

# Review Essay\*

## Method and Truth

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In this magisterial *History of the Bible*, John Barton does two things. First, he tells a story. This takes most of the space and determines the structure of the book. He tells “the story of the Bible from its remote beginnings in folklore and myth to its reception and interpretation in the present day.” He “describes the Bible’s genesis, transmission and dissemination and shows how it has been read and used from antiquity to the present, both in its original languages and in translation” (1).

Second, he advances an argument. He argues that “the Bible does not ‘map’ directly onto religious faith and practice, whether Jewish or Christian” (2). The Bible and faith are not coterminous. One can usefully think of the Christian faith and the Bible as “two intersecting circles,” with “a large area of overlap” (486–87). The Bible’s contents “provide spiritual classics on which both faiths [Christianity and Judaism] can draw” and is “an important source of religious insight, provided it is read in its original context and against the conditions prevailing when it was written” (4, 2). As such, the Bible’s contents “do not constrain subsequent generations in the way that a written constitution would” (4); rather, “freedom of interpretation, yet commitment to religious faith, need to go hand in hand” (489).

Barton’s own outlook—beyond the information on the dust jacket that he has been an ordained and serving priest in the Church of England since 1973—can perhaps best be inferred from his repeated commendation of the sixteenth-century Anglican divine Richard Hooker, who is known for his thoughtful critique of those who tried to attach more religious weight to Scripture than it could reasonably bear (“attributing unto Scripture more than it can have,” 13). But there is a dash of Martin

\* John Barton, *A History of the Bible: The Story of the World’s Most Influential Book* (New York: Viking, 2019), 640 pp., \$20.00 pb, ISBN 9780143111207. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

Luther (“a great affinity to Lutheran theology,” 398) because of Luther’s famous willingness to be critical of parts of the Bible in the light of his grasp of its central truths. Barton also likes the notion that “The Bible tells us . . . ‘things we cannot tell ourselves,’ in other words there are ideas and lines of thought in the Bible that it would be surprising for unaided human reflection to have arrived at” (486). He writes with a robust confidence that is reflective of his being both an eminent and acclaimed scholar and a deeply rooted churchman.

In terms of an outline of contents, the book comes in four main parts, which have a natural logic and sequence to them. Part One, *The Old Testament*, offers an account of the origins and formation of the biblical material in the Jewish/Protestant canon in terms of the insights of mainstream modern historical criticism: 1) Ancient Israel: History and Language; 2) Hebrew Narrative; 3) Law and Wisdom; 4) Prophecy; 5) Poems and Psalms. Part Two, *The New Testament*, does something similar for the New Testament: 6) Christian Beginnings; 7) Letters; 8) Gospels. Part Three, *The Bible and Its Texts*, considers the compilation of originally discrete documents into scriptural/canonical collections, with attention to the material forms that these processes involved (scrolls, codices, manuscript copying) and also to books excluded from the canon: 9) From Books to Scripture; 10) Christians and Their Books; 11) Official and Unofficial Texts; 12) Biblical Manuscripts. Part Four, *The Meanings of the Bible*, focuses on different assumptions about and modes of reading and interpretation that are evident in the course of the last two thousand years: 13) The Theme of the Bible; 14) Rabbis and Church Fathers; 15) The Middle Ages; 16) The Reformation and Its Readings; 17) Since the Enlightenment; 18) Translating the Bible. These four parts are framed by an introduction and a conclusion in which Barton focuses especially on the question of how best to think about the relationship between the Bible and contemporary Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

The two things that Barton offers—the story and the argument—unsurprisingly complement each other in his account. This means that the telling of the story of the Bible has a particular thrust to it. Although he, of course, respects the integrity and complexity of his subject, he nonetheless has an angle of vision, whereby he tells the story in such a way that his argument should become increasingly self-evident to the attentive reader. In principle, this should make the history more interesting to read; and in a certain sense it does. However, the making of the argument brings with it a possibly problematic dimension. Barton observes that “the terms of debate tend to be set by the more conservative strands in both [Christianity and Judaism]” (12). He apparently feels obliged to work with these terms, and thus he targets fundamentalist and generally conservative formulations and ways of thinking that he judges to be mistaken with renewed versions of critiques often advanced over the last 150 years. That a senior scholar such as he might show how one could

<sup>1</sup> Issues posed by Judaism’s different biblical canon are, of course, recognized by Barton, especially in chapter 13, but his working assumption is that “the Bible” means “the Christian Bible,” and he does not offer an account of what is at stake in deciding which canon to privilege.

constructively reframe the debate in some way other than a longstanding “liberal versus conservative” polarity is not raised as a real possibility (a matter to which I will return).

