

On not leaving the car in pieces on the garage floor

A review of John Barton's, 'A History of the Bible'

(Penguin books 2019)

Introduction – the purpose of this review.

John Barton is an Anglican Priest who was Oriel & Laing Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford and is currently Senior Research Fellow at Campion Hall, Oxford. He is one of Britain's leading academic biblical scholars and the author of numerous books and articles on the Bible and its interpretation.

His book *A History of the Bible*, which was first published in hardback by Allen Lane in 2019 and then in paperback by Penguin in 2020 builds on what he has written in his previous books and articles to give an overall account of how the Bible 'came into being, developed and was used and interpreted down the years, in both Christianity and Judaism' (p.13).

The book has been extremely well received. There has been a host of positive reviews from both academic, and non-academic, religious, and secular reviewers. The five reviews quoted on the back cover of the Penguin edition provide a good reflection of the praise that has been given to the book.

'Where does one go to learn what the Bible actually means, where it comes from, and how it has been read, both by Jews and Christians? Barton gives a superb overview of the answers' (Bart D Ehrman, Daily Telegraph).

'Scholarship and cerebral entertainment of the highest class' (Dominic Sandbrook, Sunday Times, Books of the Year).

'Phenomenal... a book from which believers and non-believers can both learn' (Colin Burrow, Guardian).

'An extraordinary tour de force... open minded, lucid, it floods with light a subject too often regarded as a closed book... Barton unlocks this sleeping giant of our culture. In the process, he has produced a masterpiece' (Peter Stanford, Sunday Times).

'A wise and eminently sane book about a book which has inspired both insanity and wisdom' (Diarmaid MacCulloch).

The chorus of praise that *A History of the Bible* has received, together with the academic prestige of its author, means that it is likely to become a standard text to which those who want to know about the Bible and its interpretation will be automatically referred, in the same way that students of the Reformation are now referred to the works of Diarmaid MacCulloch.

I regard this as worrying because, although there is indeed much that one can learn from this book, it is in my view a seriously flawed account of the nature of the Bible and its significance for today. The purpose of this review is to explain why I think this is the case.

1. The contents of *A History of the Bible*.

A History of the Bible is divided into four main parts and a concluding chapter.

Part one is entitled 'The Old Testament.' It consists of five chapters which look at the history and language of ancient Israel, and the six main literary genres contained in the Old Testament, narrative, law, wisdom, prophecy, poetry, and psalmody.

Part two is entitled 'The New Testament.' It consists of an account of the historical context out of which the New Testament emerged followed by an introduction to the New Testament letters and the four Gospels.

Part three is entitled 'The Bible and Its Texts.' It consists of explanation of how and when the Old and New Testament Canons came to be formed and defined, why certain books were excluded from the New Testament, and the manuscript tradition that underlies the biblical text as we know it today.

Part four is entitled 'The Meaning of the Bible.' It consists of a review of how Jewish and Christian scholars have interpreted the Old and New Testaments from the second century to the present day and how the Bible has been translated from the time of the Septuagint onwards.

The concluding chapter, 'The Bible and the Faith' considers the relationship between the Bible and the faith of the Christian and Jewish communities.

2. The argument put forward in *A History of the Bible*.

A. Concerning the Old Testament

According to Barton, the material which we call the Old Testament 'probably came into existence between the ninth and second centuries BCE' (p.33).

The books of the Old Testament are made up of fragments of originally separate material that have been brought together in the Old Testament books that we now have in ways that are confusing, incoherent, and self-contradictory.

The stories in the early chapters of Genesis such as the stories of Noah and the Tower of Babel are 'mythical or legendary' (p.33) The stories concerning Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, and the early kings such as Saul, David and Solomon are also 'essentially legends, even though people bearing those names may well have existed' (p.33). Even the accounts of the stories of the life of the Jewish people during the Persian period, such as the story of Esther, may also be fictional.

The historical books

What are known as the 'historical books' of the Old Testament (Genesis to 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra Nehemiah and Esther) are in fact historically unreliable texts which 'often contribute to our understanding of the history of the nation through the insight they give into how events and social movements were understood at the time they were written, rather than by providing reliable information about the history of the time they purport to describe' (p.58).

The law codes

The traditional idea that the law codes in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy go back to Moses, and the time of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, is unsustainable in view of the fact that the laws they contain reflect the life of a settled agrarian society rather than the life of 'a group of nomads living in tents' (p.76). The Ten Commandments were probably compiled later than the other law codes in the Pentateuch (the five books from Genesis -Deuteronomy) . They are 'an amalgam of elements of a different date' (p.78) and the differences between Jewish and Christian traditions about

how to number the commandments show that the list is 'not totally coherent' as a list of ten items. The Pentateuch as a whole probably achieved canonical status in the post-exilic period.

The commandments in the Old Testament law codes are intended as a statement of 'general legal principles' rather than as a set of binding commandments. As Barton sees it, they 'invite the reader to enter into a moral discussion rather than close off the debate from the start. Certainly there are some absolute commandments, but for the most part the literature is pragmatic and based on a consideration of individual cases' (p.84).

The wisdom literature

For Barton, the Old Testament wisdom literature (by which he means Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes):

'...invites the reader into a dialogue about human life and its patterns, rather than laying down the law. It tends to be open-ended rather than dogmatic: if it offers insight into the world and its ways, it is by proposing proverbs and wise sayings to ponder, not rigid diktats to be accepted and adhered to' (p.69).

As Barton sees it, neither the wisdom literature nor the Old Testament laws gives us:

'...a timeless code; both are firmly rooted in the institutional life of ancient Israel. This is not to deny that both exemplify moral principles that can often be seen in modern discussions of ethics, and that were shared with other peoples of the ancient Near East. It does, however, make any direct application of biblical teachings difficult, and argues for a more oblique relationship between the Bible and modern Christian or Jewish faith.' (p.88)

Barton also argues that the use of the description of the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22 as a reference to Christ in the Patristic debates about the Trinity was a mistake, which was due to the fact that 'It did not occur to anyone that the text might not refer to Christ at all, or that they were arguing on the basis of the Greek translation rather than the Hebrew original' (p.72).

The prophetic books

The prophetic books in the Old Testament are the result of the original short and pithy sayings ('oracles') given by the prophets themselves being gathered together by either the prophets themselves or (more likely) their disciples and then turned into the books we now have by later scribes with the words of later speakers or writers also being added. The scribes 'did not always know just when in the course of the prophet's life given oracles had been delivered, and they assembled them in what they thought was the correct chronological order, but sometimes thematically or on the basis of catchwords' (p.91) (as in the case of Isaiah 1:9 and 10 where two originally unrelated oracles are put together because they both refer to Sodom and Gomorrah).

The idea that the prophets were heralds of good tidings, 'which is the image most Christians probably have of them,' is in reality 'a post-exilic development that has been read back into earlier prophecy' (p.95). In reality, the prophets were people who:

'... became convinced through a kind of second sight that trouble was coming – or even simply saw that it was, because they were politically better informed than most - and then explained this trouble as a result of national sin.' (p.95).

What also emerged in post-exilic times were the oracles in the prophets about a future king. However, this king is not a 'messiah' in the later Jewish or Christian sense of 'a future saviour who would rule in

the name of God not just over a restored Israel but over the whole world' (p.97). In the Old Testament itself 'the 'new David' is a literal king of a liberated but limited Israelite or Judahite kingdom back within its old (or somewhat extended) borders' (p.97).

In Barton's view:

'The prophetic books, like the pieces of which they are composed, are for the most part subversive entities, undercutting the foundations of established religion, especially the state religious cults of the Hebrew kingdoms in pre-exilic times, and the political machinations of the times just before the exile' (p.111).

The Psalms

The Book of Psalms (which 'can scarcely have come into existence before about 300 BCE' (p.127)) is an anthology of Psalms 'from diverse periods' and with 'differing theological standpoints' with the result that it is impossible 'to corral them into some kind of single coherent whole' (p.129).

According to Barton, the Book of Psalms is a 'microcosm' of the Old Testament as a whole:

'The Psalms, like the contents of the Old Testament as whole, share many theological ideas, just as they share the conventions of the Hebrew verse system: they speak of the kingship of God, of the righteous and the wicked, and of God's creative and redemptive providence. But they do not tell a wholly consistent story. Nor does the Old Testament as a whole, it is full of loose ends and surprising turns. This is one reason why it is so hard to treat it as a unitary Holy Scripture' (p.129).

B. Concerning the New Testament

The three-stage emergence of the New Testament

In Barton's view we can distinguish three stages in the emergence of the books that now make up the New Testament.

The earliest stage consists of the genuine letters of Paul, which are 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians and Philemon, which were written in the 50s and 60s of the first century.

The second stage consists of the Gospels. The earliest Gospel was Mark, which may have been written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John were written after 70 with John 'conceivably at the beginning of the second century' (p.61).

The third stage consists of Acts (which may not necessarily be by the same author as Luke), Revelation, letters attributed to Paul but not by him (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), letters attributed to followers of Jesus, but not written by them (1 and 2 Peter, James, 1, 2 and 3 John and Jude) and the letter to the Hebrews which is anonymous. According to Barton, 2 Peter was 'the latest of the New Testament books to be written, early in the second century' (p.162).

Paul and his teaching.

On the topics of the resurrection and Jesus status of the Son of God 'Paul differs considerably from what later became Christian orthodoxy; and this sets up a difficulty in treating the Pauline letters as a source for Christian doctrine' (p.167).

In relation to the resurrection Barton makes two points. First, concerning the nature of the resurrection Paul '...seems to differentiate it from physical resuscitation, emphasizing that 'flesh and

blood' cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 15:50) and that what any resurrected person possesses is a 'spiritual body', which sounds like a deliberate contradiction in terms, attempting to grasp a new reality that cannot be readily captured in words' (p.168). Secondly: 'Attempts to ground faith in the resurrection by emphasizing the empty tomb, or the appearance of the risen Lord to the women, cannot appeal to Paul for support: he seems to have quite different concerns' (p.168).

In relation to Jesus' status as Son of God, Barton declares that verses such as 1 Corinthians 1:3, Galatians 1:3, Philippians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 13:13 show that 'Paul does not make the explicit equation Jesus = God but he speaks of Jesus in elevated terms, and thinks that Christians ought to give him honour very little different from the honour they pay to God' (p.169).

However, he also declares that 1 Corinthians 15:28 indicates that:

'Paul is what would come to be called subordinationist; he regards Jesus, though in some sense divine, as subordinate to God the Father... this would in later times have seemed slightly heretical, but for Paul apparently, it is natural to think that Jesus Christ, though highly exalted, has a lower rank than God himself. Jesus is the Son, very much with a capital S, but not the Father,' (p.172).

Barton goes on to argue that Paul 'simply does not discuss' (p.173) issues that we would like to know about, something that 'applies particularly to the way the churches he founded were ordered and organised.' We do not know what the leadership titles found in Paul's letters mean and there is 'no telling' what the activities of church leaders involved (p.173). Paul does not tell us 'whether the leaders of the churches were in charge of their liturgical life' and 'provides virtually no information' about the contents of early Christian worship (p.173).

Turning to the Acts of the Apostles, Barton follows the work of the American scholar John Knox in arguing that Acts should be regarded as secondary historical source that is at odds with what we know about Paul from his authentic letters. First, the chronology of Acts and the letters are incompatible and secondly 'the Paul of the letters is not the same as the Paul of Acts' (p.176).

According to Barton: 'In Acts Paul operates under the authority of the church leaders in Jerusalem and is always careful to make sure he is in concord with them.' This is shown by the account in Acts 15 of Paul's participation in the Council of Jerusalem.

The Paul of the letters, however, is:

'...a much more independent, wilder figure than Acts has made him, less concerned with maintaining harmony in the nascent Church, and convinced of his own rightness, especially over the Gentile issue. He claims to be an apostle in the fullest sense, defined as one who has seen the risen Jesus, and does not cede primacy in this to those who had been Jesus' disciples in his lifetime. This is a rather extraordinary claim, and the author of Acts does not seem to recognize it: he nowhere calls Paul an apostle, and in chapter 13 he actually has the community in Antioch laying hands on Paul and Barnabas to authenticate their mission to Jerusalem, something we may suspect Paul would have scorned' (p.177).

On the subject of Paul's teaching on justification by faith, Barton states that the New Perspective associated with Ed Sanders, James Dunn and N T Wright has been important:

'in resituating Paul in his own context and refusing to make him answer our questions. For Christians there continues to be a discussion about how people are saved, but it can no longer proceed as though Paul had provided us with a timeless answer in terms of faith as a substitute for ethics. Paul was focused on the needs and the status of his Gentile churches and staunchly defended their standing

before God against those (including perhaps Peter) who wanted to insist that Gentiles must become Jews before they could be Christians. If there are lessons to learn from this for the modern Church, they will be about inclusion and exclusion rather than about the relation of faith and works.' (p.181).

Barton goes on to say that although Paul:

'...decries the works of the law as a basis for Salvation for Gentile Christians, he never repudiates the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, which he sees as coming to fruition in Christ. Yet the Gentiles' relationship to it is bound to be ambiguous. It is a true revelation of the one God who is both the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ; but it is also surpassed by what has been seen of God in Christ, and Gentiles at least do not need to observe its mandates scrupulously. Christ is the end [Greek: telos] of the law (Romans 10:4) meaning both its abolition and also its consummation or goal' (p.182).

