



Beale, G. K.

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

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism (hereafter *EIE*) is G. K. Beale's defense of the "traditional evangelical view of Scripture" which he sees as being challenged by a slew of authors in recent years. The book is comprised of 7 chapters (not counting introduction and conclusion), 3 appendices, a select bibliography, and author and Scripture indexes. This review will cover the first 4 chapters which are slightly edited reproductions of previously published material of an extended exchange that Beale had with Peter Enns concerning his book *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (hereafter *I&I*). The original content of the exchange can be accessed online:

- G. K. Beale, "Myth, History, and Inspiration: A Review Article of *Inspiration and Incarnation* by Peter Enns," *JETS* 49/2 (June 2006): 287-312.¹
- Peter Enns, "Response to G. K. Beale's Review Article of *Inspiration and Incarnation*," *JETS* 49/2 (June 2006): 313-26.²
- G. K. Beale, "Did Jesus and the Apostles Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Revisiting the Debate Seventeen Years Later in Light of Peter Enns' Book, *Inspiration and Incarnation*," *Themelios* 32/1 (Oct. 2006): 18-43.³
- Peter Enns, "Response to Professor Greg Beale," *Themelios* 32/3 (May 2007): 5-13.⁴

¹ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_200606/ai_n17176285

² http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_200606/ai_n17176284/pg_1

³ http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/32.1_beale.pdf

⁴ http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/32.3_enns.pdf

- G. K. Beale, "A Surrejoinder to Peter Enns," *Themelios* 32/3 (May 2007): 14-25.⁵
- G. K. Beale, "A Surrejoinder to Peter Enns' Response to G. K. Beale's *JETS* Review of his book, *Incarnation and Inspiration*," *SBTJ* 11/1 (Spring 2007): 16-37.⁶

Beale opens *EIE* with a fictitious dialogue between "Traditionalist Tom" and "Progressive Pat" in which the two characters discuss issue of genre (myth vs. history) and authorship (the number of authors for the book of Isaiah). While the dialogue is somewhat entertaining and has been created to make a certain point (i.e., that the traditional view on such issue is tenable), the reader is left knowing that Beale can make "Progressive Pat's" arguments as strong or as weak as he'd like, since "Progressive Pat" is merely representative of Beale's estimation of arguments that are contrary to his own.

Once he moves into his review of Enns' book Beale finds many a fault and points them out in painstaking detail. The 8 major points are:

1. Enns finds myth in the narratives in Genesis (creation; flood) that doesn't correspond to actual historical events.
2. Enns assumes the biblical writers were not objective in narrating history and recorded events in ways that lack correspondence to modern writers would record them.
3. Enns never details his understanding of Jesus' incarnation which is his model analogy for his understanding of Scripture.
4. Enns objects to using modern definitions of *truth* and *error* to evaluate Scripture without defining ancient understandings of *truth* and *error*.
5. Enns doesn't take his own advice to evaluate others' ideas with humility, love, and patience.
6. Enns' book is ambiguous at important junctures of his discussion.
7. Enns doesn't present and discuss viewpoints other than his own.
8. Enns caricatures evangelical scholarship by presenting fundamentalist arguments and making no distinction.

From the outset I have to say that I think Beale has seriously misread Enns; so much so that the only criticisms I can identify with in any sense are #3 in which Beale identifies serious weaknesses in Enns' presentation of the "incarnational analogy" (see pp. 39-40) and #4 where he brings up a valid point in Enns not laying out an ancient understanding of *truth* and *error* in order to support the contrast he's making with regard to modern conceptions. To some extent I can appreciate #5 although I think Beale blows this out of proportion in his given examples.

⁵ http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/32.3_Beale.pdf

⁶ <http://www.reformation21.org/miscellaneous/a-surrejoinder-to-peter-enns-response-to-g-k-beales-jets-review-article-of-his-b.php>

Beale criticizes Enns for his understanding of myth as "pre-modern, pre-scientific ways of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories" but then going on to treat the genre of myth in the Bible as essentially the same as those who see myth as made up stories that have no correspondence with actual historical events. His problem is that Enns doesn't define myth in the OT as having "essential historicity" in distinction from ANE myth, but Beale never tells us how or why this distinction should be made. He does refer to authors (although not their specific works) that make a strong case for the historicity of the biblical narratives and the mythical nature of similar ANE narratives (see p. 52), but that doesn't help the reader of *this book*. But the question for me remains, if as Enns suggests, the biblical narratives and ANE narratives have enough earmarks in common to see a correspondence between the two, then if we accept the "essential historicity" of the biblical narratives must we also accept the same of their ANE antecedents? Wouldn't this be the logical consequence of what Beale is suggesting? (see p. 43, n. 27)

Beale is also fond of finding ambiguity where there is none, perhaps demonstrating just how subjective an enterprise interpretation of any document actually is! For example, Beale charges Enns with an ambiguity for describing Paul's reference to the rock that followed Israel in 1Corinthians 10:4 as a "legend" in an article from 1996 but not referring to it as a "legend" in his book (see p. 38). I'm sorry, but how that is in any way ambiguous is beyond me. Likewise, he says that Enns' "definition of *diversity* [in *I&I*] is not clear" in that he doesn't know whether Enns meant "various but complementary viewpoints" or "irreconcilable perspectives." (41) But surely Enns' attempt to show how his example passages were fit for exactly the purposes for which they were intended tells us that the latter wasn't in Enns' mind. Nor must we accept that the two choices Beale offers are the only choices available. I understood "diversity" to simply mean "differences" and the examples support this understanding. But Beale's true authority reveals itself when he says: "It would appear that he has turned the Reformer's [*sic*] notion of the perspicuity of Scripture on its head and affirmed that there is so much diversity in the Old Testament that our view of inspiration must be reassessed." (41)

