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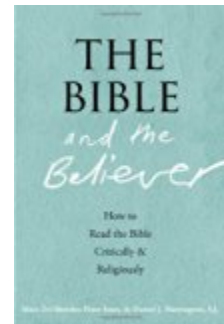


Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, Daniel J. Harrington. *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. ix + 210 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-986300-6.

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Two Sides of the Same Coin: Reading the Bible Religiously and Academically

Since the rise of biblical criticism, reading the Bible “critically” has widely been understood as tantamount to reading it from a nonreligious perspective. This book paves the way for bridging the supposed chasm between critical and religious approaches to Bible. The book comprises three chapters, each consisting of a main essay in which a reputable scholar describes how his own religious tradition has approached the issue at hand, to which each of the other two scholars responds.

After the introduction, in which the editors provide an overview of historical criticism and the history of biblical interpretation in general, Marc Brettler offers his Jewish perspective. As Judaism has the longest chain of tradition to consider, this chapter is the volume’s densest. Brettler describes Judaism as a “Bible-centered religion in the sense that the Bible *as interpreted* (rather than the biblical text itself) is primary” (p. 21). From the rise of the rabbis until the Enlightenment, Jews studied the Bible almost exclusively through the lens of the Talmud and other rabbinic commentaries. The critical perspective ushered in by the Enlightenment naturally challenged the premise of nearly all rabbinic interpretation—namely, that the Bible is the product of genuine historical revelation. According to Brettler, Jews tend to be less concerned with the historicity of the revelation itself than with the role that revelation plays in undergirding theologically the entire *halakhic* system around which Jews organize their lives. As such, Jewish readers of the

Bible as early as the rabbis themselves have endeavored to justify the validity of the *halakha* even when it deviates from, or even contradicts, the biblical text. For that reason, Brettler goes on to say, understanding the Torah as a product of humanity in response to its experience of God, rather than a product of God directly, need not compromise Jewish life as it has traditionally been lived. He argues that the historical critical method can enrich a Jew’s reading of scripture by heightening his or her awareness of the complex nature of God’s world, an experience he aims to illustrate through a Jewish interpretation of the Passover Seder informed by historical criticism.

Daniel Harrington’s chapter summarizes important Catholic teachings about reading the Bible that have been issued since the turn of the twentieth century. Obviously, Vatican II marked a dramatic change of direction for the church, a shift Harrington illustrates with three seminal documents: “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993), “The Jewish People and Their Scriptures in the Christian Bible” (2002), and *Verbum Domini* (2010). Each document encourages what Harrington calls the “both ... and” method of reading. A Catholic reader ought first to consider the historical critical perspective in order to gain insight into what the biblical authors might have been trying to say before progressing toward a consideration of what the text means spiritually for a Catholic today. He concludes by interpreting the Call of Moses (Exodus 3-4) using a threefold, “both ... and,”

Catholic approach. First, he illuminates the “world of the text as it has come down to us,” reading Exodus 3-4 as an example of the biblical call-narrative. Next, he explores “the world behind the text,” highlighting the documentary hypothesis and the origins of God’s name. Thirdly, he comes to “the world in front of the text,” providing him the opportunity to recount a personal story in which he was once encouraged by the fact that Moses, like himself, had a speech impediment.

The Protestant perspective of Peter Enns rounds out the conversation. Since there is no single Protestant view on how to read the Bible, Enns focuses on Protestants who are willing to engage in a conversation concerning the dialogue between faith and biblical criticism. The essential issues for such Protestants are (1) the doctrine *sola scriptura*, which claims that scripture is the sole authority on all matters of faith, and (2) the notion that scripture is a coherent whole with a single, unifying message. Both ideas are impeached by critical approaches to the Bible that acknowledge, among other things, the creativity with which New Testament writers handle the Old Testament, or the historical improbability of certain events in the Old Testament. Enns thus suggests that Protestants can enter into the dialogue only if they are willing to reconsider their assumptions about the Bible, a

task that he warns will be spiritually unsettling. He then describes the spiritual struggle he himself underwent as a doctoral student when he confronted scholarship regarding the historicity of the Bible that challenged his Christian assumptions. Seeing himself faced with three options—avoidance, defensiveness, and synthesis—Enns chose the last of these, seeking as much as possible to bring faith and criticism into dialogue with one another.

In its effort to engage both scholarly and lay approaches to the Bible, and to facilitate interfaith dialogue, this book offers a valuable contribution. It is clearly organized and unified by the methodology that shapes each chapter. From his own perspective, each scholar examines the way the Bible has been interpreted in his community over time, presents reactions to the historical critical approach, and offers ways to move forward by narrowing the perceived gap. In doing so, the authors do not claim to be spokespersons for their movements. Yet it is difficult at times, especially when reading about one’s own religious community, to hear them as simply one voice among the multitudes. However, this tension is exactly the point of the book—to foster a dialogue that not only better mutual understanding, but also encourages a richer understanding of one’s own tradition. And to this end, the book succeeds in its mission.

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