

Jonathan Edwards and the Bible, by Robert E. Brown

reviewed by [Amy Plantinga Pauw](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

Robert Brown's splendid book may disillusion theological admirers of Jonathan Edwards. Those who prize Edwards's exultant expressions of the beauty of God's holiness may well find Brown's portrait of him as a polemicist preoccupied with the factual reliability of the scriptures unpalatable. Brown, a visiting professor of American religion at Franklin and Marshall College, makes a persuasive, well-documented case for the increasing impact that critical historical thought had on Edwards's understanding of scripture. By the end of his life, Brown argues, Edwards was convinced that establishing the religious authenticity of biblical narratives required more than typological interpretations: "These stories had to be explained historically as well, and justified according to critical notions of authentic history."

In Edwards's day there was significant agreement across the theological spectrum, from radical biblical critics to conservative defenders of the faith, about what constituted authentic history. They differed in their conclusions about scripture, not their historical criteria. Brown's Edwards is always on the defensive, employing historical-critical arguments to wage desperate rearguard actions for the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and other traditional positions.

Jonathan Edwards and the Bible, the 1999 winner of the Brewer Prize in American church history, provides fresh support for emerging themes in recent scholarship on Edwards, such as the importance of deist interlocutors for his later theological directions, his theological convergences with moderate Anglican apologists, and the significance of his unpublished writings for a full estimation of his thought. Brown's book also recasts our perceptions of the impact of biblical criticism in North America. Whereas previously this impact had been seen as a largely post-Revolution phenomenon, Brown demonstrates the "deep penetration of critical thought into the colonial consciousness."

While Brown decisively refutes Perry Miller's and Peter Gay's portrait of Edwards as an isolated and anachronistic historical thinker, he may overstate his case. His focus on Edwards's engagement with biblical criticism tends to overshadow what Brown himself refers to as Edwards's "native inclinations toward theological interpretation." The broad sweep of Edwards's writings shows us other faces besides that of the theological polemicist: Edwards the concerned pastor, the religious psychologist, the believer enthralled with God's beauty. It is particularly the last of these that seems blurred in Brown's analysis; the Edwards he portrays is more preoccupied with arguments for the excellence of the scriptures than with musings on the excellence of God. Given the dismally short shelf life of most apologetic arguments, Edwards's continuing appeal and significance have to be explained in wider terms.

Not all corners of the American church have abandoned apologetic arguments like Edwards's. Yet even for contemporary pastors and theologians who have, the issue that Brown's book raises is very much present: how to bring together critical approaches to scripture with forms of interpretation that provide theological guidance for Christian life. Brown shows that this has been a problem in American pulpits for a lot longer than we think. But he also brings home, albeit indirectly, the constructive helplessness of biblical criticism.

Historical-critical approaches may rule out certain readings and be used to commend others. But they do not convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls us to repentance and praise; they don't point us forward in the life of discipleship. Brown's book forcefully poses the question of where faith's certainty lies. And in that, theological admirers of Edwards can take heart.