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Still People of the Book

Phil Heaps

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of The Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!
Except that today the enlightened all know
'Tis very naive to believe this is so.*

Back in June I attended the Cambridge Summer School of Theology, a two-week course that this year focused on the Doctrine of Scripture. One of the books we were asked to read and critique, as preparation, was John Barton's *People Of The Book? – The Authority Of the Bible in Christianity* (SPCK, quotes from 2nd edition, 1993). Barton describes his position as a 'positive but critical evaluation of the Bible, which avoids the absolutes of Biblicism but is not simply a watered down version of it' (p ix). This article is not a point by point interaction, which would take a book in itself, but rather a series of perspectives which aim to help the reader evaluate the sort of views presented in Barton's book, and voiced in many pulpits and classrooms.

From the outset, Barton strikes a very polemical tone. His book is written for those who see fundamentalism as 'demand[ing] a sacrifice of common sense and intellectual integrity on the altar of biblical authority' and a position with 'obvious absurdities' (all of this on the first page). In the light of this, Barton's hope to find a basis for construction which is not dictated by polemical concerns' (p 3) sounds a little lame! As will become clear, this article is written from the perspective that Barton so roundly condemns. Consistent with Barton's own usage, I refer to this position as fundamentalism throughout this article.

Stealing Their Best Tunes

Polemical is not necessarily a bad thing, though it can easily be used to compensate for a weak position. Barton's stated method throughout the book is to show that various arguments used by conservatives do not actually support the view of Scripture but rather his own stance. Considering the first example in a little more detail we see weaknesses both in the articulation of

the supposed fundamentalist argument and also in the implications drawn from it.

This first example is 'the conservative belief that the earliest Christians, and indeed Jesus himself, must be the arbiters of any Christian doctrine of Scripture' (p 2). Already this misrepresents the fundamentalist position, in which the Bible itself must define our doctrine of Scripture. This is not simply quibbling over words: important in Barton's subsequent discussion is the view of St Ignatius. Also, there is no mention of the Old Testament doctrine of Scripture, particularly the paradigmatic giving of the law when God himself is said both to speak and to write words to the people.

Barton claims that the attitude of the earliest Christians was intrinsically ambiguous, containing both 'pro-Scripture' and 'anti-Scripture' elements. Fundamentalists will happily grant his evidence for what he calls 'a quasi-fundamentalist idea of Old Testament Scripture as an ultimate and unerring authority' (p 4) since he refers to Jesus' own teaching (Matthew 5:17-20). Tellingly though, his support for an 'anti-Scripture' position is much weaker. His observation that Jesus primarily taught by his own authority, not scriptural exegesis, says more about Jesus' self-awareness than his view of Scripture. Similarly, his claim that Paul's 'interest in the Old Testament seems at best intermittent and casual' (p 6) is based on limited quotation of the Old Testament in Paul's Epistles, an unconvincing argument from silence. Both Jesus and Paul believed themselves to be communicating new revelation from God (see eg John 7:16 Galatians 1:12), and in that sense their 'relationship to Scripture' is unique. Even Barton's quote from St Ignatius only demonstrates that God reveals new things in Christ, hardly a threat to the fundamentalist standpoint.

As Barton notes '[n]othing Paul says about the abrogation of the law seems to affect in the least his veneration for the words of the Old Testament, which are the oracles of God himself' (p 6). However, the solution to this puzzle is not ambivalence as to the nature of Scripture but rather consideration of the relationship between the old and new covenants. Parts of Scripture that originally functioned as binding legal requirements on Old Testament believers now function descriptively, containing vital background and teaching key lessons, even though the laws themselves are no longer binding. This in no way threatens their supernatural origin or inerrant content – it just

shows that God is unfolding his master plan in stages. A large part of Barton's inspiring conclusion to the first chapter is actually a statement of the fundamentalist position – though Barton dearly sees it as a decisive victory over fundamentalism!

