explanatory gloss (p. 794). See also Oswalt T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950). Allis provides a strong defense of the authorship of Isaiah by the eighth-century prophet.

³⁸See <http://hamiltonmj1983.wordpress.com/2011/10/31/why-is-multiple-authorship-of-isaiah-still-an-issue> (accessed 12 December 2013).

³⁹Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 124.

⁴⁰J. Daniel Hayes, *The Message of the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 98.

the eighth-century prophet Isaiah as the dominant, principle and determinative voice in the book.... There is no reason to deny that it was put into written form during his lifetime, though such cannot be proved."⁴¹ Interestingly, in Walton and Sandy's new work, the door appears to be open much wider for further scribal activity long after the original work. Their "proposition 2" is that "expansion and revisions were possible as documents were copied generation after generation and eventually compiled into literary works."⁴² Such scribal additions included "integrated revision to address a new audience in contemporarily relevant ways."⁴³ Indeed, we are told, "invention on the part of the scribe becomes more common as societies transition to being text dominant."⁴⁴ Expansionist scribal activities, we are told, may be "extremely limited; maybe not.... Once we factor them into our model, it is inconsequential how frequently they occur, or whether we can identify the different strata or not."⁴⁵ For me, that sounds almost exactly like the position of some of the more moderate critical scholars such as Brevard Childs.⁴⁶

Continuing our survey of recent OT introductions, Longman and Dillard assert that "the question of the authorship of Isaiah probably should not be made a theological shibboleth (Judg 12:6) or test for orthodoxy.... In some respects, the end results of the debate are somewhat moot."⁴⁷ Longman and Dillard suggest that the situation with Isaiah is similar to Deuteronomy 34, which was written after Moses's death. Such a situation, they argue, "is not materially different from recognizing that the background of Isaiah 40–66 presumes an author living during the exile."⁴⁸ Actually, the situation is quite different, both quantitatively and qualitatively, since the NT writers do not cite Deuteronomy 34 and state that Moses wrote it, as they do many sections of Isaiah 40–66.

Finally, in a statement rivaling our internet blogger for its audacity, LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush lead off their discussion of authorship by

⁴¹Andrew Hill and John Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 7.

⁴²John Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 30.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 33–34.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁶Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1–4, 289–91.

⁴⁷Tremper Longman and Raymond Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 311.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 310.

declaring: “The traditional view that Isaiah wrote the entire book is held today by exceedingly few scholars.”⁴⁹ Later, they say (similar to Dillard and Longman), “A person’s position concerning Isaianic authorship should not be made a test of orthodoxy.”⁵⁰ Yet, they then decide that the book contains multiple authors: “Isaiah’s messages were collected and preserved by his disciples and later edited and put into written form.... His successors apparently saw themselves as heirs of his ministry.... Various prophecies were remembered, possibly written down, and preserved beginning ca. 740 and continuing through the Exile and return, until the canonical shape of the book was achieved.”⁵¹ Then they boldly assert, “The presence of later additions and explanatory glosses is not only a possibility but a demonstrable fact.”⁵² Yet there is actually no evidence presented to support this “demonstrable fact.” We have come a long way from 40 years ago.⁵³

Two evangelical commentaries on Isaiah will complete our brief survey. Gordon McConville argues that Isaiah came about as “collections of sayings that were gradually formed into a book.” They may, in fact, have been the Deuteronomists. In any case, “further redactions continued into the exilic period.” More recent study of the book recognizes that it has been “deliberately shaped as a whole into its present form, even though this was a lengthy process.”⁵⁴ Goldingay and Payne similarly reject Isaianic authorship, with “the fact that [chaps. 40–55] address people for whom the fall of Jerusalem is long past...remains the conclusive indication that they come from the sixth century BC (or later).”⁵⁵ In fact, in his more popular commentary on the book, Goldingay hears four “voices” in Isaiah: the Ambassador, the Disciple, the Poet, and the Preacher. It turns out that the Ambassador is First Isaiah, the Disciple is one who arranged the entire book, the Poet is Second Isaiah, and the Preacher is Third Isaiah. So it is the same 3–4 Isaiah theory espoused by critical scholars, only in a new costume.⁵⁶

⁴⁹William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 281.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 282.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 285–86.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 286.

⁵³On the positive side (from my perspective), Ed Hindson and Gary Yates offer strong support for Isaianic authorship: “The canonical witness of the New Testament confirms Isaiah’s authorship of all parts of the book.” See Ed Hindson and Gary Yates, eds., *The Essence of the Old Testament: A Survey* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 296.

⁵⁴Gordon McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: The Prophets* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002), 9–11.