In trying to hold a middle position between abrogating the theology of the Old Testament and treating it 'as in all respects as binding as the new' (p.182) Paul moved to a position that Romans 9-11 shows was 'highly complex and not very consistent' due to the fact that Paul was 'struggling with equally strong arguments that pull in opposite directions' (p.182). This means that:

'If we are to treat Paul as authoritative in in some sense, it must involve trying to think through this issue with which he himself wrestled, rather than treating his words in the same way as his opponents did the Old Testament - as totally binding and required for salvation' (p.182).

The pseudonymous letters

The letters that are attributed to Paul but are not by him can be shown to be pseudonymous both because they are stylistically different from Paul's genuine letters and because the church structures which they describe 'resemble much more those of the second century rather than those of Paul's day' (p.183).

With the exception of Hebrews, which is anonymous, all the other letters in the New Testament have to be seen as pseudonymous because they reflect 'a situation much later than that of the apostles' (p.184) and because they are written in Greek, which it is something that Jesus' original disciples were unlikely to be able to do.

For Barton the pseudonymous letters are forgeries and 'fraudulent' (p.186). On the question of whether they can be still be 'religiously authoritative' Barton writes:

'A lot depends on how we define the authority of biblical books. Are Paul's letters authoritative because they are by Paul? If so, then establishing that one of them is in fact pseudonymous presumably reduces or even annuls its authority. Or are the authoritative because they are in the Bible? If so, the question of who wrote them might be regarded as irrelevant.' (p.187)

The Gospels

According to Barton, the Gospels are not eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus: 'only two of them (Matthew and John) are even ascribed to members of the twelve apostles, and even here the attribution is much later than the Gospels themselves' (p.189).

The Gospels fall into two groups, the 'synoptic' Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke and the Gospel of John. There is 'near unanimity' among New Testament specialists that John was written at the end of the first and the beginning of the second century and even the synoptic Gospels 'are products at the earliest of the second generation of Christians' (p.190).

There are differences between the synoptic Gospels and John over the content and order of Jesus' ministry. The synoptic Gospels also each order their material differently and there are discrepancies between them over matters such as the accounts of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, the accounts of the lowering of the paralytic through the roof (Mark 2:3-4, Luke 5:18-19) and the accounts of Jesus' response to being called 'good teacher' (Mark 10:17-18. Mathew 19:16-17).

The literary relationships between the synoptic gospels are complex. It is generally accepted that Matthew and Luke both used Mark. In addition, they may have used a common source known as 'Q' and may also have had their own special sources ('M' and 'L') or created their own additional material (Barton suggests that Luke's parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) may be an example of this).

Mark and Luke may originally have existed in earlier editions in which there was no birth narrative in Luke and it is possible that Luke was originally totally separate from Acts with a later editor adding their prologues to join them together.

The references to the fall of Jerusalem in the synoptic gospels date them to either slightly before (in the case of Mark) or after (in the case of Matthew and Luke) that event. Luke and Acts could have been written in the second century.

Matthew and Luke were intended as replacements for Mark. This means, writes Barton, that when we 'continue to read Mark, we are in a way contradicting what Matthew and Luke intended: they wanted us to read only *their* version of the Gospel, and to leave Mark behind' (p.202).

John's Gospel may have been written by a 'school or group' (p.205) over a period of time. This would help to explain 'dislocations in its narrative' (p.205) such as the words 'Rise let us be on our way' (John 14:31) in the midst of the continuous block of teaching in John 14-17. John is not:

'... a new version of Mark, as Matthew and Luke are, but a wholly different conception of a Gospel, bringing out the inner meaning of Jesus' life and teaching; 'a spiritual Gospel,' as Clement of Alexandria put it' (p.205).

As Barton sees it, our familiarity with the existence of four Gospels prevents us from noticing 'just how odd it is that they stand alongside each other, offering an alternative picture of Jesus and his life and work' (p.209). The issue is not only: 'that John differs from the Synoptics, but that the Synoptics differ radically among themselves' (p.210). Barton suggests that:

'Long familiarity with the Gospels prevents people from noticing just how strange it is to have four divergent official versions of the life and sayings of the founder of Christianity, and even atheist critics of the faith seldom batten onto this problem. Historically the divergence is what we should expect, given the stories and sayings in the Gospels circulated orally over a long period before being written down; but it is remarkable that the Church decided to canonize all four versions and not attempt to reconcile them' (p.210).

C. Concerning the Biblical Canon

The Old Testament Canon

According to Barton all the evidence we have:

'...points to the existence of a canon or collection, containing the very same books that now appear in printed Hebrew Bibles, by the middle of the first century CE at the latest. And – assuming that Yadaim 3:5 is concerned with physical scrolls – there is no evidence of any disagreement about any of these books at any time. The books had assembled themselves without debates or rulings being necessary.

The New Testament writers, like the rabbis who put together the Mishnah, took them for granted as holy texts. No one ever canonised them, in the sense of taking a positive decision that they should be regarded as authoritative, still less insisted on this against opposition. They were simply accepted' (p.221).

The distinction that eventually emerged between Christianity and Judaism over the status of the books of the Apocrypha (with Christians generally accepting them as part of Scripture and Jews not doing so) reflects the fact that in the first century there was a 'core of books that were regarded as centrally important by both groups, and these included most or indeed all of what we now think of as the Old Testament' (p.229). However, there was also:

'...a range of works that were held in respect but not used or quoted nearly as much as the core, and here Jews and Christians came to diverge: Jews tended to move them to the 'outside' category, while Christians often embraced them, though still without promoting them to the core. The 'core' however, was not a canon in the sense of a fixed and determinate list, but simply a list of much-used books' (p.229).

A further difference between Christianity and Judaism is that whereas in Judaism the Torah (the five books of the Pentateuch) had special status in Christianity:

'... there never seems to have been much difference in status among the different books of the Old Testament. In the New Testament the commonest designation for what we call the Hebrew Bible is 'the law and the prophets', with just one three-fold description, 'the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms' in Luke 24:44. This shows that there was an awareness that the 'law' – the Pentateuch or Torah- had some kind of pre-eminence among the holy books. But nothing is made of this: we do not find any reflection on the difference of status, or passages from the Torah privileged in any way above those from elsewhere' (p.230).

In addition, Christian lists place the prophetic books at the end of the canon. In Barton's view this in line with the fact that: 'Christianity in general stressed the prophetic side of the Old Testament' (p.234). It is, he says, 'probably consistent with this to arrange the biblical books so that they climax with the prophetic texts.' (p.234).

For Barton the presence at Qumran of books such as the Temple Scroll which may have been intended to replace the books in our Old Testament canon, reminds that in the first century the idea of a Bible containing a fixed set of books is an anachronism 'the Qumran community, and Jewish groups in general, had a variety of books, but no unified Bible' (p.237).

Furthermore, Jewish communities may not have had access to all the books that make up our Old Testament:

The synagogue at Nazareth, for example, may not have owned a full set of what are now called the Hebrew Scriptures, and Jesus quoted mainly from what I have called the basic core (Pentateuch, Psalms, Isaiah). Perhaps for him there was as yet no 'canon' – and perhaps that should make Christians sit more lightly to the Bible, or at least be willing to prioritize among its books' (p.238).

The New Testament Canon

In Barton's view, what we call the New Testament 'did not begin life as a collection of sacred writings at all, but as occasional literature – highly important, but not sacrosanct' (p.239) . For example, in the second century Irenaeus and Justin Martyr regarded the four Gospels not as Scripture but as 'historical sources for the life and teaching of Jesus' (p.241). A further example is the fact that the New

Testaments writings were written and copied in the form of codices (what we think of as books) rather than in the scroll format used for the Jewish Scriptures and other important works of literature in the ancient world.

However, in the second century the books that make up the New Testament 'began to be seen not as informal documents but as scriptural texts' (p.240). Barton suggests that there were 'three steps in the process by which the New Testament books morphed from highly important sources into Scriptures in a sense similar to in which the Hebrew Bible is Scripture in Judaism and which both Testaments are Scripture in modern Christianity' (p.252). First, in the first century Jesus was seen as the 'the fulfilment of the Scriptures of the Old Testament' (p.252). This meant that the divine authority of the Old Testament text 'spills over into the early Christian message of salvation through Jesus' (p.253).

Secondly, in the second century the argument from prophecy reversed direction and the Christian argument became that 'the Jewish Scriptures were important and ought not to be abandoned because they were about the God who had been revealed in Jesus' (p.253). This argument was significant because 'books are Scripture if they function as Scripture, and the New Testament books clearly did so once the argument from prophecy was reversed into an argument from Christ' (p.255).

Thirdly, by the time of Origen at the end of the second century a state of 'equilibrium' was reached in which the argument from prophecy became 'an invitation to consider the divine plan in which important events were foretold and came to be. The providence of God is revealed through the matching of prophecy and fulfilment' (p.255). According to Barton, 'when we find such a perspective we can talk of the existence of the Bible as we now know it' (p.255).

In addition, from the time of Paul onwards and into the second century we find Christian writers viewing the Old Testament as an entirely Christian book in the sense that the Old Testament text itself carries a directly Christian meaning. However, this changed during the second century when Christian writers began to see the Old Testament 'as the document of a pre-Christian time, containing some things that continue to be in force but others that have been superseded or else fulfilled in Christ' (p.258). At this stage it came to be seen that 'the teachings of the Gospels and of Paul represent a fresh stage in revelation, and thus that Christians need to think in terms of an Old and New Testament' (p.259).

Two further indications that it was in the second century that the New Testament writing came to be regarded as Scripture are that at the end of the century Origen wrote commentaries on the Gospels as separate works rather than feeling free to combine them together as Tatian did in the *Diatessaron* earlier in the century and that Christian scribes began to mark out the New Testament writings as sacred by using *nomina sacra* (contractions of holy names and words such as 'Jesus' or 'cross') when they copied them.

On the question of at what point the canon of the New Testament was defined, Barton argues that the *Muratorian Fragment*, which contains a fixed list of canonical books very similar to the ones that are in our New Testament, probably dates from the fourth century. On this basis he argues that we cannot say that 'Christians became interested in defining the exact contents of the New Testament already in the second century' (p.269). For Barton the New Testament writings were 'only restricted – codified or canonized' (p.269) in the fourth century. Until then there was a core of generally accepted books with fuzzy edges.

His overall summary of how the New Testament canon developed is as follows:

‘...by the end of the second century the core was immensely stable, and Christian writers were quite prepared to reject some documents as unacceptable; while even as late as the fourth century there was still not complete clarity over the status of a few books, such as the shorter letters and even Revelation. It is not as though the New Testament first grew freely, with no attention to issues of authority and authenticity, and then was absolutely delimited without remainder, in a neat two stage process. Already within the New Testament there is a warning against spurious letters (2 Thessalonians 2:2 – itself possibly spurious) and even as late as the fourth century people are still encouraged to read such works as *The Shepherd*, even though by then it was defined as not part of the New Testament. The growth of scripture and its delimitation overlapped just as with the Hebrew Bible’ (pp. 269-270).

Two of the criteria used for the acceptance of books into the New Testament canon were possession of apostolic authority and orthodoxy of content. According to Barton ‘these two criteria tended to prop each other up’ in that ‘Apostolic works could be assumed to be orthodox’ and ‘orthodox works could be assumed to be apostolic unless there was evidence to the contrary’ (p.271). For Barton, however, ‘the major issue in accepting the canonicity of texts was continuity of use in the Church’ including ‘the reading of a text in the liturgy, which was an attestation of its sanctity and normative character’ (p.271).

Overall, and contrary to the conspiracy theory that the canonical books were deliberately imposed on the Church by those in power in the fourth century, Barton argues that Charles Hill is correct to suggest that no one chose the books of the New Testament. ‘The justifications for accepting them are all retrospective: books are canonical if apostolic, but also are apostolic if canonical. They were accepted because they had always been accepted’ (p.271).

Having reviewed the books that were excluded from the New Testament canon he argues that we should not make too firm a distinction between the contents of the canonical and apocryphal Gospels. He declares:

‘If the apocryphal infancy and resurrection narratives contain legendary or invented material, then so, probably, do the canonical versions, which are also in that sense forgeries – written by people who must have known they were recording unevidenced details. We simply do not know whether they intended readers to believe literally the stories they, or some predecessor, had created. From a religious perspective, the two easy options are either to believe that the stories are historically true, or to deny that they are making actual historical claims and meant symbolically....But what if the truth is that they were intended to persuade the reader of something that the writer knew had not actually happened? In that case their canonicity is surely no answer, however much the Church Fathers affirmed it, as we have seen they did’ (p.283).

D. Concerning textual Criticism

After looking at what we know about the transmission of the texts of the Old and New Testaments, Barton concludes that ‘Even in the New Testament, where the textual variation is much wider than in the Old, there are whole passages where the general drift of the passage is not in serious doubt’ (p.306). He then states, however, that:

‘What the existence of textual variation rules out, it seems to me, is an appeal to the exact wording of biblical sayings as if they were legal rulings, since for that a precise text would be essential. We have

seen that this has significant consequences when it comes, for example, to Jesus' sayings on remarriage and divorce' (p.306).

Furthermore, 'Study of biblical manuscripts can never get us back reliably to the original author, only to the earliest point in the transmission of the text that can be reconstructed, which will always fall short of the original' (p.307).

E. Concerning the Theme of the Bible

On the topic of the theme of the Bible Barton states that:

'...understanding ...the Old Testament as a story of disaster calling out for rescue goes back to Paul, for whom the Scriptures (meaning of course the Old Testament) are teleological, running from Adam to Christ and then on to the Second Coming' (p.313)

This reading of the Old Testament is implied in 1 Thessalonians and I Corinthians and then spelt out implicitly in Romans 5:12, 15 & 19.

