McAFEE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

A REVIEW OF JOHN BARTON'S *READING THE OLD TESTAMENT*

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(Note: In Book Reviews, it is accepted format to cite references to the book being reviewed parenthetically.)

Introduction

John Barton, lecturer in Old Testament Theology at Oxford University, has contributed to the academic world an exceptionally well-written and insightful look at biblical criticism with *Reading the Old Testament*. Barton states in the Foreword that the book began as a series of lectures delivered in 1979 in the Oxford Theology Faculty and grew out of his interest in the relation of biblical studies to literary criticism. He contends that a great deal of harm has been done in biblical studies by those who insist that there is, somewhere, "a 'correct' method which, if only it could be found, would unlock the mysteries of the text" (p. 5).

In answer to the question, "How *ought* the Old Testament be studied?" Barton guides the reader, through twelve chapters, to the conclusion that there is no "right way" to read the Old Testament. Rather, the various methods of criticism should be used in conjunction with one another to answer the many kinds of questions we ask about biblical texts.

How does Barton achieve his aim? First, he establishes that the goal of *any* literary criticism is to make the reader "competent" at reading the text. "Literary competence," a term borrowed and adapted from structuralism, is the central theme of the book and the reader must be conversant with it in order to follow Barton's arguments concerning how we should read the text of the Old Testament. "Competence" is not the same as "being good" at something. If we say that someone is "good at" German or English, we generally believe that the person is eloquent in speech or is able to read complex materials with ease. Linguistic competence, however, is not a matter of whether someone is good or bad at language, but whether one can apply the

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appropriate rules of grammar and syntax to establish meaningful units in one's own language. The argument proceeds, then, that if one can recognize the meaning of an individual sentence, then one ought to be able to recognize the meaning of groups of sentences, even whole literary works, and arrive at "textual" or "literary competence." Barton maintains that the two are related only by analogy and uses a clever illustration to make his point: a clerihew[1] about the English architect Christopher Wren. The individual lines have clear linguistic meaning. There is no ambiguity in "Sir Christopher Wren saying, 'I am going to dine with some men.'" We, however, must see the rest of the text, "If anyone calls, Say I'm designing St. Paul's," in order to resolve any literary uncertainty. Once we recognize it as comical verse, rather than as historical or biographical insight, we can react to it appropriately. Thus "literary competence" is directly linked to the ability to recognize the genre of a given text.

Barton states that the various methods of biblical criticism differ on the very question of what it means to be competent at reading the Old Testament. Different ends are sought and achieved, but each *does* attempt to produce competence. He sees in every critical method some "circularity in argument" (p. 5). He writes, "My suggestion is that we can begin to understand all the methods Old Testament scholarship has used, and to see how they are related to each other, if we ask in each case what their proponents are reading the Old Testament and its component books *as*" (p. 199). Thus, Barton uses literary competence or genre recognition as the common standard or ruler against which to evaluate each method of literary criticism.

The evaluation process consists of three steps. First, Barton surveys the methods currently used in the study of the Old Testament "in such a way that it becomes clear how they

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[1] A clerihew is a literary genre defined by Webster's Dictionary as a humorous, quasi-

are inter-related and what goals they are meant to achieve" (p. 198). Second, he sets Old Testament criticism against the wider background of literary criticism. And third, he argues a case against the pursuit of "correct" methods in biblical criticism. I will survey each step separately.

<div align="center">Current Methods in Old Testament Criticism</div>

Barton states on page one that the book is meant to introduce students to "certain critical methods and certain debated questions about those methods," but he makes it very clear that it is not an "Introduction to the Old Testament." He presupposes a working knowledge of the traditional Old Testament critical methods — source, form, and redaction — and limits his survey of them to brief descriptions in chapters one through four, thereby allowing ample room for evaluation. The newer "text-centered" methods, canon criticism and biblical structuralism, are described in detail as well as evaluated in chapters six through nine.

Barton begins with source criticism. Scholars looked at texts such as the Pentateuch, found it impossible to make sense of them as single works, and concluded that they must be amalgamations of pre-exiting sources of material. Barton argues that in order for scholars to determine that they were dealing with fragments, they had to ask questions about genre, about what these texts should be read *as*. The "questions of source analysis and questions of genre-recognition were from the beginning bound up together" (p. 25). I agree with Barton that source critics may not always have properly evaluated their criteria for determining the literary limits of "sources." The early Jewish community certainly had no difficulty in accepting the complex text of the Pentateuch as a single unit, the Torah. Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*,

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biographical poem with four lines of varying length.

stresses that the Pentateuch was a purposeful "documentary montage that must be perceived as a unity" rather than as the composition of redactors "in the grip of a kind of manic tribal compulsion, driven again and again to include units . . . that made no connective sense, for reasons they themselves could not have explained."[2]

Form criticism embarks upon its study with the same question asked by source criticism: "How could one author possibly have written this text?" Source critics divide the text into sections that can be attributed to individual authors. Form critics attempt to identify the *Gattung* (form or genre) of each section. The conclusion they reached in the early part of the twentieth century was that many of the *Gattungen* of the Old Testament—especially in the Pentateuch— had their origins in oral settings. Biblical scholars required a major re-education. Many were "competent" in reading literary genres; few were "competent" in oral genres. Barton states that it was form criticism that moved the concept of genre "to the conscious center of interest in Old Testament studies" (p. 31).

