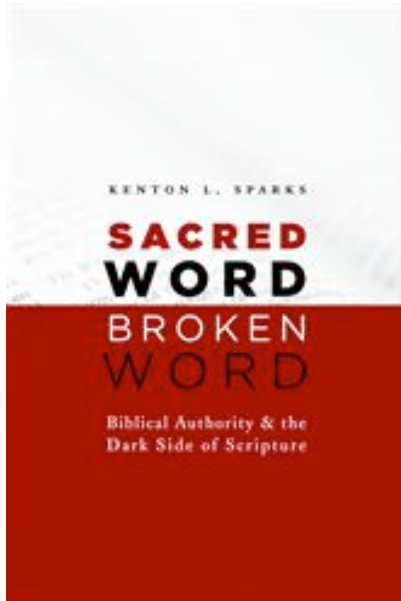


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Kenton L. Sparks

Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. Pp. xii + 180. Cloth. \$20.00. ISBN 9780802867186.

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This book is part of a recent trend focusing on ethical problems in the Bible that pose a challenge to biblical authority in the modern world. Examples of such a trend include Paul Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (2011), Eric A. Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (2009), and Caryn A. Reeder's *The Enemy in the Household: Family Violence in Deuteronomy and Beyond* (2012).

Genocide, misogyny, and intolerance of other religions are among the few ethical problems in the Bible explored by Kenton L. Sparks, a professor of biblical studies at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, in what can be described as an extended theological meditation. Previously Sparks authored an excellent exploration of ethnic identity in ancient Israel (*Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998]).

At the outset of *Sacred Word* Sparks tells readers that “[t]his is a book written for confessing Christians” (3). At the same time, he appeals to scientific evidence that transcends religious affiliation, as when he rejects a literal interpretation of Gen 1 because

the “‘red shift’ and the decay of radioactive isotopes are as much God’s voice as Genesis 1” (135).

The book is divided into thirteen chapters and some “Final Thoughts.” The first two chapters summarize what Sparks finds truthful and beautiful in scripture, as well as how the existence of evil bears implications for canonical theology. Sparks seeks to explain the seeming endorsement of unethical acts in the Bible by showing that “the Bible actually stands *within* the fallen order that we seek to understand” (22, emphasis original). That is to say, since the biblical authors are part of a fallen world, so the scripture that they write has aspects of that fallen world inscribed in the text.

Chapter 3 focuses on Christology and a brief critique of those biblical scholars who deny Jesus his humanity. Chapter 4 shows how the various historical and logical contradictions found in scripture can be explained as imperfections reflecting a fallen world. At the same time, Sparks declares that “[t]he ethical problems in Scripture are real” (44).

Chapter 5 begins an exploration of more specific ethical problems, including the genocide of the Canaanites (e.g., Deut 7, 20, Josh 6). Although he does not deny that genocidal sentiments and actions were expressed by biblical authors, Sparks says that, “in spite of this—here I simply assert a dogmatic theological point—we cannot trace the human evil back to God” (49).

Sparks’s version of St. Augustine’s accommodationist approach to scripture is outlined in chapter 6. For Sparks, “God has adopted the words and viewpoints of finite, fallen human authors as the words and viewpoints of his holy book: The entire Bible is accommodated discourse” (54). Yet, Sparks also argues that the word of God can be found outside (e.g., in nature, science) of scripture (61).

“The Redemption of Scripture: Biblical Examples” is the title of chapter 7, which explores how some biblical authors tried to mitigate ethical problems found in biblical texts. One example is the substitution of Satan for God in 1 Chr 21:1 to avoid attributing to God a census he commanded but for which he later punished Israel in 2 Sam 24.

With chapter 8 Sparks shifts toward a philosophical discussion of epistemology in order to make sense of how we can detect God’s voice. He settles on what he denominates as “practical realism,” which he calls “the preferable Christian view of human knowledge” (73–74). Practical realism, which is responsive to the work of Richard Rorty and E. D. Hirsch, allows for the idea that scripture “is itself a book of theological discourse that advances the truth, but also stands in need of redemption” (88).