To my eyes, this gives something of a Janus feel to the book. On the face of it, we have Barton, the learned and helpful scholar, informing interested readers among the general public, and clearly college and university students also, of what they need to know to comprehend the history of the Bible in all its dimensions. Massive erudition is lucidly and accessibly at the service of an interested public in dispassionate mode. This is no doubt why the book was shortlisted for the Wolfson History Prize 2020.

With regard to the New Testament writings, for example, he says: “As so often with the Bible, even such apparently innocuous questions as the dates of books can be informed by a prior concern for a particular way of reading and reacting to these books. In the end one can only try to weigh the evidence, aware all the time of one’s own bias, and hope to be as objective as possible” (163). One can also appreciate his awareness of the too-easy assumptions that scholars sometimes work with. For example, on the words of Jesus about the blessedness of being “poor”/ “poor in spirit” and “hungering” / “hungering . . . for righteousness” (Lk 6:20–21, Matt 5:3, 6), he initially observes: “The general hypothesis has been that Jesus’ original words are likely to have been about literal poverty and hunger, rather than spiritual need and desire; so the saying in Luke would be the older version.” But then he wryly comments: “(How we know that Jesus spoke of literal rather than metaphorical hunger is unclear, but that is how the argument runs.)” (194).

At times, however, I found myself musing on certain affinities between Barton and his friend the late James Barr. A generation ago, Barr wrote *Fundamentalism*,<sup>2</sup> a no-punches-pulled assault on conservatively minded believers. Such believers did/do not fully embrace the often-uncomfortable insights of modern historical-critical work on the Bible (though their possible reasons for doing so were not empathetically probed by Barr, just attacked). I wondered at times whether Barton’s book may in certain ways be *Fundamentalism* for a new generation, albeit in a less confrontational mode. This dimension of the book may be less apparent to a nonspecialist readership, even if they may at times wonder why it is so important to Barton to focus on rebutting “anyone committed to the literal truth of the Bible” (473) along with “anyone who believes that all decisions should be driven only by Scripture” (480), as though the deficiencies of such outlooks are what really need to be demonstrated in a scholarly history of the Bible. I will thus begin my analysis with the issue of Barton as a possible James Barr redivivus before moving on to other aspects of his presentation that I find somewhat puzzling or surprising.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> I will not linger on straightforward errors of fact, as when Barton seeks to portray a traditional Christian approach to the Old Testament via the content of the annual “Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols” from King’s College, Cambridge, on Christmas Eve. His contention that, although the carols may vary a little, the readings from the Bible “are more or less constant” and that “part of

## ■ The Origins and Dates of Biblical Documents

A hundred years ago, biblical scholars were confident that they could date all biblical documents with a considerable degree of precision. Today, ironically (such is progress), that confidence has diminished, especially for the Old Testament. Questions such as “How much clear evidence do we really have?” and “What do we really know and where are we making intelligent conjectures?”—when pushed—can have a distinctly sobering effect. Of course, new scholarly consensuses are quickly formed. But it is surely important, when writing for a general readership, to try to make clear not only what we do and do not know but also the inevitably broad parameters of responsible scholarly discussion of the issues. As already indicated, Barton is well aware of the general problems here. But how does he handle things in practice?

Let me start with two small examples from the New Testament, before moving on to a larger case study in the Old Testament. First, Barton has an endnote comment that “Acts cannot date from before the late first century CE” (515). This is presented as a straightforward matter of fact, something that is known. Indeed, a late first-century date of Acts represents contemporary scholarly consensus. In 1976, however, John A. T. Robinson wrote a book, *Redating the New Testament*,<sup>4</sup> in which he argued that every book within the New Testament was written before 70 CE. Robinson was a good scholar, and no fool. He made a serious case for earlier dates than are fashionable in biblical scholarship. No new evidence has been discovered in the meantime, and no one has offered a convincing refutation of Robinson’s arguments (which, with regard to a date for Acts in the 60s, many others have made also). Rather, they have been set aside in a “Well, that might perhaps be so, but we don’t really think it’s very likely” mode. My point here is not what we should reckon the date of Acts to be, whether 60s or 90s or whenever, as the reality is that we do not know, beyond the *terminus a quo* being the early 60s when the narrative of Acts ends. But, if we do not know, then it misrepresents the issues to write as though we do know at least that an early (“conservative”) date is impossible, that Acts “cannot” have been written in the 60s or 70s.