He goes on to say that: 'To most Christians from second century CE onwards this has seemed an obvious and rather beautiful way of reading the Bible: The New Testament completes the story told in the Old by showing how God rescued the human race from the disaster into which it had fallen, and to which the Old Testament bears witness. Old Testament characters are often a foreshadowing of people and events in the New Testament and in Christian history. Of course, The Old Testament had other kinds of importance too, for example as providing a basic moral code; but as a narrative it was taken to be about the human lapse into sin, sin's continuation through the history of disobedience in the life of Israel, and the restoration of the human race through the death and resurrection of Christ, who will then come again for the final judgement of the world' (p.314).

By contrast, argues Barton, in Judaism 'as it has developed to modern times' (p.314) the main character is not Adam but Abraham:

'...and the biblical story is that of how his descendants lived in the land that God gave them, were expelled from it when they sinned, but afterwards allowed back and given an ongoing existence. There is no emphasis on 'salvation,' at least not in the otherworldly and individual sense that Christians have often given that word, but rather on divine leadership and guidance of the people as a corporate entity through the winding paths of history. The prophets are there, but they are seen as guides for the path, and the predictions of the Messiah, though there are a few, are not in any way central or very important – they are a minority interest' (p.314).

Barton acknowledges that the Christian reading of the Old Testament with regard to the Fall and its consequence and the importance of messianic prophecy reflects elements of post-exilic Jewish thought, but Judaism itself later moved away from them.

According to Barton, it is foolish to ask which way of reading the Old Testament is preferable. As he sees it:

'Ultimately there is no one correct way of reading the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible: it is a huge, heterogeneous collection of material that can only be given a unity by imposing some interpretive scheme on it. Jews and Christians have done this in different ways, but neither takes account of everything contained in the books, and it is not easy to see how any scheme could do so given the variety within the collection. Both faiths have at times insisted on the Old Testament telling the story they wanted to tell anyway. Such insistence pretends that the Bible determines what we believe, when really the belief system in both faiths is to some degree independent of the Scriptures, which it reads

according to its core tenets. Scripture is for both a resource, but it is not determinative of either as it has in fact developed' (p.326).

In similar fashion, claims Barton, the Christian tradition has developed a way of reading the New Testament that does not really fit what the New Testament itself says. He writes:

'Christians necessarily had to establish a hermeneutic, that is, a framework of understanding within which the Bible is to be interpreted; it came up with the rule of faith, which captures those aspects of the biblical texts that early Christians saw as a central, and downplays others. For a modern Christian the selection is less obvious. Why, for example, was the bodily ascension of Jesus - which is mentioned only twice in the New Testament at the end of Luke in the beginning of Acts (Luke 24:51 in some manuscripts - and Acts 1:9) seen as important enough to get into the rule, while his teaching and healings are not mentioned, even though they take up a huge portion of the gospels and are emphasised in the speeches in Acts? Why did Trinitarian language become so central to the rule's structure when the New Testament hardly knows it? The answer is that these were all issues for the second-century Church, which therefore read the New Testament in their light. The New Testament becomes an answer to questions that are not exactly those its authors originally raised.' (p.330).

F. Concerning the history of Biblical interpretation

In his survey of Jewish and Christian interpretation from the second century onwards, Barton argues that the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible exemplifies the basic point made in the last two quotations. That is to say, Jewish and Christian scholars have read the Bible in ways that make it agree with their own religious traditions rather than reading it on its own terms.

For example, he declares that the Church's rule of faith provided the framework within which the Church Fathers read the Bible. While this had the good effect of constraining 'even their most baroque flights of fancy in reading the detail of the text' (pp.356-357) it also means that:

'...they inevitably sometimes interpret individual parts of the Bible in forced ways, just as the rabbis do. It is part of the price which both Judaism and Christianity pay for having such a long, complex and internally inconsistent set of Scriptures' (p.357)

For another example, he comments that:

'Christian and Jewish readers in the Middle Ages might arrive at different, sometimes even opposite, conclusions from their study of Scripture; but what drove them was essentially the same aim: to get the Bible to support their own system of thought and practice. Their problem was that the Bible only partly overlaps with Judaism, just as it only partly overlaps with Christianity, as these two religions have developed. If one insists that the overlap is to be seen as total, then necessarily rather ingenious techniques of interpretation will have to be devised; and this happened in both religions, in similar though not identical forms' (p.384).

From Barton's viewpoint, the significant advance made by the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century was that:

'...they introduced a new idea into the interpretation of the Bible; the possibility of criticizing the Church's teachings in the light of what the Bible appeared to be saying – and in Luther's case, even of criticizing parts of the Bible itself in the light of what he took to be its overall drift. This was a revolutionary idea, which would feed into the premium on independent thought that would come to characterize the European Enlightenment. For the first time it opened a gap between the Bible and the faith which hermeneutical ingenuity could not bridge' (p.408).

This gap grew wider as result of the critical study of the Bible from the seventeenth century onwards and, according to Barton the result has been that it is now clear that the Bible does not support traditional Christian doctrine or traditional patterns of Church order.

In his words:

‘What all these critics made clear, above all, was that the New Testament does not unequivocally support traditional Christian doctrines such as the doctrine of the Trinity or the divinity of Christ, any more than the Old Testament, studied critically, supports a traditional picture of the Mosaic origins of Israel’ (p.424)

Thus he also writes that the New Testament evidence does not support the idea of a God-given three fold form of ordained ministry consisting of bishops, priest and deacons. For Barton , if we look at the New Testament evidence ‘coolly and dispassionately’ we shall:

‘...almost certainly arrive at a position some of the Reformers (including Luther and Hooker) reached, namely that the New Testament does not prescribe any determinate system for ministry because it speaks with so many different voices’ (p.417).

In addition to biblical criticism, scientific discoveries also:

‘... made Readers see that the Bible contained myths and legends , which might be full of wisdom and insight of many kinds but which did not provide any scientific information or historical account of human origins’ (p.428)

Furthermore, the effect of scientific discovery:

‘... was not limited to the claims made in the Old Testament. When Paul affirms that death entered the world because of sin (the sin of Adam: Romans 5 : 12), this too is rendered clearly untrue through the observation that human beings, and their homonid predecessors, have always been mortal, as are all other organisms. Incidentally, this challenges a major plank in the Christian storythe story of God’s rescue mission....in which Adam’s sin plays a central role. This too, and not just Genesis, has to be understood in a non-literal way or relinquished’ (p.428).

Today, declares Barton, ‘Biblical studies has entered a highly pluralistic stage’ (p.435) in which the ‘traditional critical styles’ which emerged in the nineteenth century sits alongside a variety of ‘post critical’ approaches which concentrate on the final form of the biblical text informed by theological commitment or ‘political, social-scientific and postmodernist insights’ (p.434).

G. Concerning the Bible and Faith

In his closing chapter on ‘The Bible and Faith’ Barton questions argues that the concept of inspiration is not much found in Scripture and creates problems because it seems to imply that the words of the Bible are dictated by God, because the Bible says things which we now know to be wrong, and because the text of the Bible is uncertain. He suggests that the Catholic modernist notion that inspiration means that God has providentially given us a biblical text that it is imperfect, but yet still efficacious in ‘faith and morals’ is ‘an intelligible attempt’ to maintain the idea of inspiration without embracing divine dictation, but also suggests that inspiration may be a term ‘that causes more problems than it solves’ (p.479).

However, in spite of his hesitations about the concept of inspiration, Barton insists that the Bible remains indispensable to both Judaism and Christianity because: ‘Without Scripture, either religion

turns into simply what Christians or Jews happen to believe or do at the moment, and there is no criterion against which to measure their beliefs' (p.485).

As he sees it, the Bible has two important functions within Judaism and Christianity:

One the one hand:

'The Bible can exercise a control and check on the religions that claim it as their own. Christians for example, need to be aware of claims about Jesus or the church but are clearly incompatible with the evidence of the New Testament. The Reformation call to go back to the evidence of the 'primitive' church as reflected in the pages of the New Testament was flawed because the reformers often lacked relevant historical knowledge, but it was justified in principle' (p.485).

On the other hand: 'The Bible can also nourish religious faith by its very different from what Jews or Christians instinctively believe or do: it can surprise, constructively as well as challengingly' (p.486).

The value of the Bible, writes Barton, is that it tells us:

'... As Lutherans sometimes put it, '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. The extreme diversity of the material in the Bible is not to be reduced by extracting essential principles, but embraced as a celebration of variety. This undermines much traditional interpretive practice, (which as we have seen) is often designed to make sure the Bible delivers an 'orthodox' message. Freeing the Bible from the control of religious authorities is of the essence of critical study, and it results in a free counterpoint between scripture and doctrinal faith' (p.486)

Barton suggests that we should view the relationship between the Bible and the Christian faith in terms of two intersecting circles.

In the biblical circle:

'There are matters ... that scarcely bear on Christian faith at all, and which make trouble if Christians assume they must do so: the curses in the Psalms, Joshua's battles with the Canaanites, Paul's more intemperate outbursts against his converts and against Judaism as he knew it, the vindictive prophecies in Revelation, many of the laws in Leviticus' (p. 486).

Likewise, in the circle of Christian faith:

'... there are matters that are only very faintly, or even not at all, represented in the Bible: the doctrines of the Trinity, the way the Church is to be organized, the creation of the world out of nothing, the meaning of Christ's death, the idea that after his death he descended to the underworld. Only forced interpretation will find these laid down definitely in the Bible' (p.486).

However, there is 'a large area of overlap, where the contents of the Bible and of the Christian faith do coincide, or at least are congruent.' (p.487). In line with his reading of the statement in Article 6 of the *Thirty Nine Articles* that 'the Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation,' Barton suggests that matters which fall into this area of overlap 'are not negotiable'¹ because they belong to the 'essentials' of Christianity, 'what C S Lewis famously called 'mere Christianity'' (p.487).

¹ For him 'absolute allegiance to Christ' and the belief that 'God was in Christ' are examples of matters that are non-negotiable (p.488).

Those matters in the Bible and in Christian belief and practice which do fall into this area of overlap are what, during the Reformation, were called *adiaphora*, ‘things indifferent’ (p.487). Regarding such matters:

‘... reasonable people, even when properly informed by the Bible, may reasonably differ, yet on which some decision may be needed, and so must be taken in good faith – not knowing whether it is the right decision, or even if there is a single right decision.’ (p.487).

3. Why is *A History of the Bible* a book that people should read?

Barton’s book is a well-written, comprehensive, and detailed² account of what the creation and subsequent interpretation of the Bible look like from the perspective of mainstream historical critical scholarship. If you want to know what the history of the Bible looks like when viewed from this perspective, then Barton’s book is now the best place to go in order to find out.

Barton’s book is not simply a historical account, however. Like other surveys of the history of biblical interpretation such as Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the historical Jesus*³ or Brevard Childs’ *Biblical Theology in Crisis*,⁴ Barton’s work is also a manifesto for a particular theological position.

In his manifesto Barton makes four main points:

- That the best approach to understanding the Bible is the historical critical approach rather than a confessional approach based on Christian (or Jewish) theological tradition, or a ‘final form’ approach which ignores the history of the text in favour of reading it from a political, social scientific, or post-modern perspective;
- That readers of the Bible need to understand that the Bible is a complex and internally inconsistent corpus of writings that does not have a single overall theme or message. Consequently, all attempts to read it as if it did, involve imposing an interpretative scheme on the biblical material, an interpretative scheme that will never properly correspond to what the Bible itself says;
- That although the Bible is theologically indispensable to both Christianity and Judaism, neither religion directly reflects what the Bible teaches in either its faith or its practice. To use Barton’s image, there is an overlap between the circle of Jewish or Christian belief and practice and the circle consisting of what is in the Bible, but the overlap is only ever a partial one;
- That Christians in particular need to understand that even key elements of the Christian tradition, such as the doctrine of the Trinity or the traditional three-fold pattern of ordained ministry, cannot be found within the Bible itself. In Barton’s view Christians should regard those things which are not directly taught in Scripture as *adiaphora*, things that are ‘indifferent’ and upon which reasonable people may rightly differ.

To put the matter at its most simple, Barton wants people to be realistic about what the Bible is actually like and to stop suggesting that it has a greater degree of clarity, cohesion and consistency than it actually does.

At the beginning and end of his book Barton quotes the words of Richard Hooker:

...as incredible praises given unto men do often abate and impair the credit of their deserved commendations, so we must likewise take great heed, lest, in attributing unto Scripture more than it

² There are, for example, forty one pages of notes and eighteen pages of bibliography.

³ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1996)

⁴ Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

can have, the incredibility of that do cause even those things which indeed it hath most abundantly, to be less reverently esteemed' (pp.13 and 489).⁵

Barton's aim is to stop people from making this mistake and, as he sees it, the way to avoid 'attributing unto Scripture more than it can have' is to accept the approach to Scripture which he sets out.

Barton's approach to the Bible is one that has been put forward, in outline if not in detail, by a succession of liberal Anglican theologians since the middle of the nineteenth century. What his manifesto does is give a scholarly and up to date *apologia* for this tradition of Anglican thought. It follows that anyone who wants to know what the argument for a liberal Anglican approach to the Bible looks like today should likewise read his book. Until you have engaged with this book you have not engaged with this approach in what is currently its most persuasive form.

4. The two basic theological problems with the book.

What Barton says in *A History of the Bible* raises two basic problems for Christian theology.

The first problem is the issue of the authority of the Bible.