“Sacred Scripture as Ancient Discourse” (ch. 9) lays out hermeneutical rules for understanding God’s word. For Sparks, “one must understand the text and then reflect theologically on what is said in light of other biblical texts and in light of God’s voice as it speaks to us through tradition, cosmos, experience, and Spirit” (90). In studying Paul, for example, we must “inform ourselves about the historical situation and context of Paul’s day insofar as this is feasible” (91).

Chapters 10 through his “Final Thoughts” flesh out his hermeneutics, especially the role of the Spirit, Cosmos, Tradition, and Experience in interpreting the Bible. Sparks is willing to admit that “the author of Deuteronomy *wrongly believed* (as Luther did) that God told his people to slaughter their enemies” (105, emphasis original).

Sparks argues that “Scripture from Genesis through Revelation presents a tolerably coherent story, what one scholar has called a ‘theodrama’” (106). However, “our theology should grant priority to Jesus Christ to knowing him, his teachings, and the redemptive character of his resurrection, ascension, and eventual return” (107).

Since Sparks grants that his book is meant for confessing Christians, I will review it from the viewpoint of both a Christian and a secular academic biblical scholar, which is how I identify myself.

From the viewpoint of Christianity, I am uncertain what the book intends to accomplish, especially as Sparks admits that Christianity is very diverse. It seems that the book will simply attract those who already share his theological presuppositions. The book does not present anything that will compel those self-described Christians who do not share his theological presuppositions to change their minds.

For example, Sparks views “the Nicene Creed and Definition of Chalcedon, as foundational for biblical interpretation” (89). This leaves out millions of non-Trinitarian Christians and Jews who see unitarianism as foundational to biblical interpretation.

Sparks also presents his work as “ecumenical” (89), yet it is clear that “ecumenical” is simply a cipher for other Christians who agree with him. By that standard, the Christian Coalition of America is also ecumenical, as it allows Christians, whether Protestant or Catholic, who fight against abortion into their group.

In many other ways, Sparks still harbors a very traditional Christian viewpoint that does not view Judaism as equal to Christianity in its ethical development. So, when comparing Jesus’ view of the Sabbath in Mark 2:27 to that in Num 15:32–33, where someone is executed for not observing that sacred day, Sparks says, “it seems to me that the spirit of grace and freedom in the ministry of Jesus is very different from the legalism of

Numbers” (108). Yet theologically the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds view Christ as God, and so that would mean that it is also Christ who approved of the laws demanding the death penalty for violation of the Sabbath (Exod 31:15; Num 15:32–36). Further, who decided that “legalism” is unethical or less desirable for God in the first place?

From a secular academic viewpoint, this sort of theological approach to biblical studies is futile and frankly incomprehensible in the twenty-first century. It is futile because there are no objective means to adjudicate which theological interpretation is correct or valid. Sparks is most perceptive when he remarks that “there is an unavoidable circularity in parsing out where God speaks explicitly in Scripture and where he speaks implicitly” (111).

I would go further and argue that all notions of when God is speaking, whether explicitly or implicitly, are circular. They all devolve into this rationale: “I believe God thinks X because I believe God thinks X.” It inevitably becomes an act of self-deification on the believer’s part because the believer comes to see himself or herself as speaking for God. So, unlike Newton’s laws of gravity or Ohm’s Law of electrical current, which can be demonstrated to people of different religious backgrounds, everything Sparks says about God cannot be demonstrated to be anything other than the work of his own imagination or subjective beliefs. That is why Sparks’ appeal to practical realism is not successful when referents such as “God” are involved. There are no practical methods by which we can ascertain anything about a being that can be perceived by everyone in the same way even when we assume that such a being exists.

I would go much further and argue that all theistic ethics are inherently unethical because, at least from a secular viewpoint, a functional ethical system is one in which all members of a community have at least the same potential ability to verify the information on which their actions are based.

In theistic ethics, some people will claim the privilege to be perceiving God’s word correctly, so that ability will not really be distributed evenly to all. It is, therefore, inherently undemocratic. Indeed, Sparks’s book would have been improved if there were a more thorough discussion of metaethics, not just epistemology.

To understand why I say projects such as this are incomprehensible in this century, imagine that someone in a classics department in a secular university proposed that we can still understand the mind and motives of Zeus in Homer’s *Iliad* and in every other work of ancient Greek literature. If we just “listen hard enough to Zeus’s voice,” or if we just dogmatically assert that that Zeus is good no matter what Greek texts might say, then

we can come to understand why Zeus might have ordered the slaughter of people here or there.