My second example relates to origins more generally, rather than dating as such. At the outset of his chapter on the Gospels, Barton raises the point that “the Gospels are often thought to rest on the memories of four separate eyewitnesses” and then directly offers a swift and routine dismissal of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as possible eyewitnesses (189). He then moves on to a discussion of the origins of the Gospels without further reference to eyewitnesses. My question is why he makes no mention (not even in an endnote) of Richard Bauckham’s *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, which has been available since 2006, and has generated

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Genesis 3 is always the first reading in the service” (311) only shows that it is many years since he (or his editor) tuned in.

<sup>4</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976).

extensive discussion.<sup>5</sup> Bauckham is a major New Testament scholar, and his book offers a complex and subtle argument for the likelihood of eyewitness testimony underlying the Gospels, not in terms of the four traditional evangelists but in terms of evidence from the prosopography of early Christianity. It has put eyewitnesses back on the map in a discussion of Gospel origins. If Barton finds Bauckham's arguments implausible, he could give his reasons. Why does Bauckham's work remain invisible, when the issue of possible eyewitnesses is intrinsically significant?

My third example relates to the dating of Old Testament documents, with the related question of the date at which it is possible to begin a history of Israel in terms of modern critical historiography. Barton highlights well the in-principle problems here: "It is . . . hard to avoid the impression that much reconstruction of the history of Israel depends on the temperaments of the scholars involved, whether sceptical or credulous, and often also on their religious stance—committed, indifferent, or hostile to the Bible as Scripture. . . . We might despair of knowing anything worthwhile about the history" (25). However, he confidently rejects such possible despair as "unduly pessimistic" (25) and conveys a sense that, as long as proper scholarly care is exercised, a reliable account of what is historically known about the Bible can be offered.

For the history of Israel, Barton shares the current scholarly preference to lay much weight on substantiation from external records, or lack thereof (despite the well-known principle that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence").<sup>6</sup> Hence, the history of Israel probably begins in the ninth century BCE with Assyrian attestation of the "house of Omri," and this is also the likely period of the earliest documents of the Old Testament, which "are almost certainly the product of an urban elite, based in Jerusalem and perhaps other major cities such as Samaria" (33). What about the tenth-century period of David and Solomon? External attestation is lacking. Moreover, "excavations in Jerusalem suggest that it was not a major city in this period," and the Bible's own portrayal "seems almost certain to be an exaggeration," and the stories about these kings are "quite novelistic . . . even though probably resting on some genuine historical information" (28). Indeed, Barton notes that although "some [biblical specialists] are much more optimistic about the reliability of the stories of early Israel in the Bible," nonetheless "the general trend is towards scepticism about the accuracy of the narrative books of the Old Testament before the age of Amos and Isaiah, the eighth century BCE" (38).

Yet the history of scholarship here might be both interesting and illuminating to a nonspecialist readership. In the mid-twentieth century, a substantial scholarly consensus emerged around the detailed proposals of Albrecht Alt and Gerhard von Rad (and others) that the establishment of Jerusalem as a capital city under

<sup>5</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006; 2nd ed., 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Barton also notes that "nothing is known of Paul except from the New Testament" (164) but makes no radically negative inferences from this.

David and Solomon in the tenth century made a good context for envisaging the drawing together of Israel's early traditions into the first historical writings that expressed the identity of the emerging nation. In the early 1980s J. Alberto Soggin wrote *A History of Israel*. In this, with full recognition of historical difficulties (dating of texts, paucity of archaeological evidence, absence of attestation of David and Solomon in other ancient Near Eastern sources, scholarly contentions that the biblical record is idealized and exaggerated), he could nonetheless say: "the period of the united monarchy is a point of reference from which to begin a historical study of ancient Israel. And unless appearances are deceiving, this was also the period when Israel itself felt the need to make a first collection of its own earliest traditions."<sup>7</sup> This consensus of leading scholars from within living memory is invisible in Barton's account. The only slight recognition of its existence is with reference to the possibility that "scribes adept enough to write the biblical books" might have existed before Omri. Here, Barton has an endnote reference to the "lively defence" of this possibility in the derivative work of Eric Heaton; but Barton makes no mention of the weightier scholars who argued for the tenth century and simply comments, "But few now would agree with this" (493). The nonspecialist reader gains no idea of how much has changed in a relatively short time. Since, apart from some further modest archaeological findings, the evidence available now is the same as that available to Alt, von Rad, and Soggin, one might at least wonder what is involved in the shifting of dates by one or two centuries. Might the shift to later dates be indicative at least as much of ideological fashion as of dispassionate evaluation of contestable evidence?

