

JOHN BARTON, *A History of the Bible: The Book and its Faiths* (London: Allen Lane, 2019). Pp. xvii + 613. Paperback. AU\$29.99.

In the introduction to this monumental volume, John Barton describes his three-fold aim as being: (1) to tell “the story of the Bible from its remote beginnings in folklore and myth to its reception and interpretation in the present day”; (2) “to show that the Bible is an important source of religious insight, provided it is read in its original context and against the conditions prevailing when it was written”; and (3) “to distil the current state of biblical scholarship” (1–2). *A History of the Bible* is, thus, a survey of the state of the art of modern biblical scholarship and something of a manifesto for a critical approach to biblical interpretation that balances historically informed exegesis with sensitivity to the processes of canonical formation and reception across more than two thousand years.

In point of fact, Barton’s *History of the Bible* is a history of the *Christian* Bible. This is immediately clear from the contents page, which lists the first two sections as the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament,” respectively. In effect, this framing results in a parting of the ways from at least the early medieval period, at which point the primary focus pivots to Christian receptions of the Bible. That does not mean the book is myopic or teleologically orientated toward the culmination of the Christian Bible(s) in its contemporary manifestation(s). Barton is careful to communicate the dynamic tensions that arise from the fact that many of the texts that form “the Bible” are shared by Jewish and Christian communities, and in multiple instances he demonstrates the value of using approaches to the scriptures in the Jewish or Christian traditions as mutually informing counterpoints to shed light on practices and assumptions in the other tradition. Nor does Barton reduce Jewish and Christian approaches to their scriptures to an artificial and simplistic binarism. Rather, when outlining the aims of the history, he writes: “Alongside these descriptive tasks, the book also makes an argument: that the Bible does not ‘map’ directly onto religious faith and practice, whether Jewish or Christian” (2). The fact that the history is framed with reference to Christianity is noteworthy, nonetheless, as it influences the direction of Barton’s gaze, especially as the focus moves toward the modern period in the later part of the book. This is neither surprising, nor unwarranted—Barton is, after all, ordained as an Anglican priest. Nevertheless, one is left with the sense that the readership of this book will predominantly be found among Christian communities. It should also be remembered that the history is primarily written for a non-specialist audience, as is fitting for a book published by Allen Lane (an imprint of Penguin Books).

That Barton is keenly aware of his audience is illustrated by his repeated prompting for readers to grapple with the implications of contemporary biblical scholarship. However, Barton does not offer his readers a false sense of certainty about questions that are, at present, unanswerable. Rather, he guides them

through the most prominent debates, leaving them with a sense that they grasp both the problem and what is at stake. When concluding his discussion of the synoptic question in Chapter 8, for example, Barton remarks: “If all this gives the impression that we know less for certain about the Synoptic Gospels than we should like, that is no more than the truth. Despite centuries of research, they remain an enigma, and those who revere them should be aware of how much we do not know about their composition.” The gentleness of such insistence is evident, but it will doubtless seem dogmatic to some who are not inclined toward historical critical approaches.

For those who already have a grounding in modern biblical criticism, reading *A History of the Bible* feels like sitting at the feet of a trusted teacher. John Barton is, of course, well known as the author of multiple books which are designed (and used) to introduce students to the contours of biblical criticism. What sets *A History of the Bible* apart is its scope. Seldom does an author attempt to cover so much ground in a single volume. The advantage of this approach is the ability to trace patterns along a *longue durée*, but it also means there is a flux between compression and dilation as the focus shifts across topics and periods.

Following a brief introduction, which contextualises the Bible in terms of its relevance for modern (primarily Western) audiences, the book is divided into four parts. Parts 1 and 2 survey the literature of “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” respectively. Part 1 is divided into five chapters: “Ancient Israel, History and Language”; “Hebrew Narrative”; “Law and Wisdom”; “Prophecy”; and “Poems and Psalms.” Part 2 contains three chapters: “Christian beginnings”; “Letters”; and “Gospels.” In Part 3 the focus turns to processes of canonisation with four chapters: “From Books to Scripture”; “Christians and Their Books”; “Official and Unofficial Texts”; and “Biblical Manuscripts.” In Part 4 the principal focus shifts from texts to their interpretation, with chapters on: “The Theme of the Bible”; “Rabbis and Church Fathers”; “The Middle Ages”; “The Reformation and Its Readings”; “Since the Enlightenment”; and “Translating the Bible.” A concluding chapter is dedicated to “The Bible and Faith.”

On the whole, *A History of the Bible* charts a middle course which is generally representative of modern (European and North American) biblical studies, albeit with a subtle foregrounding of scholarship from the United Kingdom, especially in Part 2. Few would seriously question the accentuation points Barton has chosen to emphasise, and it would be somewhat churlish to list apparent blind-spots in what is already a vast project. There are, however, some notable omissions, not least of which is the turn to postcolonial and contextual hermeneutics in the 20th century and the legacy of the Bible’s instrumentalization in—and against—non-European societies during the age of empire and beyond.

Although many of the topics covered in *A History of The Bible* will be more-or-less familiar to readers of ABR, the book contains much food for thought and its broad scope offers a refreshing opportunity to look beyond the usual confines

of our subdisciplines. Educators will also find in its pages a rich array of examples and useful readings to accompany course materials.

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