In Article XX of the *Thirty Nine Articles* that the Church may not 'so expound one place of scripture, that it may be repugnant to another.'

As Oliver O' Donovan explains in his commentary on the Articles, this clause in Article XX shows that the English Reformers:

'...had sufficient experience of diversifying expositions of Scripture to know that they had negative implications for the question of authority. They knew that it was not enough to assert the authority of the sacred text and simply leave the hermeneutical question wide open. They had met polemical arguments which accommodated comfortably enough the formal claim for scripture, but which made such great play with the diversities and contradictions as to rob that formal claim of all its substance. The ordinary reader, it was suggested, could only be bewildered by the biblical text, and so, for all practical purposes, must resign himself to the teaching authority of the church. In response to such disingenuous arguments, the Reformers were prepared to insist, if not on the good sense of the ordinary reader of Scripture, at least upon the *ordinary readability* of Scripture, without which the attribution of authority to Scripture would be a mere pro forma gesture. Yet if Scripture is ordinarily readable there must be a unity and coherence to it. The readability of the whole is not established merely from the readability of its various constituent books and texts. Unless we can think that Scripture is readable as a whole, that it communicates a unified outlook and perspective, we cannot attribute doctrinal authority to it, but only to some part of it at the cost of some other part. The authority of Scripture then, presupposes the possibility of a harmonious reading; correspondingly, a church which presumes to offer an unharmonious or diversifying reading may be supposed to have in mind an indirect challenge to the authority of Scripture itself.'⁶

Barton's approach to the Bible leaves us with precisely the problem identified in this quotation. As we have seen, Barton argues (correctly) that Christianity and Judaism still need the Bible because 'Without Scripture, either religion turns into simply what Christians or Jews happen to believe or do at the moment, and there is no criterion against which to measure their beliefs.'

However, if what Barton writes in *A History of the Bible* is correct, the Bible as a whole cannot act as this criterion because it is not a whole, merely a collection of disparate material that has no unified

⁵ The quotation is from *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 2:8.

⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty Nine Articles*, (Exeter: Paternoster: 1986), p.56.

message or meaning. This means that either Christians and Jews have to ignore what the Bible is really like and impose their own unified meaning upon it (in which case the their reading of the Bible merely reflects their own existing ideas or convictions), or they have to accept the authority of some bits and not others (and they likewise have no grounds for such a choice except their existing beliefs and convictions since the Bible itself does not tell you which bits of its material are authoritative and which are not).

The Bible thus becomes theologically redundant because the nature of the Bible, as understood in the light of the historical critical approach which Barton outlines in his book, means that it simply cannot perform the role for which Barton says it is needed.

The second problem relates to the content of the Christian faith as a whole

As we have just noted, Barton's approach to the Bible undermines the traditional Christian belief that the Bible is able to act as an authoritative basis for Christian belief and practice. Furthermore, his approach to the Bible also calls into question a whole range of other traditional Christian beliefs.

In summary form we can say that Barton claims that:

1. The Old and New Testament Canons arose by accident.
2. The variations that exist between the copies of the biblical texts means that we cannot rely on the wording of the Bible.
3. The idea of the Bible being inspired by God is marginal in the Bible and may well create more problems than it solves.
4. The Bible does not teach that God created the world out of nothing.
5. The accounts of the creation and the Fall are mythical or legendary.
6. Much of the rest of the Old Testament is also legendary, including what is said about the Patriarchs, Moses, the Exodus and the conquest under Joshua, and the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon.
7. The Old Testament laws were not given to Moses by God in the wilderness and are in any event not really laws but general legal principles for people to consider.
8. The Old Testament prophets were people who saw that imminent national disaster was coming and interpreted this as being the result of national sin. However, they did not predict that God would act to save his people after the Exile. or predict the coming of Jesus.
9. The concept of the Messiah is marginal in the Old Testament and in any event only refers to someone who will rule as an earthly king over a restored Jewish kingdom.
10. The Gospels were not written by people who knew Jesus personally and the Gospel accounts are contradictory and were originally intended to replace each other.
11. The accounts of Jesus' birth and resurrection in the Gospels are as legendary as the stories about these events in the apocryphal gospels and may have been deliberate acts of deliberate forgery by their authors.
12. What is said about Paul in the Acts of the Apostles is historically unreliable.
13. Most of the New Testament letters are forgeries
14. In the earliest account of the resurrection Paul did not teach that Jesus rose bodily from the dead.
15. Paul's teaching about justification was not about salvation through faith rather than works, but about the inclusion of Gentiles into the Church.
16. What Paul writes in Romans 9-11 is complex and inconsistent and should be regarded as an invitation to undertake our own thinking rather than as authoritative teaching necessary for salvation.

17. The view of the Bible which sees it as continuous story of rescue from disaster running from Adam, through Christ, to the second coming, is an interpretive scheme that Christians have imposed on the biblical text.
18. The Bible gives a subordinationist account of the relationship between Jesus and God that is at odds with traditional Christian teaching about the Trinity and the divinity of Christ.
19. The Bible does not give definitive teaching about the meaning of the death of Christ, or his descent to the dead.
20. The Bible does not give a blueprint for the form of the Church's ministry.

If we were to accept all these points the Christian faith in its traditional form would be impossible to maintain. As we have seen, Barton maintains those elements of the Christian faith which are also in the Bible constitute the 'mere Christianity' referred to by C S Lewis. However, what Lewis means by 'mere Christianity' is the 'common doctrines of Christianity' as these have been held over the centuries by Christians of the various different Christian traditions.⁷ If we were to take on board the twenty points proposed by Barton, what we would be left with would certainly not be 'mere Christianity' in this sense. Christianity as it has been known and believed down the centuries would have ceased to exist.

In his Preface to *The Truth of God Incarnate* Michael Green asks:

'How much can you remove from a car, and still possess what is properly called a car? Lights may be a luxury; you can do without bodywork in warm weather; brakes may be dispensed with, at all events on the level; but if you remove the engine or the chassis it is questionable whether we are still talking about a car at all.'⁸

This question was raised for Green by the abandonment of traditional Christological orthodoxy by the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*,⁹ but it is raised in an even more acute form by Barton's work. His work requires such a wholesale abandonment of traditional Christian orthodoxy that there would be absolutely no car remaining at all. All you would have left would be a disconnected pile of different fragments of the Bible lying on the garage floor.

Barton might protest that there are still things that are left, such as 'absolute allegiance to Christ' and the belief that 'God was in Christ,' but it is difficult to know how you could affirm either in a traditional Christian sense once you have abolished the biblical and theological framework within which they have historically been understood.

The very term 'Christ,' for instance, refers to the belief that Jesus was the supernatural messiah predicted by the prophets in the Old Testament, a belief which, according to Barton, we can no longer hold. Jesus would be the predicted messiah who no one had predicted. The only way the use of the term 'Christ' could be salvaged would therefore be to give it a new meaning, different from that which Christians have traditionally attached to it. You might still say that Jesus is 'the Christ,' but you would not mean what Christians in New Testament times or since have meant by the term.

At this point, it might be argued by Barton, or someone sympathetic to his approach, that both of these problems exist, but that they are problems that we simply have to learn to live with since they are the inevitable result of serious critical study of the biblical material.

⁷ See the Preface to C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Fount, 1984) and his Introduction to *The Incarnation of the Word of God* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944).

⁸ Michael Green (ed), *The Truth of God incarnate* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

⁹ John Hick (ed), *The Myth of God incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977).

In the remainder of this review I shall suggest that this argument does not stand up to scrutiny since a serious critical study of the Bible does not in fact lead to the radical conclusions put forward by Barton.

5. An alternative approach

A. Jesus and the authority of the Old Testament

To begin with, I want to argue that Barton has come at the Bible from the wrong starting point. In his book Barton never reflects on the issue of right starting point from which to study the Bible, but in practice his starting point seems to be the general consensus among historical critical scholars. It is what historical critical scholarship has said since the Enlightenment, and what it is saying today, that determines his view of the Bible.

For a Christian believer, who gives his or her 'absolute allegiance to Christ', there is, however, a more appropriate starting point, which is what Jesus taught about how we should view Scripture. A Christian is a disciple (Matthew 27:57, Luke 14:26, John 18:15, Acts 9:36), someone who looks to Jesus as their authoritative teacher, and it makes no sense at all to say in general terms that we accept his teaching authority, but not then accept the authority of what he teaches about the Bible.

It is true that what Jesus taught is itself disputed by biblical scholars, but as John Wenham argues in his classic study *Christ and the Bible*, even if we only accept the Gospels as a generally reliable account of Jesus' teaching, the approach that he took to what we call the Old Testament is clear. In the words of Wenham:

'The evidence is clear:

To Christ the Old Testament was true authoritative, inspired.

To him the God of the Old Testament was the living God, and the teaching of the Old Testament was the teaching of the living God.

To him, what Scripture said, God said.'¹⁰

As John Stott further notes, The Gospels tell us that Jesus not only taught the authority of the Old Testament but 'submitted to its authority himself.'¹¹ He gives three examples of this.

First, he writes:

'...Jesus submitted to the Old Testament in his personal conduct. Thus, He countered Each of his temptations of the devil by an apt Biblical quotation. It is sometimes said that he quoted Scripture 'at the devil.' This is not so. It would be more accurate to say that He quoted scripture at Himself in the presence of the devil. For when the devil offered Him the Kingdom of the world if He would fall down and worship him, Jesus replied:

'Be gone, Satan! 'For it is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"
[Matthew 4:10]

¹⁰ John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1979), p.37. For the detailed evidence behind this claim see Wenham, Ch.1 and R T France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000).

¹¹ John Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (London: Scripture Union, 1973), p. 191.

Jesus was not applying this text to Satan but to Himself. He knew from scripture that worship was due to God alone. Therefore He would obey. As man He would worship God, not Satan. The simple word *gegraptai* ('it stands written' was enough) for Him. There was no need to question, discuss, argue or negotiate. The matter had already been settled by Scripture.'¹²

Secondly:

'Jesus submitted to the Old Testament in the fulfilment of His mission . He seems to have come to an understanding of His messianic role from a study of Old Testament scripture. He knew Himself to be both Isaiah's suffering servant and Daniel's son of man. So He accepted that He could enter into His glory only by the road of suffering and death. This explains the sense of necessity, of compulsion, which constrained him:

'The son of man must suffer many things and be rejected... and be killed, and after three days rise again.' [Mark 8:31]

Why must? Because the Scripture said so. Voluntarily and deliberately He put Himself under the authority of what stood written, and He determined to fulfil it , in His mission as in His conduct. So when Peter tried to avert His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, he told Peter to sheathe his sword. He had no need of human defence. Could He not appeal to His father for legions of defending angels? Then why did He not do so? Here is the reason He gave:

'How then should the Scriptures be fulfilled , that it must be so? [Matthew 26:54]

He was of the same opinion after the resurrection, and confirmed it both to the two Emmaus disciples and the wider group of His followers:

'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory? These are my words which I spoke to you, when I was still with you, that everything written about me the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.'" [Luke 24: 26, 44.]¹³

Thirdly:

'Jesus submitted to the Old Testament in His controversies. He found himself engaged in continuous debate with the religious leaders of His day, and whenever there was a difference of opinion between them, he regarded Scripture as the only court of appeal. 'What is written in the law?' He would ask. 'How do you read?' [Luke 10:26] Again, 'Have you not read this Scripture ...?' [Mark 12:10] One of his chief criticisms of His contemporaries concerned their disrespect for Scripture. The Pharisees added to it and the Sadducees subtracted from it. So to the Pharisees He said:

'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on.' [Mark 7:9,13]

And to the Sadducees:

'Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?' [John 10:35]

¹² Stott, p.191.

¹³ Stott, pp.191-192.

It is beyond question then, that Jesus Christ was Himself personally submissive to Scripture. In His own ethical standards, in His understanding of His mission, and in debate with the Jewish leaders, what the Scripture said was decisive for Him.’¹⁴

Stott goes on to note that two proposals have been made in response to the witness of the Gospels to Jesus’ view of the authority of Scripture.

The first proposal is that as a consequence of the incarnation Jesus acquired:

‘... the limited mentality of the first-century Jew. Of course He accepted the authority of Scripture, for this is what the Jews of His day believed. But that is no reason why we should. Their view and His are outmoded.’¹⁵

However, the evidence of the Gospels tells against this proposal. It tells us that:

‘He certainly emptied Himself of His glory when He took the form of a servant. But He did not empty Himself of His deity in becoming Man. And although as a man He seems to have been ignorant of certain matters (He said He did not know the day of His return [Mark 13:32]), the remarkable fact is that He was not ignorant of His ignorance. He knew the limits of His knowledge. Consequently in His instruction He never strayed beyond these limits. On the contrary, He insisted that He taught only what the Father gave Him to teach [e.g. John 7:14-17, 12:49, 17:8]. Therefore we claim that He was inerrant, that all His teaching was true, including His endorsement of the authority of Scripture.’¹⁶

The second proposal is that:

‘Jesus knew perfectly well that Scripture was not entirely the word of God and reliable. Yet because his contemporaries all believed that it was, he accommodated himself to their position. There is no need for us to do so.’¹⁷

As Stott observes, this proposal:

‘... is quite intolerable. it is derogatory to Christ, and incompatible with his claim to be the truth, and to teach the truth. Besides, he never hesitated to disagree with his contemporaries on other matters, so why should he have done so on this? Further is reconstruction with a tribute to Jesus the very thing he detested most - religious pretense, or hypocrisy.’¹⁸

If we reject both these proposals, what we are left with is the conclusion that:

‘Jesus knew what He was talking about, and that He meant it. He taught knowledgeably, deliberately and with entire sincerity. He declared the divine origin of all Scripture for the straightforward reason that He believed it. And what he believed and taught is true.’¹⁹

One of the surprising features of Barton’s book is that he says almost nothing concerning the issue of what Jesus thought and taught about the Old Testament. It is a key piece of the historical evidence concerning the origins of the Christian view of the Bible and yet Barton almost entirely ignores it.