In each of these three examples there is a question whether Barton's presentation unduly favors the larger argument he wishes to advance.

## ■ On Watching One's Language

Telling a story and making an argument are acts of communication and persuasion. Presentation matters as well as content, especially when writing for a general audience. So Barton's choice of terminology merits some comment.

The problems of finding appropriate wording, and the recognition that seemingly straightforward words can easily be "loaded," are well known to Barton. For example, in a discussion of the ways in which footnotes are sometimes added to biblical translations, he notes how easily an apparently factual note can be disingenuous. He further observes: "It was suspicion of what could be accomplished by cunningly worded notes that led to the translators of the AV being instructed not to append any marginal notes except where essential to explain the Hebrew or Greek. Even this was in a way naïve, since one person's 'purely explanatory' note is another's tendentious interpretation" (463). Indeed so. This leads me to consider two different examples of Barton's own choice of terms.

<sup>7</sup> J. Alberto Soggin, *A History of Israel: From the Beginnings to the Bar Kochba Revolt, AD 135* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1984), 28.

Sometimes Barton uses forceful language as part of a deliberate rebuttal of popular Christian outlooks. His chapter on prophecy begins with “Christians have always been enthusiastic about prophecy” (89), but quickly, on the next page, he says that the prophetic books “may be the hardest part of the Bible for the modern reader.” This is because “most of them seem chaotic,” and “even the Major Prophets are confused and muddled” and “furthermore the contents are often obscure” (90). Moreover, he eschews theological accounts of prophecy (the Old Testament’s own understanding of prophecy is not set out) in favor of depicting a prophet as someone with “special psychic powers” and “a kind of second sight” (91, 95).<sup>8</sup> Overall, there is a certain sense that Barton does not like the prophets very much: “the prophets were not helpful people, and their books are not helpful texts” (111; moreover, the chapter on them is significantly shorter than the chapters “Law and Wisdom” and “Poetry and Psalms”). However, their voices, “in all their original harshness,” have the merit of reminding Barton’s reader how much of biblical content “does not feed easily into either of the religious systems that claim them as part of their Scriptures” (111). As a historian, he reserves the right to express his judgments plainly, even if they are unlikely to encourage readers to take time to study the prophets for themselves.

Other kinds of terminology, however, raise different issues. Barton offers a substantial discussion of New Testament textual criticism. It is well known that the manuscripts of the New Testament have numerous small variants. But what follows from this? He says:

There is not, and never can be, a text of “the New Testament” as it left the hands of Paul, Luke or John: we have only variants. The implications of this for theories of the inspiration and authority of the New Testament have scarcely begun to be worked out. Where the words of Jesus are concerned, for example, we often know only roughly what he is supposed to have said (and whether he really said it is of course yet a further question). (286)

It is, of course, uncontentious that all original New Testament manuscripts have long since disappeared. But what does “we have only variants” mean? (Or, as he puts it in summary form later, “the New Testament has no fixity of text at all” [479].) One could be forgiven for supposing that this means that the textual witnesses for the New Testament are like a permanent game of Telephone, in which multiple retellings problematize and obscure the original content: there is such diversity of textual options in variant manuscripts that we can have no clear idea of what, say, Paul, Luke, or John wrote. Barton’s allowance that, text-critically, in the New Testament “there are whole blocks of text where the general drift of the passage is not in serious doubt” (306) clearly implies that there are extensive amounts of text where even the general drift *is* in doubt. But is that really so? Minor textual

<sup>8</sup> The context of the comment about “special psychic powers” is a discussion of ANE prophets generally. But although Barton notes ways in which Israelite prophets are distinctive, unusual psychic abilities are seen as common ground.

variations are indeed numerous, and most make no difference whatever to following the story or argument and being able to see the issues of substance. Where Paul's language and drift are at their most difficult, say in parts of 2 Corinthians, the text-critical problems are merely ancillary to, and not constitutive of, the real difficulties in grasping Paul's train of thought.