Bible Worship

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the fundamentalism Barton critiques is something of a caricature. One example is the charge of 'Bibliolatry: the elevation of the Bible above Christ himself' (p 81). Barton fears that Christians may 'become a "people of the book" in a sense inimical to the gospel of free redemption in Christ' (p 83). He explicitly addresses this in his concluding chapter stating 'all Protestant Theology agrees...it is not primarily the Bible that is the Word of God, but Jesus Christ' (p 81). Even this summary is somewhat slippery (as is often the case with statements of what everyone believes!). Of course it is true that at the heart of the Christian Faith is the person Jesus Christ – who is also at the heart of the Bible. But in the Bible itself, 'Word of the Lord language is applied to God's spoken and written word literally hundreds of times, but the terminology is applied to Jesus himself only a handful of times. Thus, any appeal to Jesus' priority which calls into question the character and authority of the Bible is itself foreign to the Bible.

In reality we do not need to decide between Christ and the Bible, any more than Jesus himself had to decide between 'the Scriptures' and God his Father – the former was simply a self-expression of the latter. Indeed, it will not cut much ice with God to claim that the question mark we put over his word is a mark of respect for his Son. Barton's careful relegation of the Bible seems a great distance from, for example, the unbridled enthusiasm of the Psalmist (eg Psalm 119).

The Oracles Of God

Another recurrent theme of the book is the function of Scripture. At the outset Barton loosely defines the view that he opposes (and has already written off in the foreword), as 'a theory of Scripture...supernaturally inspired in origin, inerrant in content, and oracular in function' (p 1, italics mine). Repeatedly the impression is given that fundamentalism requires the Bible to be a sort of handbook, written in the first person by God, merely

listing authorized doctrines and practices, in which ‘every portion of Scripture is capable of dictating what Christians should think or do’ (p 48). Barton then downplays the prophetic, prescriptive elements of Scripture, speaking of ‘rare exceptions such as certain prophetic oracles’ (p 56) and shows that many portions of Scripture do not easily fit this mould, for example the psalms, where it is clearly man speaking to God and not the reverse. His conclusion is that the fundamentalist view of what the Bible *should be* bears simply no resemblance to what the Bible actually is.

It seems highly unlikely that any group sees the Bible in exactly the way Barton implies, treating every sentence as a direct command or doctrinal statement (which is in any case semantically nonsensical). Maybe such a fringe position does exist – but it is inexcusable for Barton to lump it together with careful positions, particularly when he complains of such stereotyping of liberalism on the first page. In the Postscript of the second edition Barton acknowledges that reviewers criticized just this issue of misrepresentation. His reply that ‘Fundamentalism was meant to be the foil, not the main focus of attention’ (p 92) does not excuse his practice, which unfairly discredits responsible viewpoints. This misrepresentation means that several of Barton’s key criticisms are simply irrelevant.

In reality, any responsible fundamentalist position recognizes that different portions of Scripture function in different ways (whilst all contributing to the over-arching functions of making people wise for salvation and equipped for every good work, 2 Timothy 3:15-17). The idea of an inerrant, supernatural revelation from God does not in any way exclude portions of ‘authorized history’ and examples of appropriate response to God. Barton never really interacts with such a view, though he occasionally patronizes it, claiming the idea ‘...that Scripture conveys supernatural knowledge appears in many ways too simple...’ (p 37) and referring to ‘the all-too-human delusion that someone, somewhere has all the answers’ (p 87).

■ Thus Says The Lord

Barton repeatedly criticizes fundamentalism for forcing Scripture into an unnatural mould through ‘hermeneutical techniques’, which are often simply ‘a set of devices that would extract edifying meanings from an unedifying text’ (p 65). In doing so ‘the straightforward meaning of the biblical text has

to be falsified in order to read into it the message the church wants to hear' (p 48). However, often the real issue seems not to be determining the content of a particular section, but accepting it. Even when the text explicitly claims to express the divine opinion, Barton would rather not feel its force. For example, Barton clearly feels uneasy about using the description 'the Word of the Lord' to refer to the stoning of the Sabbath breaker in Numbers 15. Yet in the passage itself, the command is said to be just that. Barton appears to feel the same way about the retributive justice of God, the subordinate place of women in the Church, the cursing psalms, etc.

