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A Review of *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*

Barton, John. *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*. Revised and Enlarged. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

John Barton is the Oriel and Laing Professor of Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oriel College at Oxford University. His particular areas of research interest are Old Testament Prophets, Biblical Ethics, Canon, Biblical Interpretation and Old Testament Theology. In addition to his position at Oxford, he is a Fellow of the British Academy and a foreign member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. He holds an honorary doctorate in theology from the University of Bonn. Since 1973, Barton has been an ordained priest in the Church of England, serving in multiple clergy positions within both the church and the university. From 2004 to 2014, Barton served as the joint editor of the *Journal of Theological Studies*. He has written broadly and often a diverse range of subjects within the field of biblical studies.

Purpose and Structure

On page 1, Barton clearly states a “dual purpose” for his book. It is “to introduce students of the Old Testament to certain critical methods and certain debated questions about those methods, and to argue for certain convictions about the place of method in general in the study of the Old Testament” (1). While claiming for itself to be an “introductory book,” Barton does not want his readers to mistaken it for an “introduction to the Old Testament” (1). Instead, its aim is “to fill several gaps in the literature about biblical study, not just to provide my own version of what is already available” (1). According to Barton, this aim flows out of his convictions that there are “enough books that tell students how the now traditional methods of source (or literary) criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism work, when they are applied to the Old Testament” (1). Instead, Barton believes there is a need for a book that “raises, at a level accessible to students whose knowledge of the text is not yet exhaustive, questions about the purpose of practicing these methods” (1). The second conviction that drives Barton’s aim is the perceived need for a book that covers the development of “text-immanent” exegetical methods that has grown significantly “over the last thirty years” (2). A third conviction is the need to “show that these methods are not just random collections of techniques but hang together, make up a family, and cover the range of possible questions people ask about text” (3).

These convictions, Barton states, form the “themes of the book,” which leads him to reveal his thesis. He states, “The primary thesis is that much harm has been done in biblical studies by insisting that there is, somewhere, a ‘correct’ method which, if only we could find it, would unlock the mysteries of the text” (5). He continues, saying, “I believe that the quest for a correct method is, not just in practice but inherently, incapable of succeeding. The pursuit of method assimilates reading a text to the procedures of technology: it tries to process the text, rather than to read it” (5). He concludes, “Reading the Old Testament, with whatever aim in view, belongs to the humanities and cannot operate with an idea of watertight, correct method” (5) “In short,” Barton writes, “my thesis is that criticism is a descriptive pursuit, analyzing, explaining

and codifying the questions that perceptive readers put to the text; not a prescriptive discipline laying down rules about how the text ought to be read” (6).

Summary

The book contains fourteen chapters not including the introduction or conclusion. In the first chapter, entitled “Literary Competence and Genre-Recognition,” Barton briefly addresses the place of understanding “literary criticism” in relationship to other critical methods before discussing the notion of “literary competency,” which he describes as preparing students “to be competent in reading biblical material.” Barton describes literary competence as “being in command of the conventions that govern the use” of the biblical material. Naturally, this leads to a discussion of genre; in which those governing conventions are better understood. The chapter concludes with an example of the circularity that one encounters when reading a passage of the Old Testament. Barton writes, “We cannot say, First you must establish the ‘meaning’ of the passage, and then you can ask about the genre to which it belongs, for the meaning depends on the genre. Yet, on the other hand, there is no way of establishing the genre to which the text belongs except by reading it, and that must involve decisions about meaning” (18). According to Barton, this reality demonstrates that “our initial judgment about genre and our initial attempt at exegesis play back and forth on each other and are mutually corrective” (18).

In chapters two through four, Barton covers literary criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. Much of the material found in these chapters helpfully summarizes the presuppositions and origins of these methods, with due attention given to criticisms that have been raised against them by other forms of critical scholars and those pesky, conservative “fundamentalist” for which Barton obviously has very little use. Barton weighs the benefit of these methods for biblical study while also setting expectations for the students by showing their inherent limitations. For example, on page 43, speaking of form criticism, Barton writes, “But if form criticism achieves nothing else, at least it helps us to see the limits of our knowledge and to define more closely the sorts of things we would need to know if we were to make any further progress.” (43). The book is literally filled with qualifying statements like this to help the student understand the place of each method within the growing repertoire that Barton wants his readers to build for biblical studies. Instead of taking one method and making it the end-all-be-all tool for study, Barton wants the student to appreciate each form of biblical criticism without investing too much hope in them separately.

In chapter five, Barton attempts to take the methods that he has addressed so far in the book and provide an example of how they are to be used in the study of the Old Testament. The book he chooses to study is Ecclesiastes. Barton writes, “The purpose of this chapter is by no means to present an original, or even a personal, interpretation of the book, but simply to see what has been or might be said about it if the methods so far discussed are applied” (62).