The claim about the words of Jesus, that "we often know only roughly what he is supposed to have said"—as a matter specifically of the nature of the Greek text, not of the historical question of the relation between the textual tradition and Jesus himself (and whatever language[s] in which he spoke)—perplexes me, as some forty years of reading the New Testament in standard scholarly editions of the Greek, with full text-critical apparatus, had not alerted me to the problem. Barton himself offers only one example, admittedly a strong example, of the well-known problem of what Jesus is supposed to have said about divorce and remarriage in Mk 10:11–12 and Matt 5:32, 19:9 (296–99)—where his concern is that the unclear wording of Jesus on divorce and remarriage should rule out "appeal to the exact wording of biblical sayings as if they were legal rulings, since for that a precise text would be essential" (306). But one swallow doesn't make a summer. The plain implication of "we often know only roughly" is surely that a significant percentage of the wording of Jesus is unclear and contestable in the textual tradition. I would expect numerous comparable examples of substantive textual unclarity—a minimum of some twenty or thirty—at least to be listed (even if lack of space prohibited discussion) in order to substantiate his claim. In their absence, his rhetoric seems at least careless and is arguably tendentious.

## ■ Genre, Interpretation, and Truth in the Gospels

An issue related to that of terminology, but nonetheless distinct, is that of the conceptuality that one employs in interpretation. Here, I find a particularly striking oddity. In this book, as in his earlier writings, Barton appropriately emphasizes the importance of appreciation of literary genre as a key to intelligent reading. Yet despite this, he consistently reads biblical narrative, in both Old Testament and New Testament, by the criteria of modern historiography. This inevitably portrays the biblical narratives as history *manqué*, fit to be depicted with negative terminology.

When discussing the Gospels, Barton appears to equate "truth" with "historical reliability." Thus, form criticism "tended if anything to undermine the historical reliability of the accounts, since they 'had to be' told in this particular way whether they were true or not" (191). Likewise, appreciation of literary skill in Gospel composition "implies that the narratives are not simply an accurate account of the life of Jesus, but are written with a degree of artifice" (191). Differences of content show that we have "four mutually incompatible Gospels" (235). If the canonical Gospels, like the apocryphal Gospels, "contain legendary or invented material," then they are "in that sense forgeries—written by people who must have known they were recording unevidenced details." To be sure, one might "deny that they



[the stories] are making actual historical claims and are meant ‘symbolically’ (or allegorically . . .). But what if the truth is that they were intended to persuade the reader of something that the writer knew had not actually happened?” (282–83). “There is also no way of being sure of the veracity of anything in the Gospels, if by ‘sure’ we mean established beyond all reasonable doubt” (295). Indeed, “the story of the woman who wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair (Lk 7:36–50) . . . could be false, a composition by the evangelist” (295).

What is so striking is that Barton here seems to share the same positivist mindset of those conservative believers whom he seeks to rebut: truth is equated with historical accuracy. It is just that the argument is inverted. Instead of “we believe this to be true, and so hold that it must be historically accurate,” Barton offers “this cannot be shown to be historically accurate, and so it may well be false.” Barton’s genre categories for the Gospels do not extend beyond a limited number of familiar modern categories, mainly “history” and “legend” (which are never analyzed), with a possibility of “symbolism” thrown in. Entirely lacking is any attempt to offer (or to engage with scholarship that has offered) a cumulative inductive account of what genre ‘Gospel’ might be in terms of ancient literary conventions and how matters of history could be presented via those conventions; for example, dialogue is as integral to these ancient conventions as it is alien to modern historiography—but need it be the worse for that? Equally lacking is any attempt to utilize the resources of recent literary and hermeneutical theory to offer a possibly positive appreciation of how those literary conventions might be not only meaningful but also truth-bearing (or to engage with scholarship that has attempted the task); for example, if the centurion by the cross, although indeed attesting ancient Roman practice, is a creation of the synoptic evangelists to offer an interpretation of Jesus’s death within the world of the story rather than through external commentary, that in itself hardly seems a sufficient reason to hold that his words cannot be true (in their various versions). Moreover, if such work were to be done, and the Gospels were still considered not to be truth-bearing, then one would hope for well-argued reasons for this, reasons hopefully more substantive than “recording unevidenced details” or being “a composition by the evangelist” (by which criteria all human creativity in pursuit of or in response to truth perishes).

### ■ Spinoza for the Twenty-first Century?

My final major reflection follows on from the previous section, in terms of probing more fully the conceptual frame of reference that Barton brings to bear upon his handling of the Bible.

