

## **Book Review**

**By Stephen A. Smithon**

Written in a historical-fiction approach, the book relies on Edwards's interpretation of Old Testament Bible stories, his own conjecture, and his belief in the one-to-one application of these stories to contemporary believers.

Before I examine some of the inaccuracies in this book, let me state my motives.

Motive 1: As a follower of Jesus who holds firmly to the inspiration of scripture--and as a graduate of a conservative seminary, as was Edwards--I value adherence to the Word of God. A book may move me to no end, but if the words strung so beautifully together are in fact untrue, then I trust my weight to a fractured chain.

Motive 2: As a survivor of spiritual abuse in a Bible-cult for 25 years, I have a heightened awareness of issues related to spiritual authority and submission. Therefore, when I read a book on this topic my ears perk up and I have a vested interest that the author accurately portrays the salient issues. I personally know people who read books like this as a source of wisdom and insight. I want to make sure these good folk receive true balm, not snake-oil or vinegar.

Exegetical Fallacies in A Tale of Three Kings:

Unfortunately, I believe that Edwards's book commits several major flaws in logic and in hermeneutics (that is, the interpretation of God's Word). This distorts the truth of scripture in aid of his thesis and makes the book's premise and its conclusions untrue. I will include one interpretational matter and four logical errors, with the relevant category in parentheses after each point. For a better understanding of these categories, refer to Exegetical Fallacies by D. A. Carson.

1.) Mistaking description for prescription (Hermeneutics). Edwards mistakenly uses Old Testament descriptive passages as a prescription for Christians. What does this mean? It means that Edwards has interpreted narrative portions of scripture to draw out principles which the original authors may never have intended. He treats these stories as if they were doctrinal epistles similar to the book of Ephesians or 2 Timothy. Thus he takes David's behavior during the rebellion of Absalom as prescriptive for every believer. But the Bible never says that David handled every matter in a godly way which Christians today should emulate. In fact, David made many mistakes in parenting and kingship which a discerning reader can identify. Complicating this is that Edwards freely switches between loose paraphrases of scripture and his own made-up conjecture. He implies that Christians must adhere to his fanciful interpretation and act accordingly. Thus the non-discriminating reader may easily become confused as to what is scripture and what is Edwards's fiction.

2.) Failure to Recognize Distinctions (Logic). By saying that Christian leaders are like

anointed kings, Edwards fails to distinguish critical differences between Israelite kings in a theocracy and Christian leaders today. Most Christians understand that there is a categorical difference between the kings of Israel 3,000 years ago and the local church pastor today. Edwards does not. A question: Can your local church pastor raise an army? Collect taxes? Build a temple? Put congregants to death? No. Then why does Edwards believe that a king and a pastor should be viewed as identical with each other? It doesn't follow.

Indeed, nowhere in the New Testament are church leaders described as "anointed" leaders, much less kings with divine right to rule. Instead, Christian leaders are selected via a strict qualification process with carefully prescribed prerequisites (cf. I Timothy 3; Titus 1; 1 Peter 5). And leaders who abuse their authority may be called to account via a carefully regulated church discipline process (cf. Matthew 18; I Corinthians 5; 1 Timothy 5:19--this last verse is often cited by abusive leaders who claim that church folk cannot question them. But the verse explicitly says that church members may entertain an accusation against an elder if there are at least two witnesses.)

3.) False Distinctions: An Improper Appeal to the Law of the Excluded Middle (Logic). By setting forth either-or options of conduct, Edwards has committed what logicians call a false distinction. That is, Edwards creates a scenario (King Saul throwing spears at David) and then gives only two options to respond: to throw the spears back (which makes you a bad person), or to do nothing (which makes you a good person). But aren't there other options? Couldn't a believer put up a shield, call the king out on his mad behavior, and call other believers to assist in restraining the king's madness or removing the king from power?

4.) Appeal to selective evidence (Logic). Because Edwards has a thesis to prove, he refers to scripture in a manner which supports his opinion. For example, when he says that David did nothing when Absalom rebelled against him (p.72), Edwards overlooks the rest of the story which shows that David was highly strategic in his response and aggressively assertive with his army when it came time to fight. Ignoring biblical context and citing only favorable scriptures is called proof-texting.

5.) Improperly handled syllogisms (Logic). This just means that an argument is flawed because its pieces don't necessarily follow. For example, Edwards says that if David had resisted Saul, that would equal rebellion (A) which would have been bad (B). Therefore, resistance to any authority figure (C) is also bad (B). In other words, A=B=C. But this doesn't follow. A Christian is called to stand up for what is right and to call into question unqualified leaders or false teachers who are abusing God's people, just as Jesus opposed the Pharisees (cf. Matthew 21; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 12-15, 20; 12:19-21; Gal. 1:6-10; 2:11-14; 3:1-5; 4:8-12, 15-20; 5:4, 7-26; 6:1; Col. 2:8-23; 2 Tim. 3:1-9, 13).

Potential Harm of the Book:

Because Edwards's major premises are flawed, his conclusions also represent flawed and simplistic solutions to spiritual abuse.

While his stated goal is to prevent division in the church and to encourage people to submit to spiritual authority, in fact Edwards reinforces unhealthy models of spiritual authority. Chief amongst these is the fallacy that church leaders are unimpeachable; that people who disagree with a spiritual leader should remain silent (the "Don't Talk" rule of many cults, cf. p.69); that those who are hit by a leader's "spears" are to blame (blame-shifting, cf. p.19); that critically-minded people are rebels like Korah (p.91) [My own pastor unforgettably cited this passage when deacons called him to account for his spiritually abusive behavior]; and that spiritually abused people should prefer getting "stabbed to death" by an abusive leader rather than to resist an abusive spiritual authority (p.23).

For these reasons, I give *A Tale of Three Kings* a single star and wish it a quick death or a corrective sequel.