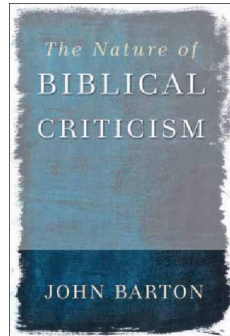


○ REVIEW OF JOHN BARTON. *THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM*

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Barton's aim is neither to write a history of biblical criticism nor to propose a new program of criticism. It is to be analytically descriptive about what should (and does) constitute biblical criticism. In ten succinct theses (pp. 4–7), which the book's chapters elaborate, Barton summarizes what he believes biblical criticism is and is not. Biblical criticism is not primarily concerned with questions of 'introduction' or of history; it is not to be equated with historical criticism or with the application of any one method to biblical texts; and, it cannot be reduced to 'advocacy' approaches (e.g., postcolonial readings), or to confessional, devotional, and liturgical uses. Biblical criticism 'is essentially a literary operation, concerned with the recognition of genre in texts and with what follows from this about their possible meaning' (p. 5). There is an intimate connection between the perception of genre and semantics, with genre-perception being the more fundamental (p. 109), and the biblical critic's task is to attend to the semantic possibilities of texts – 'whole texts as well as of individual words or sentences' (p. 5). In the final analysis, the task of the biblical critic is to *understand* the 'plain sense' of a text by 'entering into the text at a deep level, recognizing the shared humanity of the author so that *cor ad cor loquitur* (heart speaks to heart)' (p. 59). The 'plain sense' of a text at this deep level can only be grasped by 'intuition', i. e., 'an intuitive appropriation of the combination of words that make it up,' not by the application of any method (p. 58).

In this short review, I would like to respond to Barton's main thesis (ch. 4) that 'biblical criticism is primarily concerned with the "plain sense" of the text' (p. 69). 'Plain sense' is not the 'original sense' of texts, as opposed to meanings that they have later acquired (p. 69), nor is it the 'intended sense' of the author. The critic seeking the plain sense of the text is concerned with its historical sense, but only in terms of the semantic range for what a text could have possibly meant when it was produced (p. 81). Meaning is historically conditioned, but words 'change their meanings over time, and so do the sentences, paragraphs, even books that contain them' (p. 83). Biblical critics must take the original provenance of a text's production into account,

but '[T]he object of studying the history of the meaning of words is not to establish what ... [texts] *used to mean*, but what they *do mean*' (p. 83, his emphasis). 'Biblical criticism,' then, 'is concerned with the "plain" sense of text, but this is not the same as the "original" sense if that is taken to signify what the text "meant" in the past as opposed to what it "means" now ... Rather, biblical critics are concerned with what texts mean, now equally as much as then' (p. 7).

When Barton says that a text's meaning changes over time, it is important to see that he is still talking about a *determinate* meaning. Barton claims that 'what the text meant is what it still means' (p. 86). Following E. D. Hirsch, Barton distinguishes between a text's meaning and its significance: '[T]he significance may vary from one generation to another, but the meaning remains constant throughout' (p. 86). The original meaning of a text 'can be thus deliberately open to reinterpretation without thereby ceasing to be itself' (p. 87). In other words, 'a given meaning in the text persists over time even when its significance is differently perceived' (p. 87). The 'plain sense' of a text, then, is the trajectory of a determinate meaning that is perceived differently in its significances over time. It is that overall trajectory, not simply the original production of a text, that biblical critics seek (or should be seeking). Barton summarizes his view this way: 'My thesis will be that biblical criticism, in its quest for the plain sense, is a semantic or linguistic and a literary operation first and foremost, only indirectly concerned with the original, the intended, the historical, or the literal meaning' (p. 101). The trajectory of a text's meaning, its plain sense, 'can be extended ... from sentences to much lengthier sections or even whole books,' (p. 105) or, indeed, 'even of the whole Bible' (p. 107). The critic decides whether to work at the micro or macro level, but he or she is *always* working with the plain sense that can move semantically in ever-expanding concentric circles from its historical point of origin.

By invoking E. D. Hirsch's concepts of determinate meaning and significance, Barton has clearly (and consistently) staked out his position in the debates about what constitutes biblical criticism and interpretation. In turn, he has, as I am certain he is aware, automatically ruled out certain concepts and interpretive approaches that he need not engage in any detail – "advocacy" approaches, such as feminist and postcolonial criticisms; social-scientific criticisms (including psychoanalytic approaches); poststructural approaches (such as deconstructionist ones); and, many important concepts in postmodern literary theories. Since Barton has defined biblical criticism as a semantic operation in which the plain sense is dependent upon genre recognition (see p. 109), I will mention the main postmodern semantic concepts that call his view into question.