In part four of the book, where meaning and interpretation are discussed, the emphasis naturally falls on a historical survey of significant options advocated by major interpreters. Nonetheless, Barton’s own understanding of what ought to be done comes clearly to the fore in his repeated commendation of Spinoza’s distinction

between the *meaning* and the *truth* of biblical texts.<sup>9</sup> Methodologically, “we must keep the search for the meaning of texts separate from the search for theological or philosophical truth” (415). On one level, of course, this is common sense. How can you decide whether or not something is true until you have first established its sense? For Barton, however, there is a deep-rooted problem here: all too often believers operate with an antecedent commitment to the truth of the biblical text in such a way that they make its meaning fit its supposed truth. They interpret the text “so that it is capable of being believed” (416). Hence, in Barton’s judgment, there is endless skewing of the interpretive process—sometimes grossly, sometimes subtly—so that interpretation fits with faith.

A parade example is Gen 1:1–2:4, which thoughtful contemporary Christians often hold to be poetic or metaphorical in its account of creation, depicting not the *how* of creation but the *why* (Barton cites a 2014 publication of the Pontifical Biblical Commission to this effect [482]). That such a construal can be edifying, Barton does not deny. But maybe a hard truth is being evaded:

But it seems to me highly likely that the original author *was* trying to describe how the world came into being, in other words that the text *is* meant literally. The problem with this way of understanding it is that, unless one is a fundamentalist, one then has to go on to admit that the author was mistaken; and this comes very hard to Christians, especially when they are producing ecclesiastical documents.

No matter how time-honored such an approach is among believers, for Barton it represents a failure to be truly critical in the mode boldly pioneered by Spinoza:

Because the text is inspired, it must be true: hence it must be read in ways that are capable of being true, according to our understanding of how the world is and of how it came to be. But there is an alternative, which is to read it at face value, and then recognize that it is not true. If we do that, then the idea that the text is inspired becomes harder to hold on to. Perhaps it is better not to make the high claim that it is inspired—or else to understand inspiration differently (482–83).

Numerous questions could be put to this account. For example, might its seemingly casual treatment of “the high claim” of biblical inspiration not unreasonably cause those for whom inspiration is important to feel that the issue has been handled dismissively rather than thoughtfully?<sup>10</sup> Might the often-compared Babylonian account of creation, the *Enuma Elish*, make some difference to what

<sup>9</sup> This distinction, with due acknowledgment of Spinoza, also plays a key role in Barton’s 1992 inaugural lecture to his chair in Oxford, *The Future of Old Testament Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), and in his book *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> When Barton reverts briefly to the issue of inspiration in his conclusion (476–79), he gives the impression that a knowledge of the formation of the Bible, together with an appreciation of its errors, should suffice to show that “inspiration is a term that causes more problems than it solves” and that “to talk of the authority of the Bible may not require a belief in its divine inspiration at all” (479).

kind of “literal” description of “how the world came into being” is on offer in terms of genre? Or might the juxtaposition of Gen 1:1–2:4 with a further account of creation with a different sequence of events in Gen 2:4–25 perhaps encourage a reader to read the first account in a metaphorical mode? But rather than analyze Gen 1 in relation to Barton’s/Spinoza’s key principle of interpretation—first determine the meaning, then determine the truth—I would like to probe this principle itself.

As already noted, on one level Spinoza’s principle is simply common sense. How does it relate, however, to the social nature of knowledge and the reading of works that have attained the status of classics? Part of education is to be inducted into existing culture via works that are commended for their special value, depth, wisdom, truth. Schools and universities do not prescribe texts at random. We learn to read prescribed texts not in *tabula rasa* mode but with socially prescribed preunderstandings and expectations. Their meaning is approached via assumptions about their value and maybe also their truth (say, about the human condition). In this respect, the Bible is at least a classic (even if also more than a classic in historic Jewish and Christian faiths).

I cannot presume to speak for Barton. But let me offer a sketch that I hope is not inappropriate. Barton has been a Christian priest for most of his adult life. He has surely done most of his study of the Bible as a priest, with a commitment—in some sense, with whatever caveats and exceptions—to its truth (i.e., that it tells him something he could not have told himself, and whose content he considers to be the result of more than just unaided human reflection). Indeed, I assume that it was his Christian faith that led him in the first place to study the Bible professionally. Of course, he has learned, as a scholar, to stand back within his faith and reflect critically upon it, distancing himself from some facets while still embracing others. But I very much doubt that he first determined the meaning of the Bible and then decided upon its truth, or lack thereof. I imagine a much more complex, subtle, and no doubt messy process in which he started with a commitment to the truth (in some sense) of the Bible, because of his Christian nurture and faith, and has then sought as best he could to determine its real meaning within that frame of reference. At any rate, I recognize such a process in my own life and career. But if this be allowed, it means that the Spinoza principle does not even begin to depict the real process of encounter with the Bible, either of Barton himself, or of Christians or Jews generally, or even of many secular readers who will still have some preunderstandings about the purported value and truth of the Bible.