In chapters six through nine, Barton’s focus is on “canon” and “structural” criticism. These two areas receive a fair amount of engagement throughout the rest of the book. This is most likely because, as was stated in the introduction, these methods are relatively new and have received much less attention in terms of criticism than previous methods of study. One of the key figures that Barton focuses on is Brevard Childs, who believes that “the historical-critical

methods are unsatisfactory theologically” (79). Childs’ “canonical method begins with the datum that the Old Testament as we now have it is part of Scripture, and seeks to interpret it with that always in mind” (80). After detailing canon criticism, Barton devotes an entire chapter to addressing its major premise of interpretation within a canonical context, and then offers several questions of critique.

In chapters ten through twelve, Barton considers what has been termed the “New Criticism.” As such, the “New Criticism” did not originate within the field of biblical studies, but eventually, as a theory of literature, began to influence the work of biblical scholars. “New Criticism” has three “major theses.” They are “1) That a literary text is an artifact, 2) That ‘intentionalism’ is a fallacy, and 3) That the meaning of a text is a function of its place in a literary canon” (144) Barton spends the rest of chapter ten explaining these theses and comparing them to the Childs’ canon criticism and the historical-critical method. Chapter eleven offers a sustained critique of the three major theses, while chapter twelve shows how structuralism as a system is susceptible to the same critiques, even though it makes principled contributions to the field of biblical studies by revealing how authors construct meaning through the use of literary convention.

Chapters thirteen and fourteen move the reader from a consideration of structuralism to a study of rhetorical criticism, poetics, reader-response criticism, and post-structural literature concepts like deconstructionism and postmodernism. All of these elements, like in the previous chapters, are described and then critiqued in such a way as to preserve their benefit without making them “the method” of interpretation. Barton concludes the book by providing (“tracing”) a map of methods that will logically allow the student to embrace an eclectic approach to interpretation using the methods presented in the book. A helpful diagram with explanations is provided on page 240 of the book. Barton concludes by saying, “If we would abandon this fruitless quest (of finding one valid way of understanding the text), we might turn again to each of the methods which litter the path of biblical criticism, and see in each the key to certain ways in which we do in fact read the Bible” (246).

Critique

In terms of structure and clarity of content, Barton’s book is wonderful. He truly accomplishes his goal of “introducing students of the Old Testament to certain critical methods and certain debated questions about those methods, while arguing for certain convictions about the place of method in general in the study of the Old Testament.” Furthermore, the reader concludes the book feel what Barton desired for them: That much harm has been done in biblical studies by insisting that there is, somewhere, a ‘correct’ method which, if only we could find it, would unlock the mysteries of the text. It is hard not to agree with Barton after reading this book. It seems completely unreasonable to not adopt an eclectic approach to methods if one wants to do thorough, critical study of the Old Testament. Barton also does a great job tracing the “logical connections” and drawing “a map of biblical criticism on which the methods can all be located.”

One of the strengths of Barton’s book is his engagement of “text-immanent” exegesis. Some have criticized Barton for what they believed to be a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of Childs work. However, regardless of how one feels about Barton’s

assessment of structural exegesis and the canonical method, his attempt to bring them down to an understandable level for the student is in keeping with the goals of the book and ultimately helpful. Barton's criticism of canonical criticism seems spot on when he points out how Childs wants to "have it both ways" by wanting to do theology within the constraints of a canon formed by an ecclesiastical institution without also being bound by its theological conclusions. This criticism has profound implications not only for canon critics, but also protestant groups that would argue for the canonicity of certain books on the basis of early church acceptance while rejecting the theological positions and practices of that same early church.

Barton's book is immensely readable and enjoyable in many parts, barring, of course, his attempt to explain chiasms, which was very difficult to follow. One comment in particular that was enjoyable comes from his discussion of the similarities between canon critics and fundamentalists. Barton writes, "They represent a response to question that only occur within a context where the historical-critical method has come to be taken for granted as part of the landscape. Neither could survive the demise of historical criticism, for they draw all their strength from being able to wage war on it. It is the enemy they love to hate" (99).

In terms of a critique, though, Barton does seem to be blind to his own presuppositions when he critiques those of others. To be fair, Barton appears to be an equal opportunity offender of other scholars. There is rarely a time when he not able to find something to critique about others' positions. However, when Barton states that "the only criticism of these methods is likely to be found in fundamentalist work," and that he "thought it might be useful to approach the accepted methods in a critical frame of mind but without any doctrinaire commitment" (1-2), it sounds like he thinks himself not be impacted by his own commitments. However admirable Barton's attempt may be, to suggest that a "critical frame of mind" frees people from "any doctrinaire commitment," it is simply false. He is blind to his own set of presuppositions that he uses to accuse the fundamentalist. Barton would have been better off arguing for why his commitments were superior to those of others, instead of acting like he did not possess any or that those he possessed did not impact his assessments.

Ultimately, Barton's blindness to his own presuppositions leads to a clear but weak conclusion. It is clear what Barton is calling his reader to: an eclectic approach to methods of biblical study. It is weak in that Barton fails to see how his suggestion is, in and of itself, an attempt to postulate a singular method of biblical study that is simply informed by other methods. This is, of course, not to say that Barton is wrong, but rather to say that he cannot avoid the matter of believing his eclectic position is superior and therefore better than other more narrow positions. Otherwise, there would have been no reason to write the book in the first place.