Barton could have discussed more fully two matters related to form criticism. First, he does not make it clear whether his definition of "literary competence" encompasses oral genres. If it does not, can we ever become "competent" at reading substantial parts of the Old Testament? Someone pointed out to me, however, that oral genre is not an issue for Barton, since his concern is with the final form of the Old Testament, which is written, rather than with the *Gattungen* that lie beneath the written text. Therefore, second, we must be careful *not* to equate Barton's theory of literary competence/genre recognition with genre recognition as outlined by form criticism. He concerns himself with very different aspects of the biblical text than do form critics.

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[2] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 19-20.

Redaction criticism comes closest to what is called "literary criticism" in other literatures. Barton points out that redaction critics were the first scholars to view the Old Testament books as "works of something like conscious art" (p. 52), composed by writers with their own political, theological, and sociological outlooks. And he maintains that the results of redactional study come very close to his own definition of literary competence. "We may say that to be competent in reading literature is, precisely, to be able to find thematic and artistic unity within literary works" (p. 75).

Redaction criticism falls short, however, in helping us understand texts whose "thematic and artistic unity" is not clear. Barton cites Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch as examples of finished texts that we cannot clearly determine how to read. He asks:

> Does this mean that we are doomed forever to a competence in reading this literature which does not reach beyond the parts of which it is composed, and that we can never become competent to read a whole book, a collection like the Pentateuch, or, least of all, the Old Testament as a whole? (p. 59)

But he then goes on to answer his own question: "Once a book exists as one work, the task of criticism is to read it within conventions that will ensure it does have a coherent context" (p. 75).

Here the book shifts its focus from the methods that ask "What *did* the text mean?" (the historical critical methods) to those that ask "What *does* the text mean?" (the newer critical methods). Canon criticism, developed by Brevard S. Childs, begins its study of the Old Testament texts with the datum that they are part of scripture and must be interpreted with that always in mind. The inconsistencies of the Pentateuch and the "genrelessness" of Deuteronomy are not concerns. When the synagogue and the church canonized those texts as part of Scripture, they became part of a work that must, by definition, "hang consistently together" (p. 86). The

genre of the Old Testament is "canonical religious literature" and we become competent at reading it when we recognize it as such.

Barton criticizes Childs' approach in two areas. Childs emphasizes that we must read and interpret a text in the context of the canon of which it is a part. Barton asks, "How are we to define the limits of the Old Testament canon?" (p. 91). Will each community with a separate canon have its own 'canonical reading' of the Old Testament? I think individual canonical readings is precisely what *will* take place, but I do not see that it in any way serves to diminish the impact of canon criticism, since, as Barton points out, this method of study is primarily concerned with "theological competence" rather than with "literary competence."

Second, Barton sees an inconsistency in one of the basic premises of canon criticism. If it accepts as its basis for interpretation the canon of scripture which was established in the "pre-critical" era, should it not also be bound to accept "pre-critical" readings of the texts? And, if the answer is "yes," then could not Childs be called a kind of fundamentalist? Childs' Old Testament Library commentary on Exodus contains extensive historical-critical material as well as commentary by the "church fathers."[3] Childs tells us that together the two components provide an overall continuity to the process of interpreting the text—to achieving "literary competence." "The one . . . offers an analogy to the [other] . . . The one deals with the period before the text's complete formation, the other with its interpretation after its formation."[4] And he states in the introduction, "It does belong to the task of the scholar in the church to deal

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[3] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, The Old Testament Library, ed. by William P. Brown, Carol A. Newsom, and David L. Petersen (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974).

[4] Ibid., xv.

seriously with the Old Testament text in its original setting within the history of Israel."[5] I think

Barton has perhaps over-stated his objection to show the dangers of using one method in

isolation and to extremes.

It is unfortunate that Barton chose to use the words "bizarre" and "foreign" to describe

structuralism in the opening paragraph of chapter eight. It may influence people's reading and

acceptance of a methodology that has much to offer contemporary biblical criticism. He outlines

several points of analogy between structural criticism and canon criticism. For the latter, the

position of a text in a canon of literature is the key to its meaning. For the former, a text's

position within the agreed conventions of a cultural system provides meaning. Both are

concerned with what the text *means* rather than with what the text *meant*. And both represent a

theory of reading rather than a theory about writing. Thus, like canon critics, who achieve

literary competence when they recognize a text as "canonical religious literature," structuralists

achieve literary competence when they recognize that the genre of a text is a function of the

"sorts of significance that the words composing it are capable of bearing, given that it is this kind

of work rather than some other" (p. 114).

