Did God Really Say?

David B. Garner, ed. | Review by: Kenneth J. Stewart


Evangelical symposia about biblical reliability have regularly appeared in the face of perceived dangers. It was certainly true in 1946 when the faculty of Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) collaborated to produce The Infallible Word. The preface to the volume alluded to concerns that the view of Scripture set out in the historic Westminster Confession of Faith had come to be undermined in recent decades. In the Carl Henry-edited symposium Revelation and the Bible (1958), one finds concern over the advance of neo-orthodox views of Scripture. Similar concerns fuelled the J. W. Montgomery-edited God’s Inerrant Word (1974); by that era there were growing evidences that major American denominations were abandoning historic allegiances to biblical trustworthiness. And in the ensuing years when Fuller Seminary’s Paul K. Jewett alleged a conflict within Paul’s teaching on gender in his Man as Male and Female (1975), there was provoked both a period of intra-evangelical “Bible Wars” and an upsurge in the evangelical defense of inerrancy. A further spate of symposia ensued—among which was the Don Carson and John Woodbridge-edited Scripture and Truth (1983) and the Harvie Conn-edited Inerrancy and Hermeneutic (1988). The volume under review belongs to this genre and shares some of the characteristics common to them all—yet with two differences.

First, each of the seven contributors to Did God Really Say? (hereafter DGRS) is a biblical or theological scholar connected to the conservative and evangelical Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Second, while some of the earlier volumes mentioned were the collective efforts of the faculty within a single seminary (such as WTS [Philadelphia]), this volume draws together the literary efforts of scholars working in three Reformed seminaries: WTS (Philadelphia), Reformed Theological Seminary, and Covenant Theological Seminary. Each of these features is praiseworthy. The symposium, DGRS, is meant to address concerns and questions faced by the PCA. (The chapters were presented as seminars in the denominational General Assembly in 2011.) Should not such a book be church-focused? Yes. And also collaborative across institutions? Yes as well. DGRS, therefore, has in its favor these important factors.
What perceived danger stimulated the production of this symposium? Examine the volume (and particularly its footnotes) and you learn that it is a range of prominent scholars (some within the broadly evangelical family) who represent the threat needing to be countered. The names John Franke, Peter Enns, Bart Ehrman, Christian Smith, Kenton Sparks, and Tom Wright are among those specified. Now we must consider how DGRS, a volume prefaced by three seminary presidents and endorsed by a plethora of evangelical leaders not confined to Presbyterianism, carries out its task. And the answer is: with mixed results.

The seven chapters of DGRS fall into three categories. First we have three chapters that can be deemed historical-theological: K. Scott Oliphint (WTS) on the Westminster Confession’s stress on the ultimate divine authorship of Scripture, Michael D. Williams (Covenant) on B. B. Warfield’s defense of inspiration, and Robert W. Yarbrough (Covenant) detailing the unfolding of the inerrancy discussion since the notable Chicago Statement on Inerrancy (1978). All of these are well done, yet it seems that only the third covers ground not already well-trod.

Do we suppose that today’s scholars who unsettle confidence in the Bible have done so because they are ignorant of what theologians affirmed in 1643 or 1886 about the Bible’s origin? I do not suppose this; I suppose the opposite—that those today who undermine confidence in the divine origin of Scripture are quite indifferent to what the church has historically held. This reality does not render historical studies of the doctrine of inspiration moot, but it does require rethinking what such studies can yield. They can certainly hearten the faithful. Yet do such reiterative studies, in highlighting historical landmarks of doctrine, allow proper scope for the necessary advance and reformulation of Christian doctrine over time? There is, from the 17th century forward, far more variety in robust, non-concessive, evangelical discussion of inspiration than these historical chapters suggest. I exempt from this caveat the chapter by Yarbrough on the Chicago Statement (1978) inasmuch as the author raises pertinent questions about the way in which inerrancy ought to be advocated in North America (where we expect it ought to be explicitly supported) and in burgeoning global Christianity (where support is often implicit).

Second, DGRS offers us topical studies that zero in on particular contested issues or questions. It was especially refreshing to digest the amply documented chapter provided by Michael Kruger (RTS) on the current ferment over questions of New Testament canon. The literature surveyed is impressive and the discussion up-to-date. And in case you hadn’t heard, the question of the process by which the NT canon coalesced is “out there” in pop culture, as well as in academia. Of a similar type is the nuanced and sympathetic appraisal by John Frame (RTS) of the writings of Tom Wright bearing on the origin and authority of the Bible. Frame shows that an alleged gulf separating Wright’s views from mainstream evangelical understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible is not nearly so wide as many suppose. Yet Frame effectively shows that Wright’s over-reliance on historical methods as the primary means by which biblical authority is to be maintained is ill-conceived. Historical investigations of the type Wright relies on so thoroughly are warranted because of our prior acceptance of the Bible’s claims to supernatural origin.

Finally, DGRS offers us what may be called two “overarching” studies by Poythress and Garner (both WTS). The former, elucidating in brief what he has explained at greater length in his In the Beginning Was the Word (2009), helpfully points out that much of today’s crisis of biblical authority is rooted in postmodern skepticism about human language as a vehicle by which we may speak of God and things unseen. Though one could have wished for greater documentation in this chapter, it still rewards the reader. Garner’s concluding chapter attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the current crisis of biblical authority. The range of literature surveyed is impressive, but given that we only read here (in footnotes) many of the “names” of those who currently unsettle the church, one is left
to wonder why—as in the case of the chapter by Frame—this volume did not focus more intensively on challenges posed by individuals such as Franke, Sparks, and Smith.

And given that a number of serious challenges have arisen recently in Old Testament studies bearing on the relation of our Old Testament books to Ancient Near Eastern literature, why does no Old Testament scholar tackle this problem? I have noted that only Wright has a chapter devoted to questions raised about his writings. But why no chapters demonstrating that reverent discussion about the meaning of inspiration has been ongoing and rewarding across the Protestant centuries?

*DGRS* definitely rewards the reader. But it also provokes questions about its design and evenness of coverage.

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