It is also somewhat surprising that Barton still sees Spinoza as such an indispensable guide to biblical interpretation. Spinoza’s work on the Bible came out of a context in which religiously oriented conflicts were proving destructive not only for European society but also for himself personally. He wanted not just to lower the temperature of the debates but to change their character altogether by expelling their religious, biblically-derived character in favor of (in our terms) a secular orientation. His way of doing this was at least twofold: to rethink the

nature of God, and (apparently) equate God with the world (his famous tag, “Deus sive Natura,” is not mentioned by Barton), and to make the Bible no more than a work of ancient history, without application to the present day, other than through a general ethic (“Practice justice and loving kindness to your fellow human beings,” cited by Barton on 417)—an ethic at which people could in fact arrive without the Bible at all.

Barton is, of course, aware of Spinoza’s political agenda (525 n. 5), but he still offers a charitable reading of Spinoza. He recognizes that “it is possible to see Spinoza as purely destructive” and his ethical principle of justice and lovingkindness “as no more than a cynical way of trying to avoid censure for his views.” But he resists this in favor of seeing him “as one who kept a firm hold on the essentials of biblical faith, while stripping away the whole scaffolding of interpretative subtlety that had tried to bring every last word of the Bible into an orthodox structure and, in the process, had lost the heart of the matter” (417). Spinoza is thus, wondrously, the exemplar for Barton himself.

Throughout the book Barton works with his own implicit understanding of “the essentials of biblical faith” but never spells out its content or parameters. His commendation of Spinoza in such terms is striking. He touches briefly on Spinoza’s understanding of God, which he considers essentially deist (410),<sup>11</sup> and appears not to think it problematic that Spinoza’s general ethic, so obviously echoing Mic 6:8, manages without the God-oriented dimension (“walk humbly with your God”). Such a humane ethic of justice and loving kindness has obvious deep value. Yet it is surely surprising that such an ethic—in which there features neither a relationship of trust and accountability and hope with a living and gracious God, nor a call to live and serve faithfully in the people of God, nor a sense of how God may enable living well—should be considered to display “the essentials of biblical faith.”

A different approach to the possible limits of “first meaning, then truth” comes from asking how it is meant to work positively. Barton only uses it negatively, as in the example of Gen 1, to show how believers all too easily skew their reading of the biblical text, because they do not properly separate meaning and truth. But let us suppose, *argumenti causa*, that someone does properly separate them and seeks to move from the one to the other. How should it be done?

One of the most famous phrases in the Christian Bible is “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). Although it is harder than often supposed to determine the real meaning of this in the context of the argument in John’s letter—because most people take the phrase out of context and use it as a free-standing axiom—let us imagine that the work has been properly done. Thus it has been established that “love” (agape) is being used predicatively of “God” to say something definitional about the divine

<sup>11</sup> The interpretation of Spinoza’s understanding of God is controverted, but the main options appear to be some form of either “deist” or “pantheist” or “atheist.” No one, I think, would contend that Spinoza still held to the sovereignly transcendent and immanent personal deity of classic Jewish and Christian belief.

nature, in such a way as to distinguish legitimate claims to know God (because people who make the claim display something of that love that characterizes the divine nature) from claims that can be disqualified (because those who make them do not display God's character). If that, or something like it, is the meaning of "God is love" in its context, how can its truth be meaningfully established or denied? Individual biblical scholars may indeed express judgment on the matter and say they believe it to be true or false. But does any such judgment amount in reality to more than clicking "like" or inserting a smiley emoticon (or not, as the case may be)?