¹⁴ Stott, pp.192-193.

¹⁵ Stott, p.200.

¹⁶ Stott, pp.200-201.

¹⁷ Stott, p.201.

¹⁸ Stott, p.201. For a more detailed consideration of these points see Wenham, chapters 2-3.

¹⁹ Stott, p.201.

I say 'almost entirely' because, as we have noted, Barton does suggest that for Jesus there may have been 'as yet no 'canon.'" If this was true it would mean that we cannot say that Jesus taught the authority of the Old Testament as we know it since for him it would not yet have existed.

He gives two arguments in support of this suggestion. First, he contends that the synagogue at Nazareth 'may not have owned a full set of what are now called the Hebrew Scriptures ' and secondly he notes that Jesus quotes most frequently from the Pentateuch, Isaiah and the Psalms.

There is absolutely no evidence to support the first contention. We have no evidence concerning what scrolls were possessed by the Nazareth synagogue, so it may or may not have had a full set.

Furthermore, even if it was the case that the synagogue at Nazareth did not have a full set of the Hebrew Scriptures, this would not mean that for Jesus a canon of Scripture did not exist. The latter does not follow from the former.

It is true that according to the Gospels Jesus quoted most often from the Pentateuch, Isaiah and the Psalms. However there is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that these were the only books he regarded as authoritative, or that he saw them as core books that were more authoritative than the other books of the Old Testament from which he also quoted.

The evidence that we have tells us that, contrary to Barton's argument, the Jewish canon of Scripture was fixed by the first century. There wasn't a canonical core with fuzzy edges, but a fixed canon of twenty-four books divided into three sections.²⁰ This canon was arranged as follows:

The Law; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy,

The Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, The Twelve Prophets [Hosea to Malachi]

The Writings: Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.

The books in this list correspond exactly to the thirty-nine book Protestant Old Testament Canon, except that the books are in a different order and the minor prophets are combined together as one book.

If we look at the evidence from the Gospels we find that Jesus quotes from, or alludes to, fifteen out of the twenty four books of the Jewish canon and that these books come from all three sections of the Canon (the books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, The Twelve, Psalms, Proverbs, Daniel and Chronicles).²¹

If considered on its own this evidence could suggest that Jesus had an idiosyncratic fifteen book Canon, but there is other evidence that needs to be taken into account.

First, in Matthew 23:5 and Luke 11:51 we have two warnings by Jesus of imminent judgement that refer to the shedding of 'righteous blood' from Abel to Zechariah. Abel comes at start of the Jewish Canon(Genesis 4:8) and Zechariah comes at the end of it (2 Chronicles 24:21). As Beckwith comments:

²⁰ For details see Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1984). Beckwith explains that the non-Canonical texts found at Qumran were not additional books of Scripture but interpretations of the books found in the existing Jewish Canon(pp.358-366).

²¹ A helpful list of quotes and allusions can be found at 'Parallel passages in New Testament quoted from Old Testament' at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/quotes.cfm> .

‘What he [Jesus] is evidently saying is that all the martyred prophets from one end of the Bible to the other will be avenged on his generation. He is thus confirming that the traditional order of books, which began with Genesis and ended with Chronicles, goes back in all essentials to the first century. Nor is he the inventor of this order. His allusive way of indicating the whole canon would be intelligible only if the order were already widely received.’²²

To put it simply, Jesus regards the twenty-four book Jewish canon of Scripture, in its received order, as a given which he shares with his hearers, otherwise his warning of coming judgement makes no sense.

Secondly, at the end of Luke’s Gospel we have two references to the canon of Scripture.

In Luke 24:27 we read ‘And beginning with Moses and all the prophets he [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself’.

Then in Luke 24:44-47 we read:

‘ Then he said to them, ‘These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’”

In these two passages ‘the scriptures’ are the books comprising the canon and these are summarised as ‘Moses and all the prophets’ and ‘the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms.’ In both cases it is the twenty—four book canon that is meant. In the second passage ‘psalms’ is a way of referring to the third section of the Canon(‘the writings’) that reflects the fact that Psalms is the largest book in this section.²³

As we saw previously, Jesus believed that his mission had been laid down in advance by God in the Scriptures and these passages make it clear that for him the Scriptures meant the books of the twenty-four book Canon (the writings that make up our Old Testament) .

In addition, the fact that Luke feels no need, either here or anywhere else, to spell out the meaning of the terms he uses when referring to the Scriptures indicates that those to whom his Gospel is addressed knew what the terms meant. For them the contents of the canon were clear, and they were clear because Jesus had made them clear to his first followers who had then passed on Jesus’ view of the matter to the early Church.²⁴

Thirdly, the whole shape of the Gospel of Matthew bears witness to the Jewish Canon. As Peter Leithart points out in his commentary on the Gospel, Matthew tells the story of Jesus:

‘...as a recapitulation of the story of Israel. Jesus does it right; He keeps the covenant; he is the obedient Adam reversing the scene of the first Adam, the obedient Israel undoing the failure of the first Israel. He goes to the wilderness and resists temptation. He conquers the land with words of healing and power. He is faithful in the face of the attacks of the people and of Herod. In his death

²² Beckwith, p.220.

²³ Beckwith pp.112-115.

²⁴ A comparison with Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1:8 is illuminating here. Josephus feels he has to explain to his non-Jewish audience the contents and rationale of the Jewish Canon of Scripture, whereas Luke feels that no such explanation is necessary.

and resurrection, Jesus relives Israel's exile and return. Jesus is Israel, living through the history of Israel in order to undo that sinful tragedy.'²⁵

Furthermore, the story of Jesus is the recapitulation of the story of Israel as this is laid down in the Jewish Canon. We can see this from the beginning and end of the Gospel.

The Gospel opens with the words Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ. Following Dale Allison, Leithart suggests that these words should be translated 'The book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ.'²⁶ What Matthew is saying that the coming of Jesus in to the world is Genesis 2.0, a new start for Israel and the world, and for our purposes the point to note is that Matthew's story of Jesus starts where the Jewish canon starts, with Genesis.

The Gospel closes with the Great Commission in Matthew 28: 18-20, a commission which deliberately echoes the words of the decree of Cyrus the Great in 2 Chronicles 36:23 with which the Jewish canon ends. In Leithart's words:

'In both Matthew 28:18-20 and 2 Chronicles 36:23 we have the following sequence:

Statement regarding universal authority

Statement regarding the source of authority

Commission to 'go.'

Jesus is greater than Cyrus, having received authority in heaven as well as earth from His Father, and in the light of that authority he commissions his disciples to 'go' (πορευθέντες) . Matthew's gospel begins like Genesis and ends like Chronicles, and thus encompasses the entirety of the Hebrew canon.'²⁷

Where Matthew begins and ends his Gospel shows us that for him, as for Luke, the Canon of Scripture is the accepted Jewish Canon, the twenty-four books starting with Genesis and end with Chronicles. Furthermore, he would have expected his readers to get the point and so their Canon must have been the same as his. As in the case of Luke, the best explanation for this is that he and they held a common view of the Canon going back to Jesus himself.

This means we can expand Wenham's statement quoted earlier as follows:

'The evidence is clear:

To Christ the Old Testament, *consisting of the twenty- four books of the Jewish Canon*, was true authoritative, inspired.

To him the God of the Old Testament was the living God, and the teaching of the Old Testament was the teaching of the living God.

To him, what Scripture said, God said.'

²⁵ Peter Leithhart, *The Gospel of Matthew Through New Eyes Volume One: Jesus as Israel* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2017), Kindle edition, Loc. 588.

²⁶ Leithart, Loc.548.

²⁷ Leithart, Loc. 175.

B. Divine communication and the proper approach to reading the Old Testament

When we say that what Scripture says God says we are using metaphorical language.

If we say, as people sometimes do, that what JRR Tolkien says in the *Lord of the Rings* is X we do not mean that Tolkien is literally speaking. Tolkien died in 1973 and so is no longer capable of physical speech. We are using the language of speech metaphorically to say that as the author of the *Lord of the Rings* Tolkien used the words contained in the text to communicate something to his readers. The use of the metaphor of speech highlights the truth that writing is an act of personal communication by an author in the same way that speaking is.

In similar fashion when we say that God speaks through the written words of Scripture what we are saying is that God is involved in an act of personal communication with the readers of Scripture through these words so that they might be in a right relationship with him.²⁸ To put it another way, the text of Scripture is a message to us from God.

I have used the word 'text' twice in this section and it worth pausing at this point to consider what the word means since this will help us to understand the form that God's communication to us through the Old Testament takes.

When people use the word 'text' they often mean a physical object which contains words, such as a book, an article in a magazine, or a notice stuck up on a wall. This is perfectly legitimate use of the word, but it does not get to the heart of what a text is. This is because fundamentally a text is a web of words intended to convey meaning and a physical object is only one of the forms this web of words can take.²⁹

If we think of a book, for example, the text first exists as a web of words in the mind of the author and this web of words can then exist in many different forms. For example, it can exist as a text hand-written in pen by the author, or as a traditional printed text, or as an e version, or in an audio version. What remains constant is not the form of the text but its meaning.

The description of a text as a 'web' of words makes the point that in a text meaning is communicated through a group of words that are placed in association with each other. To go back to *The Lord of the Rings*, the opening paragraph of the first chapter, of the second book, of the first part, runs as follows:

'Frodo woke and found himself lying in bed. At first he thought that he had slept late, after a long unpleasant dream that still hovered on the edge of memory. Or perhaps he had been ill? But the ceiling looked strange; it was flat, and it had dark beams richly carved. He lay a little while longer looking at patches of sunlight on the wall and listening to the sound of a waterfall.'³⁰

The words in this paragraph convey the meaning intended by Tolkien through being placed together in this paragraph. For example, in the fourth sentence we know in what way the ceiling looked 'strange' because of the words in the two clauses that follow.

²⁸ For this point see Timothy Ward, *Words of Life* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009).

²⁹ I owe this point to Peter Williams in his lecture 'Can we know the exact words of God?' which can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTGJR1eFzPc>.

³⁰ J R R Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Book Club Associates, 1980), p.235.

On one level the meaning of this paragraph is clear in itself. We know what Frodo experienced when he woke up. However, to appreciate its full meaning by, for instance, to understand who Frodo is, or why it is significant that he is lying in bed in a particular place at a particular time, we have to see how the words in the paragraph form part of larger web of meaning (a larger 'text') constituted by the book to which it belongs and by the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as a whole.

If we apply a similar analysis to the Old Testament we find, first of all, that the individual smaller texts of which the Old Testament canon is made up do not exist on their own, but exist as part of books. Furthermore, careful study by scholars such as Robert Alter,³¹ Brevard Childs³² and David Dorsey³³ has shown that these books are not simply, as Barton repeatedly suggests, collections of texts that have been randomly stuck together. Instead, they are careful literary constructs that use a whole variety of sophisticated literary techniques to link the smaller texts they contain within a single, coherent web of theological meaning constituted by the book as whole.

What this means is that if we want to read the Old Testament properly, the primary texts to which we need to pay attention are the books which it contains. The tradition of historical criticism represented by Barton has focussed on trying to reconstruct the original forms of the texts which underly the biblical books we now have (such as the J E D P sources in the Pentateuch, or the oracles underlying the prophetic books) and then trying to re-construct the history of Israelite religion on the basis of these reconstructed original forms. The problem is that (a) these original forms have proved very difficult to reconstruct, with huge scholarly disagreement about the matter and a tendency to produce more and more hypothetical sources (so not just J but J¹⁻³ and not just first, second and third Isaiah, but numerous sources within each) and (b) this approach ignores the truth that what God has given to us in the Old Testament is not these sources (if indeed they existed), but the biblical books that we now have. These books are the texts through which he has chosen to communicate to us.

This means that a proper approach to reading the Old Testament involves a 'final form' reading of the biblical books, an approach to which Barton refers, but of which he does not appear to make use. In the case of the Book of Genesis, for instance, the proper way to read it is to discern how the texts which it contains (the various narratives concerning God's creation of the world and the ancestors of the people of Israel) fit together to form a single overarching text which describes how the promise of deliverance made by God in Genesis 3:15 in the aftermath of the Fall begins to become true in the history of the descendants of Abraham, who God starts to form into a people through whom the all the nations of the world will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Each of the individual stories in Genesis needs to be understood in the light of this one overarching story.

For example, the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38:1-30 is not just a fragment of tradition which has been randomly introduced into the cycle of stories about Joseph. Instead it is there for a specific, identifiable, purpose. In literary terms it heightens the tension in the Joseph narrative by pausing the story of Joseph after he has been sold into slavery in Egypt in Genesis 37: 36. In this time of waiting in the larger Joseph narrative, the smaller story of Judah and Tamar also serves to introduce the key theme of the larger narrative (how God acts in unexpected ways in the face of human evil to preserve the posterity of Abraham and achieve blessing for the world - Genesis 50:20) by describing how the heroic determination of Tamar keeps the line of Judah alive after the deaths of Judah's two sons, Er and Onan, and the refusal of Judah to marry her to his third son Shelah). Moreover the fact that the item which identifies Judah as the father of Tamar's children in his staff provides a linguistic link

³¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981) and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, Basic Books, 2011).

³² Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM 1979).

³³ David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

between this story and the prophecy made by Jacob in Genesis 49:10 that there will be 'a descendant from Judah whose dominion will encompass the world.'³⁴

If we want to read the Old Testament books properly we also need to read them in the light of the whole Old Testament canon. Just as each of the three books of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy needs to be read in the light of the trilogy as a whole, so also each of the books in the Old Testament need to be read in the light of the Old Testament as whole. It is the whole Old Testament canon that constitutes the big text, the big web of meaning through which God has chosen to communicate with us.

This truth is signified by the way that early Jewish descriptions of the Old Testament canon refer to it using descriptions such as 'the Holy Word', 'the Divine Word' and 'The Prophetic Word.'³⁵ The point these descriptions are making is that, pace Barton, for all its textual variety the Old Testament constitutes a unified and coherent message, a 'word' from God.

C. Understanding the Old Testament as Canon

If we look at how the Old Testament canon is structured in the original order known by Jesus, we find that it starts off in the Pentateuch and the former prophets (Genesis – Kings) by telling a single continuous story which starts with creation and runs to the exile in Babylon. Because there is one story, each book in the sequence needs to be read in the light of the rest. Thus Judges cannot be understood except in the light of the story of the Exodus and Conquest that precedes it or the story of Israelite kingship that follows it (Judges 2:6-15 and 21:25 make this point). This story is then picked up and continued in relation to what happens during and after the exile in the books of Daniel, Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah, and it is finally re-capitulated as a whole in Chronicles.

The law codes contained in the books from Exodus to Numbers are not just, as Barton suggests, a set of general legal principles which readers are invited to consider. Within the biblical story they are the stipulations attached to the covenant between God and the people of Israel that the people of Israel are expected to obey in their entirety. It is the failure of the people of Israel to obey these stipulations that eventually results in the exile, which is the punishment for violating the covenant set out in Deuteronomy 28-30.

The latter prophets, Jeremiah-The Twelve Prophets, and the writings from Ruth-Lamentations, serve as a commentary on the story. The prophetic books explain why the exile in Babylon took place and describe how God will in due time fulfil his good purposes for Israel and the world through his further activity both during the exile and into the indefinite future.

The writings provide additional commentary on the story. Thus Ruth reminds its readers that God kept the Davidic line alive when it was apparently about to be extinguished in exile, the Song of Songs declares that in spite of the exile God loves Israel his bride with an unbreakable love, and the Psalms cover the whole of the experience of the people of Israel and declare that the story of Israel will end with everything in creation praising its creator for what he has done.

The writings also give instruction on how to live in the time before God fulfils his purposes. Thus Job and Ecclesiastes remind their readers that they will never be able to fully fathom God's ways, or the

³⁴ Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty – A theology of the Old Testament* (Nottingham & Downers Grove: Apollos/Inter Varsity Press, 2003) p, 91. This point is also picked up by Matthew when he includes Tamar in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:3.

³⁵ Beckwith, p.105.

reasons for the apparent triumph of evil, and that wisdom lies in accepting this fact and continuing to nonetheless fear God and keep his commandments, and Proverbs teaches that wisdom lies in fearing God by observing the moral law embedded in the created order, even though the created order is marred by the continuing presence of sin.

The end of the Old Testament canon in Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles leaves the story of God's dealing with his people unfinished. In the words of Leithart :

'...we come to the end of the history of the Old Testament Israel, and things still don't look the way the prophets said they would look. The house of the Lord has been rebuilt, but the temple mountain hasn't risen to become chief of the mountains. Israel is back in the land, but the lands doesn't quite look like the garden of Eden. Yahweh has renewed his covenant with His people, but the law doesn't seem to be written on their hearts. Nations have confessed the God of Israel, but the knowledge of God does not cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.'³⁶

Given the emphasis in the Old Testament canon on the fact that God always keeps his promises, the only way to make theological sense of where the Old Testament history ends up is to believe that in the future there will be a further act of God through which God's promises will find their complete fulfilment. Contrary to what is said by Barton, this means that when Christians have read the Old Testament as a text that points beyond itself to a new and greater act of God still to come they have not imposed an alien meaning upon the text, but correctly understood what the text itself is saying.

The same is also true when Christians have read the text in the terms of a rescue from disaster and as pointing to the coming of a Davidic messiah who will rule the nations. Once again contrary to Barton, in neither case have they imposed a meaning on the text that is not there.

In terms of the first, the Old Testament storyline is clear. Death and sin entered into the world through Adam, and Israel, which was meant to be part of the solution, 'a central move in putting the world to rights',³⁷ becomes instead part of the problem (which is why there is a parallel between the exile to Babylon and the earlier exile from Eden). The new act of God to which the Old Testament points forward therefore has to be, and is described as, an act in which God rescues Israel and humanity from this situation.

In terms of the second, what we find as the Old Testament story develops is that the text's focus narrows down from the universal to the particular and then opens out again, and that God's choice of the Davidic line is central to this contracting and expanding focus.

'...humanity is called to be the image of God, fails in its task and is replaced by Israel, who is regarded as God's son. A tribe is singled out within Israel, a family within the tribe, and an individual – David – becomes the focus. And yet David, his sons and their failures, point forwards to a just Davidic king who will bring the benefits of the rule [of God] not only to Israel but to all of humanity.'³⁸

Furthermore, texts such as Isaiah 11:1-9 and 65:17-25 declare that when this king comes there will be a renewed creation (a 'new heavens and a new earth' Isa 65:17) in which humanity and nature as a whole will live in peace.

³⁶ Peter Leithart, *A House for My Name – A survey of the Old Testament*, (Moscow: CanonPress, 2018) Kindle edition, Loc. 3993.

³⁷ N T Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005), p.26.

³⁸ Dempster, p.231.

This coming Davidic king, who, contra Barton, is not seen simply as the earthly ruler of a reconstituted Israelite kingdom like the one that existed prior to the exile, never arrives in the Old Testament itself and so, as Christians have always insisted, the promises of his coming have to be seen in terms of a fulfilment that is going to take place at some point in the future.

D. The Old Testament Canon and Jewish and Christian traditions of biblical interpretation

As we have seen, Barton contends that the Jewish and Christian traditions of biblical interpretation are both equally flawed attempts to impose a unified meaning onto the Old Testament text. What we have noted in the last section of this review indicates that this contention is mistaken.

Whatever the strengths of mainstream Jewish biblical interpretation (and it has many, such as a dedication to a close reading of the biblical text and a tradition of noting the inter-textual links between different biblical passages), its emphasis on reading the Old Testament primarily as a guide to living faithfully before God in the here and now misses out the forward looking and messianic aspects of the text. For this reason, it does not give an adequate account of the message of the Old Testament canon considered as a whole.

By contrast, whatever the weaknesses of Christian biblical interpretation in terms of its exegesis of particular biblical passages, the Christian interpretative tradition has been right to see the Old Testament not just as a guide to holy living, but as an unfinished story, a text full of promises made by God, but not yet fulfilled by him. In this key respect its understanding of the Old Testament canon has been better than the one offered by mainstream Jewish tradition because it gives a more comprehensive account of the Old Testament material and Barton is wrong not to acknowledge this fact.

It is thus simply not the case that both traditions have been equally mistaken in their reading of the Old Testament.

E. The alleged contradictions in the Old Testament

As we have also seen, Barton also contends that the Old Testament cannot be read as a unified text by either Jews or Christians because that way it has been put together has made it self-contradictory. However, the examples he gives do not support this claim, as the following three examples show.

First, in relation to Exodus 24:1-18 Barton argues that the present text consists of 'three entirely simple stories, each with a different emphasis and even a different idea of God and his relation to the people to whom he reveals himself' (p.54) which have been subsequently muddled together into one incoherent account. Barton cites four pieces of evidence for this claim: (1) an inconsistency in the number of times Moses is said to have gone up Mt. Sinai, (2) an inconsistency about whether Moses alone went up the mountain to receive the law, (3) an inconsistency about whether Moses is said to have received the law from God before he went up the mountain, or afterwards and (4) the use of the two different divine titles 'God' and 'the Lord.'

With regard to (1) the answer is that Moses went up twice, once with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders to behold God (v.9) and once with Joshua to receive the tablets of stone with the law and the commandments written on them (v.12). With regard to (2) the answer is that Moses alone is mentioned as having gone up the mountain in verse 18 because he alone receives the law from God, but as Exodus 32:17 makes clear, Joshua accompanied him. With regard to (3) the answer is that in verse 3 Moses has already received the law orally from God, but in verse 12 he goes up the mountain

to receive it in written form. Finally, with regard to (4) the terms 'Lord' and 'God' are used in a complementary way. The 'Lord' is the covenant name of 'the God of Israel' (v.10).

Secondly, in relation to Isaiah 1:9-10 Barton argues that there are 'two seemingly unrelated sayings that have been placed next to each other because they both happen to contain references to Sodom and Gomorrah' (p.91). However, as Alec Motyer argues in his commentary on Isaiah, the repetition of a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah in verse 10 in fact forms a deliberate link between the two discourses in verses 2-9 and 10-20. The repetition 'magnifies God's mercy' by underlining the point that because of the wickedness of Israel referred to in verses 10-20 she would have been utterly destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah had God not decided to be merciful.³⁹

Thirdly, in relation to Proverbs Barton notes that it 'sets up two opposing points of view without telling the reader how to choose between them' (p.64). Thus, he says bribery is condemned in Proverbs 15:27 and 17:23, but seen as necessary in Proverbs 18:16 and 21:14. However, as Ernest Lucas observes, when reading Proverbs it is important to note that its sayings are sometimes 'simply observations on the way things are' and not statements about 'how they should be.' This means that it 'is important to put these kinds of proverbs alongside those which do make an explicit evaluation of a certain pattern of behaviour.' If we apply this principle we see that the sayings about bribery in Proverbs, when taken together 'recognise that bribery sometimes succeeds, but brand the practice as wicked.'⁴⁰

What these examples show is that Barton's claim that the Old Testament is self-contradictory does not hold water. When looked at carefully, the passages he appeals to in order to support this argument do not in fact support it.

F. The allegedly unhistorical nature of the Old Testament

Another claim made by Barton is that the Old Testament is historically unreliable. If true, this claim would undermine the theological message of the Old Testament completely. This is because the Old Testament consistently declares that God has made himself known in the things that he has done ('I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Exodus 20:2)). If these things never happened, then God has not made himself known, and the basis for Old Testament theology and ethics, and for its future hope, disappears.

However, there is no reason to hold that they did not happen. As the distinguished Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen insists, the sceptical attitude to the history of Israel evidenced by Barton and other contemporary Old Testament scholars emerged in the nineteenth century at a time when our understanding of the Ancient Near East was in its infancy. When read against the background of what we now know about Ancient Near Eastern literature and history, the Old Testament has to be judged an historically reliable text. Kitchen summarises the evidence we have as follows: :

'The periods most in the glare of contemporary documents - the divided monarchy and the exile and return - show a very high level of direct correlation (where adequate data exist) and of reliability. That fact should be graciously accepted by all, regardless of personal starting point, and with the firm exclusion of alien, hence irrelevant, modern 'agendas.' When we go back (before ca.1000) two periods when inscriptional mentions of a then-obscure tribal community and its antecedent families (and founding family) simply cannot be expected a priori, then chronologically typological comparisons of the biblical and external phenomena show clearly that the Hebrew founders bear the marks of reality and of a definite period. The same applies to the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt and appearance in

³⁹ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p.46.

⁴⁰ Ernest Lucas, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), p211.

Canaan, with one clear mention of course (Israel on the stela of Merenptah). The Sinai covenant (all three versions, Deuteronomy included) has to have originated within a close-set period (1400-1200) - likewise other features. The phenomena of the united monarchy fit well into what we know of the period and of ancient Royal usages. The *primaeval* protohistory embodies early popular tradition going very far back, and is set in an early format. Thus we have a consistent level of good, fact based correlations right through from circa 2000 BC with earlier roots down to 400 BC. In terms of general reliability - and much more could be have been instanced than there was room for here - the Old Testament comes out remarkably well, so long as its writings and writers are treated fairly and even handedly, in line with independent data, open to all.⁴¹

When he describes Genesis 1-11 as 'proto history' Kitchen is making the point that Israel, like other peoples of their day, knew that the world was very old and sought to find ways of describing the history of the world in those periods which went back beyond memory or written records. What this means is that Genesis 1-11 is meant to be history (i.e a record of real events), but not a record that describes these events with the same kind of historical detail you find from Genesis 12 onwards.

In theological terms this means that the author of Genesis 1-11 certainly did believe that God had created the world and that there had been a historical Fall, but that the way these events are described may well be symbolic rather than literal. To say this is not to reject a literal reading of the Bible, as Barton seems to suggest when he says that a literal reading of Genesis must involve belief in creation in six twenty four hour days (p.482). What it does meant is that in regard to these early chapters of the Bible the literal meaning may be a symbolic reading, as it is in Psalm 23 and numerous other places in the Old Testament.

Barton also declares, as we have seen, that science now means that we cannot believe that death came upon humanity as a result of the Fall. However, as C S Lewis writes 'Science... has nothing to say for or against the doctrine of the Fall.'⁴² All that science can tell us is what we already knew, namely that all humans are subject to death. What it cannot prove or disprove is the biblical claim that this would not have been the case had the first parents of the human race not rebelled against God (which is the claim made in Genesis 3 and then re-echoed by Paul in Romans 5).