Fundamentalists can (and do) quibble over interpretation, but with the aim of ascertaining the actual content and function of the particular passage. They are motivated by the thought that to grasp the correct understanding is to hear the authoritative voice of God. When Barton denies the Bible this kind of authority, he leaves it with very little authority at all, despite his claims to the contrary. For Barton, the Bible stands as 'a fixed norm against which doctrinal affirmations can be tested, not indeed for truth, but for authenticity' (p 44). Barton leaves us in no doubt as to his view that we cannot appeal to the Bible to settle the truth-questions it raises: 'This would seem almost too obvious to avoid saying, were it not that many theologians do seem to think that biblical exposition is itself a way of deciding questions of truth in the real world' (p 54).

Again, this is utterly foreign to the Bible's own idea that these are the very words of God, coming with his authority, and which we ignore at our peril (eg Deuteronomy 18:19; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; Hebrews 10:28; 2 Peter 3:16). Barton's view clearly stands in opposition to the persistent condemnation of false teaching throughout both Old and New Testaments – presumably he believes that in this respect, as in many others, we now know better than previous, less enlightened ages! Barton allows Christians to differ over 'how far the contents of the Bible should be seen as divinely inspired, and how far the product of the human religious quest' (p 36), but in practical terms nothing is inspired in the sense of communicating actual words (or even ideas) of God. This means that belief and practice are ultimately based much more on the preferences and sensitivities of the individual and the Age than on God's word. Not surprisingly, Barton openly admits his distaste for credal statements.

Peace, Peace

Barton's book certainly stimulated thought. Some of his statements and concerns are undoubtedly valid. At other times they are frustratingly unsubstantiated, like his offhand dismissal of 'a false belief that...the gospels were written by apostles or the friends of apostles...' (p 39) or his incredible statement with regard to canon: 'One of the least plausible fundamentalist [ideas]...is the notion that Jesus and his disciples had hard and fast rules on which books ought to be reckoned scriptural... Any book that came their way and that seemed old and venerable...they were apt to treat as an authority' (p 25). This clearly contradicts Josephus' careful delineation.

On the back cover, Barton's book is praised as being 'marked as much by his love and respect for the text of Scripture as by his knowledge of, and attention to, critical method'. Certainly Barton himself speaks of his love for the Bible (p 2) and gives positive descriptions of Scripture: 'an essential resource to which Christians ceaselessly return in the certainty of being refreshed and nourished' (p 3). However, Barton's view of Scripture does lead him to apply various other descriptions, with which I am profoundly unhappy: 'the Bible is too baggy and amorphous, and its interpretation is too uncertain if it is read as a single work' (p 41). Or regarding Galatians 3:16, 'at the linguistic level at which it claims to operate the argument is simply nonsense. But such verbal quibbles are by no means uncommon in Paul...'. Or the amazing concession, 'the amount of material in the Bible which is unedifying to an offensive extent is not great...', and the mention of the 'rather rare occasions when the 'word' is morally objectionable (p 71). Or the statement: 'parts of the New Testament reflect compromises which undermine aspects of the faith Jesus stood for' (p 52). Or the assessment 'I doubt if we should see much worth preserving in Nahum or 3 John if they were not officially Scripture' (p 60). Or the damning indictment 'No unitary picture of God emerges from its pages' (p 96). I think these quotes provide a telling indication of where a view of Scripture comparable with Barton's leads – a far cry indeed from the Psalmist's assessment: 'The words of the Lord are pure words; As silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times' (Psalm 12:6).

Some of the saddest words in the book are the opening words of the Foreword. Barton speaks of many Christians who have a bad conscience

about the Bible because 'they find some parts inspiring; but they cannot honestly say that it is the book they turn to first when they are perplexed, or the most important source of the hope that is in them'. Undoubtedly none of us treasure God's word as we should. But this is a matter for humble penitence and fervent prayer, not ingenious attempts to persuade our conscience otherwise. To the extent that Barton deadens that voice of conscience he stands with those saying 'Peace, peace, but there is no peace' (Jeremiah 6:14). Rather we should seek to develop a mentality that says with the Psalmist, 'I shall delight in your statutes' (Psalm 119:16) and with the men on the Emmaus road, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was speaking to us on the road, while he was explaining the Scriptures to us?' (Luke 24:32).

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