Sparks's view of the value of tradition as a guide to scriptural interpretation also inevitably generates moral relativism. He tells us that "[t]he Christian tradition is not a single authoritative voice so much as a family of closely related traditions that have different but overlapping judgments ... but no single traditions holds all the cards" (127). But how do we know which tradition holds the right card? Such a claim regresses to Sparks's own circular judgment: "I believe tradition X holds the right card because I believe tradition X holds the right card."

Furthermore, we could just as well redefine the family of traditions as consisting of all Abrahamic religions, and then we might also include Islam in our "family" and view Muhammad as the final arbiter of previous biblical interpretation. Or we could include Mormons with their expanded canon in our "family" of traditions.

Yet, Sparks has already explicitly declared at various points that his beliefs are dogmatic. For example, note how he includes the belief that Jesus God is Christ incarnate as one of the "matters of dogmatic theology that I will treat as finally settled" (3). But if no one tradition holds all the cards, then how did he decide that this dogma should be settled? If anyone else can be just as dogmatic about Muhammad being the last prophet, then why choose Sparks's dogmatic beliefs over those of Islamic theologians?

The idea that the Bible bears ethical problems because it is part of a fallen world will not help redeem the Bible from its moral flaws. The whole idea of a fallen world may itself be a flawed idea generated by an author who is as wrong about the world being fallen as Sparks contends the author of Deuteronomy was wrong to believe "that God told his people to slaughter their enemies" (105).

Given these intractable problems, Sparks's book can be seen as another attempt to preserve the value of the Bible in the modern world by whitewashing its ethical problems. It is an instance of what, in *The End of Biblical Studies* (2007), I termed "bibliolatry" among modern biblical scholars. Bibliolatry entails the belief that the Bible is a superior text to all others even if it has ethical, logical, and historical problems.

Such bibliolatry is apparent when Sparks discusses Deut 22:28–29, which decrees that an unengaged rape victim must marry her rapist. Sparks remarks that "we are all understandably repulsed by what looks like very sick and twisted logic" (39–40). Yet Sparks defends the Bible by saying that "the law actually served a role in defending women's rights" (40). He argues that, "[b]ecause ancient Israelites greatly valued virginity,

rape victims tended to remain unmarried and, hence, to become economically vulnerable in a patriarchal world. Given this eventuality, rapists were forced to marry and economically care for their victims.... So, though I freely admit that I am troubled by this law as it stands, the law is 'good' in ways that I would not have expected because my world is so profoundly different from the world of ancient Israel" (40). Sparks cites Jeffrey Tigay (*Deuteronomy* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996], 208–9) for support, but Tigay actually says something quite the opposite. Tigay notes that, "[a]ccording to the halakah in cases of both seduction and rape, the girl as well as the father has the right to refuse the marriage" (208). In fact, in Exod 22:16 the father can refuse a marriage to a man who seduces his unbetrothed daughter: "If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equivalent to the marriage present for virgins" (RSV). In light of how Sparks claims that ancient Israelites valued virginity, such a girl might also remain unmarried and be vulnerable. But someone had at least thought of the option to not marry a man if her father refused regardless of the girl's loss of virginity. So, other options for a girl in such circumstances could have been contemplated in the ancient world. Indeed, there is no reason why an ancient society could not have imposed the death penalty on the rapist, then transferred at least part of his family's property to the raped girl's household for her support.

I have argued elsewhere (*Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* [2005]) that we need to treat ethics in biblical texts just as we treat ethics in any other works of ancient literature. It is a vacuous exercise to pick and choose which atrocities were really ordained by any gods and which were not. We should have a zero-tolerance view of any text or collection of texts that at any time endorses genocide, misogyny, and other atrocities. We always judge ancient texts by modern ethical standards, and the Bible should not be treated differently.

Sparks's book does show that the ethical problems in scripture are increasingly bothering the conscience of biblical scholars who are still affiliated with religious traditions. Whereas the first couple of centuries of modern biblical scholarship focused on issues of historicity and literary analysis, this century of biblical studies may be marked by its ability or inability to address Sparks's own realization that the ethical problems in Scripture are real.