Let us suppose that archaeologists found the bodies of Adam and Eve with, as G K Chesterton once put it, a half-eaten apple inside Eve and slightly faded fig leaf still attached to Adam. This would still neither prove nor disprove that their broken relationship with God rendered them subject to death. Forensic scientists might be able to determine the physical cause of their death, but this would still not rule out the theological claim that this physical cause only resulted in death because sin had previously rendered them no longer immortal.

Science has nothing it can say on the matter. Like Adam and Eve In Genesis 3 we are left to either believe or disbelieve what God has said, in our case through the witness of the Old Testament text.

Barton's argument that the Old Testament laws cannot be historical because they are unsuitable for a people living in a wilderness ignores the obvious point that they are described as having been given to a people who are soon going to leave the wilderness and establish a settled agricultural community in the land which God has promised to them.

⁴¹ Kenneth Kitchen, *On the reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp.499-500.

⁴² C S Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1978), p.62.

G. Creation *ex-nihilo*

A final claim by Barton about the Old Testament that we need to consider is his claim that there is not clear biblical support for the traditional Jewish and Christian belief that God created the created order *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).

The key text here is Genesis 1:1-2. The traditional reading of the text has separated the two verses. Thus, the RSV reads:

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.'

However, it has been argued that verses 1 and 2 could also be translated

'When God began to create the heavens and the earth the earth was without form and void (or 'a formless mass') '

If we adopt the first translation, creation is creation *ex nihilo*. There is God and nothing else and then God causes all things to come into being. If we adopt the second translation, however, God's act of creation consists of giving order to an already existing formless mass of stuff (like a potter making a pot out of a mass of clay).

How should we decide between these two understanding of Genesis 1:1-2? The answer is that the most grammatically plausible reading of the Hebrew (which is supported by the early translations of Genesis 1:1) is that verse 1 is an independent sentence which asserts God's creation of everything there is ('heaven and earth' meaning 'the entire universe'). Verse 1 is a general statement of the creation of the entire universe by God and what is then described in verses 2-25 is what God does with the earth, namely turn it into a habitable place for human beings to live in in preparation for the creation of humanity in verses 26-31.

If this is correct, then against Barton, we have to say that Creation *ex nihilo* is taught in the Old Testament and that in fact it is the basic truth the underlies the entire Old Testament story.⁴³

H. Jesus and the emergence of the New Testament

We have already noted that a major weakness of Barton's approach to the Old Testament is that he leaves Jesus out of the picture. The same major weakness is also present in his approach to the issue of how and why the New Testament came into being.

Barton totally ignores the issue of whether Jesus made provision for his followers to continue to bear witness to him and to instruct people about his teaching once he had ascended into heaven. This is a very serious omission because it is only once we have understood that Jesus *did* make such provision that we can properly understand how and why the writings of the New Testament came into being.

According to the witness of Luke, Acts, and Matthew, Jesus commanded the apostles (the inner circle of his followers) to bear witness to his fulfilment of the Old Testament and to teach people to obey

⁴³ For this point see William Lane Craig, 'Doctrine of Creation (Part 1)' at <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-2/s2-doctrine-of-creation/doctrine-of-creation-part-1/> and in more detail Claus Westerman, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1990) pp.74-173, and Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).

everything he had commanded (Luke 24:45-48, Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:20). In Luke, Acts and John we read that he also promised that he would send the Holy Spirit upon them to equip them for this task (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8, John 16:4-15).

The people to whom these commands and promises were given were the apostles (the remaining eleven disciples plus Matthias who was chosen by lot to replace Judas Iscariot - Acts 1:15-26). Acts tells us that after they had received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost the apostles began to fulfil the commission given to them by Jesus, and that the ranks of the apostles were expanded due to Jesus' appointment of Paul by the risen Jesus as 'a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel' (Acts 9:15).

As Acts makes clear, the apostles first delivered their witness orally. However, as Michael Kruger notes: '...it very soon began to be preserved and passed along in written form.'⁴⁴ There are two causes that explain this development.

First, the apostles:

'...functioned within the backdrop of Old Testament covenantal patterns that suggested that the inauguration of a new covenant would be accompanied by new written covenantal documents Given that they understood the redemptive work of Jesus as the inauguration of the new covenant (Luke 22:20) and viewed themselves as 'ministers of a new covenant' (2 Cor. 3:6), it would have been quite natural to pass on the apostolic message through the medium of the written word.'⁴⁵

Secondly, the movement towards using written texts:

'...would have been driven by the very function of the apostolic office as the foundation for the ongoing ministry of the church (Eph.2:20). As the church continued to spread throughout the world into further geographic regions, it would have become evident that the apostolic tradition could only be effectively communicated and accurately maintained in written form. Obviously, the apostles were not able to provide personal attention to every church within the ever-expanding range of missionary influence. Moreover, their limited life spans made it clear that they could never bring the apostolic message to the ends of the earth, but would need a way to preserve it for future generations. Thus the role of the apostles as foundation layers for church would have led them to make sure their message was preserved in a more permanent form, making its inscripturation a virtual inevitability.'

⁴⁶

Furthermore, the evidence we have tells us that the apostles used others as well to spread the apostolic message, both orally and in writing, providing they had the skills and gifts needed to do this. Because apostolicity was thus not tied to the personal speaking or writing of an apostle, this in turn meant that:

'...even if a document was not written directly by an apostle, there would have been good reasons to think it bore authoritative apostolic tradition if (1) it was written during the apostolic age (and thus was composed at a time when the apostles were overseeing the transmission of their tradition and (2) it was written by someone who got his information from an apostle.'⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2012) Kindle edition, Loc. 4859.

⁴⁵ Kruger, Loc.4859.

⁴⁶ Kruger, Loc. 4859.

⁴⁷ Kruger, loc.4908.

This latter point explain why the Gospels of Mark and Luke and Hebrews, James and Jude, which were not written by apostles, came to be accepted as having apostolic authority and were thus eventually included in the New Testament canon.

If we ask when books that were apostolic in the senses discussed above began to be recognised as forming a canon of authoritative texts alongside the Old Testament, it appears that the answer is that the process appears to have been well under way by the end of the first century. As Andreas Kostenberger and Michael Kruger comment, the evidence we have tells us that:

‘...the concept of canon not only existed before the middle of the second century, but that a number of New Testament books were already received and being used as authoritative documents in the life of the church. Given the fact that such a trend is evident in a broad number of early texts – 2 Peter, 1 Timothy, 1 Clement, the Didache, Ignatius, Polycarp, Barnabas and Papias – we have good historical reasons to think that the concept of a New Testament canon was relatively well established and perhaps even a widespread reality by the turn of the century. Although the borders of the canon were not yet solidified by this time, there is no doubt that the early church understood that God had given a new set of authoritative covenant documents that testified to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and that those documents were the beginning of the New Testament canon.’⁴⁸

The fact that the documents that became the New Testament were preserved in codices rather than on scrolls does not mean that they were not regarded as holy books with same level of authority as the writings of the Old Testament. The use of codices may have been simply a matter of practicality, or, as Barton suggests it may have been a way of distinguishing Christian writings from Jewish, Greek or Roman writings as ‘having a new and special character’ (p.249). The fact is we do not actually know why the early Christians used the codex format, but what we do know is that from very early times they accorded books written this format as having the status of Scripture.

If, against Barton, we accept that the Muratorian Fragment was written in the second half of the second century rather than the fourth⁴⁹ this suggests that a canon consisting of the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen Pauline Epistles, Jude, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation had become accepted by that date. The Fragment also indicates that the determining factor in the acceptance of books as canonical was their apostolic provenance. The books that were accepted were either by apostles or by those in the apostolic circle such as Luke.⁵⁰

Furthermore, In the early third century Origen gives a list of canonical books in one of his homilies that lists the twenty-seven books of our current New Testament canon without appearing to see his list as in anyway controversial.⁵¹

Although it is often said that it was Athanasius who for the first time set out the list of canonical New Testament books exactly as we now have it in his Festal Letter at Easter 367, this was thus not the case. What his list indicates is that by his day the doubts expressed by some regarding Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter and 3 John had been settled in favour of their acceptance as canonical. And if we ask why these books had become accepted the answer is that they had come to be seen as genuinely apostolic. This is demonstrated by the way that Hebrews is (wrongly) listed as Pauline. It was known

⁴⁸ Andreas Kostenberger, and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), p.249.

⁴⁹ C E Hill, ‘The debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon,’ *Westminster Theological Journal* 57:2 (Fall 1995), pp, 437-452.

⁵⁰ A translation of the Muratorian Fragment can be found at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html>

⁵¹ Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp.135-141.

to be from the circle of the apostles and therefore it was assigned to Paul even though earlier writers such as Origen had questioned such an attribution.

What all this means is that we can draw a straight historical line between the commission given by Jesus to the apostles and the eventual acceptance of our twenty-seven book canon. The canon did not just emerge by historical accident. It was not simply a matter, as Barton seems to suggest, of the Church retrospectively deciding to accept as orthodox and apostolic those books which were read in public worship. There were books, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* which were read in church and yet were not accepted as canonical, and this impossible to explain if reading was the determinative factor.

Rather, the Church believed that it had reliable historical information about which works had been produced by the apostles and those in their circle and the debates were around whether in the light of this information a small number of books which most accepted, but some doubted really were apostolic in that sense and therefore could read as Scripture in church.

A final point about Jesus and the New Testament canon is that if we accept that Jesus had divine teaching authority and that he gave that authority to his disciples through the Spirit so that, as Acts 1:1 suggests, the ministry of the apostles was the continuation of Jesus own ministry in a new form, it follows that, just like Old Testament, the New Testament carries God's own authority. As before, Wenham makes the point well:

'To Christ his own teaching and the teaching of his Spirit-taught apostles was true, authoritative inspired.

To him, what he and they said under the direction of the Spirit, God said.

To him the God of the New Testament was the living God, and in principle the teaching of the New Testament was the teaching of the living God.'⁵²

To put it another way, just like the Old Testament, the New Testament is a God given text, the written form of God's self-communication. Furthermore, if we look at it carefully, we find that like the Old Testament this new God given text has a distinctive canonical shape.

As Dempster comments:

'...The New Testament is structured similarly to the Tanakh [the Hebrew Bible]; story (Gospels, Acts), commentary (Letters), story (Revelation). Although the last book is not strictly narrative, it brings to conclusion the story line begun in the Gospels.'⁵³

What is more, as the Christian interpretative tradition has always insisted, the message told through these texts finishes the unfinished story told in the Old Testament. God's promises are kept, the messiah comes, sin and death are defeated, and a new world is born.

Furthermore, because there is one continuous story which begins in the Old Testament and is finished in the New Testament it makes perfect sense to talk not just about an Old Testament canon and a New Testament canon, but about one overarching biblical canon. Just as one can coherently say that the three parts of *The Lord of the Rings* make up one single book, so we can also coherently say that

⁵² Wenham p.123.

⁵³ Dempster, p.232.

the books of the Old and New Testaments make up on single canon of Scripture, what the Christian tradition has come to call the Bible.

I. Did the right books get into the New Testament?

For Barton an obvious rejoinder to the view of the New Testament canon outlined above would be the argument that critical historical study shows that if the criterion for inclusion in the New Testament is apostolicity then many of the books that are currently in the New Testament canon should not be in there.

As we have seen, Barton contends that we cannot be sure who wrote the Gospels, but what we do know is that they came from the second generation of Christians rather than from the immediate eyewitnesses of the life of Christ. He also holds that with exception of 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians and Philemon, which are by Paul, and Hebrews, which is anonymous, all the other epistles in the New Testament were not written by apostles or those in the apostolic circle but are deliberate forgeries.

If this contention was true, then the grounds for the canonicity of most of the New Testament would disappear. However, it does not seem necessary to believe that the contention is true.

There is no good reason to reject the traditional attribution of the Gospels to the apostles Matthew and John, to Mark who was a co-worker of Paul and then Peter, and to Luke who was a co-worker of Paul, an attribution which in all probability reflects the titles given to the Gospels at the time when they were written.⁵⁴ No one has satisfactorily explained why this traditional attribution, which was unanimously accepted in the early church, developed unless it was true. The evidence we have is that the Christians in the second century were well-aware of what had happened in the first century and yet no one preserved any alternative tradition about the authorship of the Gospels.

There is also no good reason to accept the argument that the disputed New Testament letters are forgeries. In each case scholars have shown that the argument that language and style of the letters are incompatible with their traditional authorship are unconvincing, as are the arguments that they are doctrinally incompatible with the letters known to be authentic, or that they reflect conditions in the second century rather than the first.⁵⁵

In addition, no one has convincingly identified a literary genre of pseudonymous writing into which these letters fit, no one has explained the reason (s) why these letters were produced in a pseudonymous form by orthodox Christians when all the evidence we have tells us that pseudonymity was not regarded as acceptable in the early church, and no one has explained why all memory of when the letters were actually written and who wrote them was completely lost.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See for example John Wenham, *Redating, Matthew, Mark and Luke* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester and Grand Rapids: Apollos/Eerdmans, 1991), Brant Pitre *The case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Jesus Christ* (New York: Image, 2016) and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006)

⁵⁵ As Stanley Porter has argued, there is good reason to think that Jesus not only talked in Greek, but even taught in Greek ('Did Jesus ever teach in Greek?', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 44.2, 1993, pp. 199-235. If this was the case, there is no reason to think that people like Peter, James and Jude could not have written letters in Greek, particularly if they had the help of Greek speaking scribes.