The difficulty here has long since been institutionalized. That is, because biblical scholars primarily articulate a history of theological ideas in the biblical context, it is apparently up to other people to determine their truthfulness and applicability in the contemporary world. Those others are held to be systematic theologians . . . or is it philosophers of religion? . . . or is it practical theologians? . . . or is it ethicists? . . . or is it mystics? . . . or who? A certain sense of passing the buck is well known, and nobody in the scholarly world really owns the task of determining the truth of the Bible as theirs in particular. All can engage with the question, but because of its intrinsic depth and breadth, it is beyond any particular area of knowledge or expertise. Belief in the love of God, while on one level simple and accessible, is, on another level, complexly established and articulated as a belief of the whole Christian church—available to be appropriated by its members but not established by them. Once the study of the Bible is cast into an essentially historical mold, questions of its religious truth can easily be endlessly deferred, at least in the scholarly context. (That the principle "first meaning, then truth" should lead in practice to a deferring of the question of truth might well have been realized and welcomed by Spinoza.)

## ■ Conclusion

Much of what Barton writes about the story of the Bible is of undoubted value and will be helpful to many. Yet his argument not only influences the telling of the story in ways that are open to question but also promotes an understanding of biblical interpretation that is open to question. His argument is also frustrating for those who do not suppose in the first place that there is, or should be, identity between the content of the Bible and faith today, but rather understand the relationship in terms of *continuity*. Recurrent arguments against identity feel all too easy. They leave the more interesting questions about what constitutes good and bad continuity in living traditions of Jewish and Christian faith on the sidelines.

Barton's advocacy of a Spinozan hermeneutic crystallizes some of my difficulty with his book. It seems that what was good in the seventeenth century remains equally good in the twenty-first century, despite the enormous social, political, cultural, and intellectual shifts between then and now, and the fact that the institutional religious power that Spinoza sought to undermine has increasingly been relegated to the margins of post-Christian Western culture. To my mind, one of the

most striking lacunae in Barton's account of biblical interpretation is recognition of influential thinkers of more recent years, thinkers of a stature comparable to Spinoza, who have massively impacted biblical and other interpretation. While Spinoza receives eight and a half pages, recent thinkers receive only some two and a half pages. Wittgenstein, Gadamer, MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor, for example, receive no mention at all. Ricoeur is noted only in passing, and he and those others who are briefly noted (Childs, Lindbeck, Frei, Alter, Kermode, Derrida) are all summarily depicted as "post-critical," a term Barton defines as displaying "an interest in the biblical text as it presents itself to the reader, without attention to any possible history of composition that may lie behind it" (432, 434). Yet "post-critical" is surely infelicitous, as it implies that the prestige term "critical" only belongs to those who focus on certain kinds of historical questions. Perhaps tellingly, Barton depicts all "post-critical" interpretation as showing that "in a way the wheel has come full circle, taking us back to where we were before free spirits such as Spinoza, Reimarus and Strauss got to work on the Bible" (435). The notion that recent developments are not just turning the clock back but genuinely moving on, enabling fresh modes of interpretation beyond those of premodern scholars, does not feature. Ricoeur's famous "second naïveté"—a mode of scholarship that has learned from and is chastened by modernity's searching enquiries but that nonetheless is able to reframe and relativize them in varying ways on the grounds that other important questions still remain—appears to have no place in Barton's map of interpretation.

Those who have spent time with some of these recent thinkers are likely to reckon that the interpretive axiom with which Barton begins his book—the Bible is indeed "an important source of religious insight, provided it is read in its original context and against the conditions prevailing when it was written" (2)—simply does not ring true. The positive point, of course, is that there is undoubted value in historical knowledge about the kind of meaning that can appropriately be ascribed to an ancient text in its originating frame of reference; and it is right that this should inform interpretation. But the problem is not simply that for most books of the Bible we simply do not know their precise context of origin (informed conjectures about origins have their place but often function to conceal how conjectural they really are). It is also that the way in which weighty religious texts function meaningfully and veridically (or not) needs a far richer account than Barton seems able to offer.

Gadamer famously argued that prepossession with scholarly method could sometimes obscure access to truth.<sup>12</sup> This may not be a final word, but it is at least a possibly salutary warning. Put differently, it is one thing to be methodologically alert (awareness of possibilities helps keep interpreters on their toes), and another to be methodologically driven (to adopt an approach that essentially serves to exclude whatever does not fit within the specified parameters, as Barton seeks to

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd rev. ed., London & New York: Continuum, 2004; ET of German original of 1960).

problematize conservative approaches to the Bible). Barton is sufficiently confident within his own frame of reference to think not only that religiously conservative approaches to the Bible can be refuted but also that truth (in some sense) can indeed be derived from the Bible through disciplined historical method. My reading of *A History of the Bible* has reinforced my sense that Gadamer has a point.