⁵⁵Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 1:2.

⁵⁶John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, New International Biblical Commentary

Now is the time to ask, “What has changed?” What new data compel many evangelicals to abandon the traditional view of Isaianic authorship? The answer is, none whatsoever. In fact, there is *more* evidence for the unity of Isaiah than ever before. The Great Isaiah scroll from Qumran (1QIsa^a) indicates no break whatsoever in the traditional critical dividing point (chap. 40). More and more critical scholars in recent years have argued for the redactional unity in the book, rather than the atomizing previously done by Duhm, Forher, and others. Edgar Conrad documents the recent discussion well. He states that critics are coming to the position that the book of Isaiah is a redactionally unified whole. But here we have, “the trick of the disappearing redactor”: “the more impressive the critic makes the redactor’s work appear, . . . the more also he reduces the evidence on which the existence of those sources was established in the first place. . . . Thus, if redaction criticism plays its hand too confidently, we end up with a piece of writing so coherent that no division into sources is warranted any longer.”⁵⁷ The result has produced a crisis in the traditional historical-critical reading of Isaiah.

That is the ultimate irony of the recent evangelical shift in the authorship of Isaiah. There is less evidence than ever for the traditional three-Isaiah theory, and yet OT evangelical scholars are no longer staunch supporters of the single eight-century authorship of Isaiah.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

So once again, we ask, why? Why do we see these shifts in evangelical thinking today? Beale lists two factors that he thinks explains the shift in evangelical thinking: first, a postmodern culture that causes less confidence in the propositional claims of the Bible; and second, an increasing number of conservative students graduating with doctorates from non-evangelical universities.⁵⁹ I think that he is correct on both factors. But Schultz identifies a third factor that I think is equally compelling: a subtle redefinition of prophecy and the prophetic institution.⁶⁰ The nature of the prophet is diminished, so that he is more a

(Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 2–5.

⁵⁷Edgar Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 19.

⁵⁸Neither space nor time permits me to list here the strong reasons for holding to single authorship of Isaiah. But the NT evidence should be determinative. See esp. John 12:37–41, where Isa 53:1 and Isa 6:10 are cited together and attributed to the prophet Isaiah. For further discussion, see Schultz, “How Many Isaiahs?” 153–70; and Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 124–59. In particular, Isa 40–48 demonstrates that God alone can tell the future—and one of the key evidences of that fact is his prediction of Cyrus in Isa 44:28 and 45:1.

⁵⁹Beale, *Erosion of Inerrancy*, 20.

⁶⁰Schultz, “How Many Isaiahs?” 159.

human voice than a voice from God with a supernatural message. Goldingay states that the prophets “speak and write as they are inclined to do, not necessarily aware of special divine prompting or authority.”⁶¹ And in nearly all the modern evangelical OT introductions, the role of predictive prophecy is significantly downplayed. It seems almost as if we are embarrassed by prophecies such as Isaiah’s specific prophecy of Cyrus over 150 years before his birth. But why? If Isaiah can prophesy seven hundred years ahead of a Messiah who is born of a virgin, who will come to Galilee, who will suffer and die as a Servant for our sins, and who will ultimately rule the earth with peace and justice, then why can he not prophesy of Cyrus, a mere 150 years ahead?

But that takes us right back to the first illustration I gave in this essay: the use of the OT in the NT, where we observed that evangelicals are increasingly uncomfortable with messianic predictions in the OT. Oh yes, it is fine for a NT writer to change the meaning of an OT text, but how can these OT texts prophesy so clearly of a Messiah?

A key flaw in this new evangelical methodology seems to be the limitation of the text to what the OT writer’s audience might understand. Some limit the prophecy to what the prophet himself might have understood. And evangelicals today tend to discount the clear NT testimony on all these matters: the fulfillment of OT prophecy, the historicity of Genesis 1–11, and the authorship of biblical books such as Isaiah. We cannot really fathom (though we say that we do) that the OT prophets might be supernaturally inspired by God to write something that neither they nor their audience completely understood.⁶² Yet even the prophet Daniel says that he did not understand all the prophecies that were given to him (Dan 12:8).

Yes, we need to understand the OT in its context. Yes, we should be careful not to import NT content into OT passages with abandon. But as evangelical scholars we must treat Scripture as the inerrant Word of God, with many human authors but one ultimate Author—where God demonstrates his uniqueness and his majesty in creation and in fulfilled predictive prophecy. As he says in Isaiah, “Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done” (46:9–10). Let us humbly bow before him, and praise him for all that he has revealed to us in his amazing Word.

⁶¹John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 248.

⁶²See 1 Pet 1:10–12.