Beale's criticism that Enns doesn't address viewpoints other than his own is really a non-issue when the point of Enns' book is to present material that can be perceived as problematic to evangelical non-scholars and present them with *his* solutions to these alleged problems. He need not present all the options out there when all he wants to communicate is how *he* resolves these issues. And one wonders if Beale (and D. A. Carson whom he follows on this point) read the same *I&I* that I did when he says: "almost every sentence in Enns's book is in fact an attempt to acknowledge the viability of these [= contemporary scholarship's] objections and to undermine what he takes to be conservative (mis)conceptions of what the Bible is." (83) Enns' book did exactly the opposite! His entire purpose was to protect the Bible from charges of error by pointing out that it should be evaluated according to its own standards and conventions, not

ours! And while it might be true at some points that Enns equates fundamentalist readings with evangelical readings, Beale is surely guilty of caricatures of his own, specifically the constant charge of postmodernism which to the average reader carries overtly negative connotations. In one of Enns' responses he notes this and Beale has to clarify that this isn't how he intended it, although to this reviewer it seemed to be exactly how it was intended before reading his explanation. (see p. 80)

Aside from noting certain points of agreement and certain points at which I think Beale has missed Enns, I'd like to register a number of other complaints with regard to both the content and format of the first half of *EIE*.

To start, Beale operates with a presupposed understanding of biblical inspiration that he never makes clear to the reader. The best we get is the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy in appendix 2 and the problem there is that the CSBI doesn't tell us exactly what inspiration is or how it works. At best we're told that "what Scripture says, God says; its authority is His authority." (275) At worst we're told that "the mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us." (271) There is also the problem that Beale doesn't explain varying views of biblical inspiration (something he criticizes Enns for not doing) or explain why his (i.e., the CSBI) view is preferable. But this is insufficient grounds upon which to critique Enns' "affirmation of inspiration [as dying] the death of a thousand qualifications." (68) The CSBI understanding of inspiration is both heavily qualified and largely unclear. Enns confesses belief in inspiration and simply challenges one particular understanding of something that "remains largely a mystery." The same complaint can be registered when Beale says that according to Enns' views "the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and authority dies the death of too many qualifications." (106) Why are all the qualifications in the CSBI not "too many" while Enns' qualifications are? And why are Enns' conclusions not "viable for evangelical faith" (83)? How narrowly is Beale defining "evangelical"? It would seem that Beale's work suffers from the lack of precise definition that he'd like to see in Enns' work.

When Beale turns to evaluating Enns' section on the NT use of the OT he chides in a number of places that Enns only provides 8 examples of what he sees as a normative hermeneutical practice that the NT writers adopted from their existing Jewish context (see pp. 89, 91, 92, 97, 115). He consistently says 8 examples is simply not enough and that if there are more examples then Enns could have listed them even if not expounding upon them. But my question is how many examples is enough? 10? 30? 60? 100? At what point would Enns have produced enough examples to make his point and why at *that point* couldn't Beale still contend that he *could have* listed more? There's also the problem with Beale suggesting that the NT writers didn't operate within the parameters of the accepted Jewish hermeneutics of their time. He suggests that we start with the NT and then look to the Jewish context in which it's set. Okay, good and well, but when we do this and see that their interpretation aligns itself with the accepted Jewish

hermeneutical practices of their day then what do we do? Enns' examples are sufficient to show that the NT authors weren't unique in their interpretive practices but that this doesn't undermine the inspiration of their writings.

I have a number of other criticisms that I could make with regard to the content of this book but this review is already long so I'll move into some of the problems I have with the format. The material of these first four chapters has been published elsewhere and only slightly edited here. It's presented out of chronological sequence which detracts from our seeing just how the debate developed between the two. Enns' responses to Beale are summarized by Beale's research assistant, which is fine, but then Beale quotes material not included in the summary which causes some confusion after reading Enns' truncated response and accepting *that* as what was said. Because the original material has been slightly edited and reprinted in this book there is a troublesome dual reference system in which we're referred to the original material and then the reprinted material in the book. It would have been better to simply choose one over the other, preferably just referring to the material in the book itself. My suggestion would have been for Beale to simply write a new book rather than reproducing previously published material. This would have made for a better flow and it would have done away with the dual referencing which can be annoying. There is also the issue of repetition. In more than a few places the same material is repeated verbatim or in a very similar manner (see e.g., pp. 53, n. 45 cf. 106, n. 47; 55 cf. 66 & 105; 61 cf. 112; 67, cf. 121).

In short, I'd summarize Beale's major criticism as being that Enns didn't write the book that Beale would have written. The irony of the first half of *EIE* is that it criticizes a book that is defending the Bible from charges of error! And it's on this point that Beale is most unsuccessful in his presentation. Beale differs from Enns, sure, but what does that mean? That only means that evangelicals aren't monolithic. That only means that there are multiple ways to understand doctrines like inerrancy and inspiration even if Beale and those of his theological ilk would like to think otherwise. I'd recommend that those interested in the exchange between Beale and Enns just read the original material online rather than purchasing this book.