Criticisms that have been leveled against Hirsch's view of meaning would not constitute a complete critique of Barton's views, but they do pertain to his major thesis that the biblical critic's task is to seek the plain sense of a text. One view of meaning that I am speaking of understands meaning in terms of 'denotation' (=D) and 'connotation' (=C). Barton does allow that a text has many meanings over time in terms of both D and C (p. 83); the D of the original meaning *never* changes (pp. 84, 87), but its significance does, though even here it is always constrained – texts 'cannot mean simply anything you like' (p. 113). For Barton, meaning is constrained by 'convention, genre, time, semantics' (p. 113). That is true enough, but conventions, genres, and semantics are all determined by *discourses*. In that light, what Barton is really saying is that 'a text within the discourse of biblical scholarship, such as the Society of Biblical Literature, cannot mean just anything at all'. However, the *empirical* fact is that if one takes one step outside of that discourse – the *practices* of producing 'knowledge' that is called 'biblical scholarship' – then all bets are

off. The meaning of texts can, and actually *do*, mean anything. In other words, *meaning is theoretically infinite; meaning is limited only by the number of possible discourses.*

Let me be clear. I agree with Barton's statement, even though he has set up a straw person with it, that '[A]s sane readers of any text know, a text that can mean anything means nothing, and biblical criticism stands against treating the Bible as a kind of endless palimpsest on which we are free to inscribe our own meaning' (p. 114). To paraphrase Richard Rorty, I do not know of anyone whom I would call a biblical scholar who believes that a text can mean anything at all (only an occasional undergraduate student might claim that). Any *individual* scholar who operates this way would, as Barton implies, be labeled as 'insane' by others *within a discourse*. The point is: meaning is not determined solely by individuals but by discourses that construct individual identities such as 'scholar' (Michel Foucault), and within each discourse a plausible argument can be made by its '*scholars*' for a text's meaning, a meaning that other discourses and their '*scholars*' will label as 'nuts'. (Wittgenstein is surely correct that members of one discourse, or 'language-game', will have little chance of convincing believers in a different discourse of the 'truth' of theirs.)

For example, the figure of Jesus in the canonical gospels is male. A friend once told me: 'There's no way to read "Jesus" as a female'. Within the discourse of modern biblical scholarship, of course not. But within other discourses, e.g., certain forms of ancient and modern Gnosticism, Jesus is indeed female (Sophia) or, at least, androgynous; for these discourses the meaning of 'Jesus' in either its D or C cannot be limited to the masculine gender. If the discourse switches to the UFO Society, then the meaning of 'Jesus' *in the canonical gospels* to its '*scholars*' is that he was an extraterrestrial who visited earth to proclaim peace. In some Buddhist discourses 'Jesus' is another manifestation of the Buddha Principle or perhaps of a bodhisattva who has chosen to return and teach humanity. It is not only the case that Jesus in the canonical gospels *can* have these meanings, but, in fact, *does* have them. Diversity of meaning, even contradictory meanings, is the *empirical* fact, and the meanings are determinate only within each discourse – *determinate meanings*, or a determinate *range* of meanings, *occur only with specific discourses*. The 'proof' of any determinate meaning is within the discourse itself; the 'proof is within the proof', as Jean-François Lyotard says. Meaning is limited only by discursive parameters, which are set by ideologies and political power, and the meaning of any text is theoretically (not practically) as infinite as the number of possible discourses. The diversity of meanings – in this example the overwhelming number of different Jesuses – is the empirical fact to be theoretically explained. To my mind, postmodern concepts such as I have outlined, and Barton rejects, best explain the fact of diverse and contradictory meanings for the 'same' text. (The diversity of meanings for the same text is staggering even within the same macrodiscourse of biblical scholarship. Barton acknowledges this postmodern point, but he buries it in a footnote: 'It is interesting and perhaps puzzling that two people, both of whom have read a lot of biblical criticism, can receive it [the text] in such different ways' [p. 58, n. 63]).

I could pursue another postmodern point that there is no stable 'the text', as Barton believes, that survives from discourse to discourse, but that *discourses write texts*. Whether one follows Stanley Fish, Foucault, or any number of other theorists in this regard, there is no meaning *in* a text; meaning is in the discourse(s) by which a text is read, and beyond that, in an ever-expanding 'general text' (Derrida). Perhaps Barton himself takes a step in that direction when he concludes that in the final analysis biblical criticism 'is the application, not of method, but rather of a sort

of intuition' (p. 58). Biblical criticism focuses upon semantics, but for Barton semantic perception is dependent upon the intuition of genre – perception of genre leads to a perception of macro meaning (pp. 25–27) – and genre itself 'is hopelessly elusive if one tries to get at it in any methodical way' (p. 59). The 'deep understanding' of a text that Barton calls for (e.g., p. 61) is, in the final analysis, the result of 'intuition', an intuition that is produced, guided, and restrained by the discourse in which the biblical critic reads.

Barton's book is a tightly written essay on his particular view of biblical criticism, and he has many contributions to which I can only allude. He eloquently explains: (1) why biblical criticism cannot trace its origin only to the Enlightenment; (2) that the 'meaning' and 'truth' of a text should, if possible, be considered as separate issues; (3) that meaning cannot be reduced to the historical (original) sense, to authorial intention, or to the literal sense; and, (4) how his version of biblical criticism can relate to and aid both confessional readings and the academic theological enterprise.