Barton mentions, but I think does not explore sufficiently, the factor of time in

understanding structuralism. Because meaning is determined by the agreed conventions of a

cultural system, meaning can change when the cultural system changes. Mary Gerhart, in an

article in *Semeia* titled "The Restoration of Biblical Narrative," tells us that the competent reader

must keep in mind "that there are, minimally, two time-elements in a narrative: the time of

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[5] Ibid., xiii.

events told about and the time of telling."[6]   With structuralism, I believe a third time-element

must be added — that of the time of reading. Thus I would add to the definition of literary

competence stated at the end of the last paragraph that the genre of a text is also a function of

"the significance the words can bear given that it (the text) is being read within the cultural

system of twenty-first-century America."

<p style="text-align:center">The Wider Background of Literary Criticism</p>

Barton gives the biblical scholar an overview of the history of "secular" literary criticism

and a detailed study of recent methods such as the New Criticism. He points out that biblical

methods and literary methods are not as far apart as we initially might suppose. In both, the

focus of modern scholarship is on the finished text (rather than its history), on the reader (rather

than the author), and on the literary context (or canon) of which the text is a part.

New Criticism established that the value of a literary text is found not in its subject-

matter, but in its literary character. Thus poetry exists for poetry's sake. And "the critic's task is

to read the poem, not to reduce it to the information he supposes it conveys" (p. 159). New

Criticism dealt only with material that was clearly "literary" in nature, and any text whose sole

purpose was to convey information (i.e., an instruction manual or a cookbook) was simply

outside the scope of its methods.

Hans W. Frei adopted New Critical ideas for the study of biblical texts. According to

Barton, Frei determined that "the correct way to read a narrative text is not as a source of

information, but as a *narrative* . . . the true use of a narrative is simply to read it and to take

seriously its 'narrativity'" (p. 163). Barton points out that the problem with extending the

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[6] Mary Gerhart, "The Restoration of Biblical Narrative," *Semeia* 36 (1989): 16.

theories of New Criticism to the Old Testament texts is that "we really do not know whether these are 'literature' in the narrower sense or not" (p. 167). And New Criticism does not provide any criteria for determining what qualifies as literature.

In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter addresses the issue in his opening chapter. He writes, "What role does literary art play in the shaping of biblical narrative? A crucial one, I shall argue . . ."[7] He then puts forth an interesting possibility that "the ancient Hebrew writers purposefully nurtured and developed prose narrative to take the place of the epic genre which by its content was intimately bound up with in the world of paganism."[8] I find the proposal fascinating; further inquiries into it might strengthen our "literary competence" of biblical narrative. At any rate, I think we can say that a major contribution of "secular" literary criticism to biblical scholarship is that it gives us a new respect and appreciation for the text as it stands.

An Argument against "Correct" Methods

Barton states at the end of the book's introductory material that his aim is to examine the shortcomings as well as the achievements of the various methods of modern biblical criticism. I think he sees a valid place for all of the criticisms he discusses. The shortcoming common to all of them is that individually they are able to answer the questions we ask about the biblical text only in a limited way. Every method approaches the text with its own intuitions about how it should be read and finds answers based on those intuitions. Often the answers are fresh and innovative, but scholars turn these "startlingly original insights . . . into pedestrian 'methods' which are supposed to provide a key to everything in the Old Testament" (p. 206).

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[7] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 3.

[8] Ibid., 25.

The outcome can only be disillusionment. No one method can provide all the answers. Barton has shown the value, benefit, and place of each method of criticism in the study of the Old Testament. He emphasizes that the answer to the question "How ought we to read the Old Testament?" is that there is no *right* way. Rather, we should see in each critical method "the key to certain ways in which we do in fact read the Bible" (p. 207). Barton's conclusion, I think, is that the time has come for scholarship to end its single-minded inquiries *into* the text and to begin giving a great deal more attention to the relationship *between* the text and its reader.

Some Concluding Comments

As I stated in the introduction to this paper, I found *Reading the Old Testament* insightful, challenging, and very informative. Barton's writing style is clear, the text flows smoothly from one subject to another, and the stated purpose is achieved in all respects. I appreciated the section "Using the Book" in the Introduction and Barton's words of warning about the preliminary readings. I think, however, that he *does* have high expectations of the abilities of his readers. If I were recommending this book to readers who were approaching these subject for the first time, I would suggest that they thoroughly understand chapters one through nine—the methodologies of biblical criticism—before they attempt to read the remainder of the book. Overall, Barton gives a high-level survey and a very valuable critique of literary criticism that will, I think, challenge the best of biblical scholars.

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