Book Reviews


The twofold scope of the book—as reflected in how the book originated, as the Croall Lectures at the University of Edinburgh and an earlier work entitled “What Makes Biblical Criticism Critical?”—can be broadly sketched out as having serious reservations with the nomenclature “historical criticism” and the old prescriptive philosophical-theological adage: “What has Jerusalem (the church) to do with Athens (scholarship)?” The book is comprised of seven chapters: (1) Introduction (2) Difficulties in the Text (3) The “Historical-Critical Method” (4) The Plain Sense (5) The Origins of Biblical Criticism (6) Biblical Criticism and Religious Belief (7) Conclusion.

Barton’s “Ten Thesis” sets the stage for biblical criticism. Biblical criticism (i) is a literary enterprise (ii) is only tangentially or accidentally concerned with history (iii) is a product of the Enlightenment but also grounded in the Renaissance and the Reformation (iv) not reductive (v) is not an application of “scientific” methods (vi) “requires the reader not to foreclose the question of the truth of a text before reading it… but to attend to its semantic possibilities before asking whether what it asserts is or is not true” (p. 6) (vii) is not the only way and truth to reading the Bible nor is it inimical to application, liturgical or devotional purposes (viii) is liberal but not associated with liberal theology (ix) strives to be objective (x) is concerned with the plain sense of the text (emphasis added).

The conclusion reinforces these points as Barton goes to length to point out that biblical criticism has always been a literary enterprise with the “historical” (critical) arriving only accidentally or as a by product of a reconstructed history to better understand the literature. Barton additionally stresses, in a defensive manner, that biblical criticism has never been hostile to the “application” of the text.

In “Difficulties in the Text,” Barton makes the point that the classical problems of inconsistencies in the Pentateuch and the harmonizing attempts of the Gospels are not the real markers that define something as “critical.” It is precisely how one addresses those difficulties; not through historicity, but through genre recognition (p. 28).

Pressing on with the short-comings of the “Historical-Critical Method,” there is an interesting discourse on what actually constitutes a method. Barton says that past and current scholars in the tradition of Bultmann continue to be invested with the history of Israel, the historical Jesus, or the early church. But the words of Walter Wink nicely capture the *Mitte* of the chapter: “historical critical method is ‘ensnared in an objectivist ideology’ that can never do more than ‘simply refer the data of the text away from an encounter with experience and back to its own uncontrolled premises.’ By detaching the
text from the stream of my existence, biblical criticism has hurled it back into the abyss of an objectified past. Such a past is an infinite regress. No amount of devoted study can bring it back” (p. 48). Barton fully understands the burdens and current concerns raised by postcolonialists like R.S. Sugirtharajah and feminist biblical scholars in the company of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. But ultimately for Barton, “Biblical criticism is not a matter of processing the text, but of understanding it” (p. 57).

Barton prefers the term “Plain Sense” over against the “original sense.” There is a clear demarcation between what the text “meant” (critic’s task) without hostility to what it “means” (theologian, preacher, general reader). He reckons with the fact that there are responsible and irresponsible critics, dealing with past and contemporary works of Eichrodt, von Rad, de Wette, James Barr, Krister Stendhal, Brevard Childs, Katherine Greene-McCreight among others. Barton’s point is “The exegete’s task is to help the reader to understand the text, not to bring out and restate the meaning in such a way that the text is evacuated of its content and replaced with the exegete’s interpretation” (p. 112). Barton is well versed in the literal versus the allegorical readings—the Anti-ochaeans and the Alexandrians, the Reformation and Catholic readings, and now, biblical (or historical) critics vs. postmodernists. Barton is quick to distance himself from biblical literalism—picking up on Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal—arguing that certain texts are not to be taken literally. “Thus the plain sense can well contain within itself possibilities for finding layers of meaning well beyond the literal, and biblical critics need no more be under a self-denying ordinance that would rule this out than are their colleagues in the study of other branches of literature” (p. 116).

In analyzing the defining marks of “The Origins of Biblical Criticism,” Barton tackles the point of entry, the Enlightenment. He makes the refreshing point that where the Bible that once solely belonged in the hands of the church and the believer was loosened from its strange-hold. But interestingly, in contemporary biblical studies, the reverse situation has now transpired. The discipline has become so secular that the church has to fight to have its own voice heard only to have it dismissed by critical scholars. Attempting to not only bridge but moreover advocate for an alternative approach, Barton offers the following: First, biblical criticism is to be concerned with semantics, a literary and philological task. Secondly, correctly identifying the genre of the text will then generate the appropriate questions concerning the (con)text. Thirdly, the inquiry and seeking of the “truth” is tabled. I will have more to say about this below, but the assertion that the application of rationality was the result of the Enlightenment is put to the challenge. Barton sees earlier traditions, already prevalent in earlier forms of Judaism and early Christianity. Barton then steers us to the Renaissance and the Reformation.

In the chapter entitled “Biblical Criticism and Religious Belief,” the imbalance of the current state of biblical studies is thoroughly reviewed—past and current outcries that historical criticism has done much damage and that now, there is a real need to reclaim biblical studies from a confessional point of view (e.g., Christopher Rowland, Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson). Barton says “It is crucial for supporters of traditional biblical criticism to be aware, not only of the intellectual arguments here, but also of the existential and emotional force of what is felt by those who perceive biblical criticism as marginalizing them because it has come to be seen as the province of experts detached from the church’s