⁵⁶ Helpful discussions of the matter can be found in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove Inter Varsity Press, 1990), Don Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand

J. The nature of the Gospels

If we accept the traditional authorship of the Gospels, it follows that Barton's Argument that the Gospels are not eyewitness accounts has to be seriously qualified. Matthew and John were eyewitnesses, Mark embodies the eyewitness testimony of Peter and Luke, as we know from his preface (Luke 1:1-4) also based on his gospel on the direct testimony of eyewitnesses.

We have no external evidence that John's Gospel was the product of a group of writers and John 14:31, which Barton sees as evidence of dislocation in the farewell discourse in chapters 14-17, can be satisfactorily explained if we:

'suppose that after these words were spoken the Lord, with the eleven, at once finally left the house and went on the way which finally led to Gethsemane; and consequently that the discourses that follow, XV-XVII, were spoken after He had gone from the upper room and before he crossed the Kidron (XVIII.1).'⁵⁷

The fact that the Gospels were the result of eyewitness testimony is supported by the fact that, in contrast with the apocryphal Gospels produced in the second century, the writers of the canonical Gospels reflect correctly the geography, botany, customs and linguistic usage of first century Palestine in the years before the first Jewish revolt. They get the details right, whereas later writers do not. This indicates that either the Gospel writers were personally present at the events they describe or that they were drawing on the accurate eyewitness testimony of the people who were.⁵⁸

It is true, as Barton says, that there are differences in content and order between John and the first three Gospels, but the theological understanding of Jesus found in John is entirely in line with that found in the other three Gospels, and the chronology of Jesus's ministry in John actually help us to make sense of the data which we find in those Gospels. Thus, as Carson notes 'John's report of an extensive Judaeon ministry is needed to explain several features in the Synoptics, which record a fairly brief Galilean ministry (about a year) and only a few days in Jerusalem prior to Jesus' death'⁵⁹

The alleged discrepancies between the first three Gospels to which Barton refers are also less significant than he supposes. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke can be perfectly satisfactorily harmonised as two separate but complementary accounts of what took place.⁶⁰ The accounts of the lowering of the paralytic through the roof (Mark 2:3-4, Luke 5:18-19) are compatible if we assume that Luke correctly describes the tiles being taken of the roof of a Greco-Roman style house while Mark simply says in more general terms that they 'unroofed the roof' (Mark 2:4). The accounts of Jesus' response to being called 'good teacher' (Mark 10:17-18. Mathew 19:16-17) can likewise be reconciled if we assume that the rich young ruler originally said 'Good teacher what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?' and that for their own theological purposes Mark and Matthew record Jesus' responses to the words 'good teacher' and 'good thing' respectively.

If we accept that the traditional accounts of the authorship of the Gospels are correct this also has implications for their dating. First, it rules out the second century date for Luke Acts suggested by Barton. Secondly, the best explanation as to why Acts finishes with Paul's arrival at Rome rather than the result of his subsequent travel is that Luke finished the story at the point it had reached when he

Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) and Andreas Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum and Charles Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009).

⁵⁷ B F Westcott, *The Gospel According to John* (London: John Murray, 1924), p.210.

⁵⁸ For this point see Peter Williams, *Can we Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), Ch.3.

⁵⁹ Carson, p. 52.

⁶⁰ See for example J Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London: James Clarke, 1958), Ch. VIII.

wrote. This would mean that Acts needs to be dated in 62. The Gospel needs to be dated earlier, and a possible reference to Luke's Gospel in 2 Corinthians 8:18 means that it has to be dated before 55. Given that the linguistic evidence suggests that Luke made use of Matthew and Mark this means that they in turn would need to be dated in the 40s.⁶¹ Barton's preferred dates of just before the fall of Jerusalem for Mark and sometime after it for Matthew and Luke thus date the Gospels several decades too late.

There is nothing in either later tradition, or the contents of Matthew and Luke, to suggest that they were intended as replacements for Mark. The Augustinian tradition that Matthew preceded Mark is still a viable reading of the evidence, but even if Matthew did make use of Mark this does not mean that he wanted people to stop reading Mark and read only his Gospel instead. Similarly Luke's words in the prologue to his Gospel 'It seemed good to me also' (Luke 1:13) indicate that he was seeking to supplement the earlier testimonies to Jesus mentioned in verses 1 and 2 rather than to replace them. Matthew and Luke are intended to be read on their own terms and not as 'not Mark.'

Barton's insistence that each of the Gospels offer us 'an alternative picture of Jesus and his life and work' is a misreading of the Gospels. We do not have to choose between them because in fact each Gospel offers us eyewitness testimony to Jesus that supplements rather than contradicts what is in the other three, both in terms of the events it describes and the theological accounts of Jesus that it offers.

Richard Hays offers a much better model for understanding the relationship between the Gospels when he writes that we should:

'...hear their testimonies as four distinct voices singing in *polyphony*. If that is correct, the art of reading the Gospels is like the art of listening to choral singing. Each section in a choir must learn to hear and sing its own part. The choir director does not want everyone gravitating to sing the melody in unison; if that happens, the polyphony and the harmonic texture will be lost. So it is with the fourfold Gospel witness of the NT canon.'⁶²

Under the guidance of the Spirit, the Church canonised the four Gospels because it discerned that the text, the message, it had been given from God by the apostles included this polyphonic witness.

Furthermore, the Church believed that the polyphonic witness borne by the four Gospels, unlike the content of the later apocryphal Gospels, was historically accurate. Barton, as we have seen, challenges this conclusion, suggesting that the accounts of the virgin birth and the resurrection at least should be seen as legendary. However, there is no need to accept this suggestion.

As we have seen, there is good evidence that the Gospels contain early eyewitness testimony and that they give an accurate account of events in Palestine prior to the first Jewish revolt. They are historical records and they stand up well as historical records. The accounts of the virgin birth and the resurrection are an integral part of these historical records and in literary terms provide exactly the same kind of testimony as all the other narratives which the Gospels contain. There is no evidence at all that in the birth and resurrection narratives the Gospel writers decided to abandon history and depart for fantasy land.

⁶¹ Wenham, *Redating, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Ch. 12.

⁶² Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards – Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (London: SPCK, 2015), p. 95.

If we accept the general historical veracity of the Gospels, we should accept the historicity of the virgin birth and the resurrection. We should accept the historical veracity of the Gospels – therefore we should accept the historicity of the virgin birth and the resurrection.

K. Barton's account of Paul and his teaching

Barton's insistence on contrasting the picture of Paul found in Act from that found in Paul's letters is misleading.

First, the chronology found in Paul's letter and that found in Acts can be harmonised in a satisfactory fashion as has been shown, for example, by N T Wright in his recent biography of Paul which utilises both the evidence from Paul and the evidence from the letters.⁶³ A similar approach is also taken by the distinguished German scholar Martin Hengel in his books *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* and *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch*.⁶⁴

Secondly, Acts does call Paul an apostle (Acts 14:4 and 14), it also uses the *apostello* root twice when describing the ministry to the Gentiles which God has given Paul (Acts 22:21, 26:17) and it has three accounts of Paul's apostolic commissioning by the risen Christ (Acts 9:1-19, 22:121, 26:2-23). The laying on of hands which Paul receives in 13:1-3 is not the point at which Acts thinks Paul becomes as apostle. It is his commissioning for a particular missionary task.

Thirdly, in both Acts and his letters Paul acknowledges, and works with, the other apostles, but in neither is he said to be subject to them.⁶⁵

Moving on to what Barton says about Paul's teaching, we find that this also is problematic for the following reasons.

First, Barton has seriously misunderstood Paul's account of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15.

When Paul says 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 15:50) this does not mean that Paul is ruling out bodily resurrection. What it does mean is that kingdom cannot be inherited by 'the present physical humanity (as opposed to the future one), which is subject to sin and death.'⁶⁶ When Paul talks about receiving a 'spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15:44) he is not denying that we will have a real, resurrected physical body. What he is saying is that 'the body we shall be given in the resurrection is to be animated by God's own spirit.'⁶⁷ Finally, what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 is, contra Barton, entirely about the evidence for Jesus' bodily resurrection as recorded in the Gospels. To quote Wright:

'The fact that the empty tomb, so prominent in the gospel accounts, does not appear to be specifically mentioned in this passage is not significant; the mention here of 'buried then raised' no more needs to be amplified in that way than one would need to amplify the statement 'I walked down the street' with the qualification 'on my feet.'⁶⁸

⁶³ Tom Wright, *Paul - a biography* (London: SPCK, 2020).

⁶⁴ Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003) and *Paul between Damascus and Antioch* (London: SCM, 2012).

⁶⁵ For a good overview of the issue of the depiction of Paul in Acts and in his letters see F F Bruce 'Is the Paul of Acts the Real Paul?', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 58, 1976, pp. 282-305.

⁶⁶ N T Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), p.359.

⁶⁷ Tom Wright, *Paul for everyone, I Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2003), p.221.

⁶⁸ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p.321.

The reason the women are not mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15 as they are in the Gospels is because in the Church's formal teaching to outsiders and new converts (which Paul is summarising) their testimony was omitted because the culture of the day would have seen it as unreliable.

Moving on to what Barton says about Paul's teaching concerning the person of Christ, we find that he is wrong in two respects.

First, When he says that in 1 Corinthians 1:3, Galatians 1:3, Philippians 1:2 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 'Paul does not make the explicit equation Jesus = God' he has actually misread the import of these passages. It is true that he does not explicitly call Jesus 'God' (though he does do so in Romans 9:5, and Titus 2:13). However, as 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Philippians 2:11 make clear, the use of the term 'Lord' which appears in all the passages that Barton cites explicitly identifies Jesus with YHWH, the Lord God of Israel.⁶⁹ Therefore, in these passages Jesus=God.

Secondly, in saying on the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:28 that Paul has a 'subordinationist' Christology Barton fails to clarify what he means by this ambiguous term. If he means that Paul was ontologically subordinationist in the sense that he believed that Jesus was less than fully and truly God then the evidence we have just seen rules this out. For Paul there is one God and Jesus shares his identity. If he means that Paul was functionally subordinationist in the sense that he believed that Jesus as God the Son was subject to, and submitted to, the will of his heavenly Father, then this is correct. However, it does not, as Barton thinks, distinguish Paul from later Trinitarian orthodoxy since the most zealous supporters of Nicene orthodoxy explicitly taught this as well.⁷⁰

If we take seriously the fact that in Paul as in the other New Testament writings Jesus = Lord = God we are brought straight to the doctrine of the Trinity. This is because it is clear that while Jesus is God, so also is the one he called 'Father,' and so also is the Holy Spirit by whom he was conceived and anointed and which he poured out on his followers from the Father on the day of Pentecost. Furthermore, we cannot simply say that these are simply different names for the same God so that Jesus = Father = Holy Spirit without making nonsense of the intra-divine divine relationships which the Bible describes.

We have to say that Jesus is God, that the Father, is God, and that the Spirit is God and yet if we are to be true to biblical monotheism (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) we have to say there is only one God. The doctrine of the Trinity, one God existing as three divine persons is the only way to properly express this.

Augustine makes the point brilliantly:

'O Lord our God, we believe in Thee, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. For the Truth would not say, Go, baptise all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, unless thou wast a Trinity. Nor wouldest thou, O Lord God, bid us to be baptized in the name of Him who is not the Lord God. Nor would the divine voice have said, Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one God, unless thou wert so a Trinity as to be one Lord God. And if thou, O God, wert thyself the Father, and wert thyself the Son, Thy Word Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit your gift, we should not read in the book of truth, 'God sent his Son;' nor wouldst Thou, O Only-begotten, say of the Holy Spirit, 'Whom the Father will send in my name;' and 'Whom I will send to you from the Father.'" ⁷¹

⁶⁹ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), pp.100-102 and 197-210.

⁷⁰ For the evidence for this assertion see Michael Ovey, *Your Will be Done* (London: Latimer Trust, 2016).

⁷¹ Augustine, *On the Trinity* XV:28 in *The Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers* Vol III (Edinburgh)

Unfortunately, Barton doesn't appear to get the point.

It is also worth noting that Barton is mistaken in his criticism of the interpretation of Proverbs 8:22 by the writers of the Patristic period. Writers such as Athanasius were correct in seeing this verse as referring to Jesus because the identity between God's wisdom and Jesus is made clear in the New Testament both by Jesus being directly described as God's wisdom in Luke 11:49, 1 Corinthians 1:24, and Colossians 1 and by the way in which Jesus is God's agent in bringing the created order into being (John 1:2, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 2:10) in the same way that wisdom is God's agent in creation in Proverbs 8. Furthermore, while Barton sees the Patristic debate about whether wisdom is described as created in Proverbs 8:22 as only making sense in terms of the Greek translation of the text rather than the Hebrew original, in fact the same issue is raised by the Hebrew. The Hebrew verb *qanah* used in Proverbs 8:22 can mean either 'created' or 'possessed' with the latter making more sense theologically since it is difficult to think coherently about God creating his own wisdom whereas it does make sense to think of wisdom as something eternally possessed by God. In saying that Christ was the wisdom of God eternally begotten by the Father Patristic writers were thus building on rather than distorting the meaning of the original Hebrew text in Proverbs 8:22.⁷²

If go to look at what Barton says about Paul's teaching about justification, we find that he has misunderstood what the New Perspective on Paul has to say about the matter.

What the New Perspective has stressed is that for Paul justification was about the inclusion of Gentiles into the Church. However, it was *also* about the salvation of individuals from sin and death through faith in Christ. The two go together. Thus, in his commentary on Romans James Dunn insists that Paul's concern was indeed about the inclusion of Gentiles into the Church alongside, and on an equal basis with, Jews. However, he also comments as follows on Paul's statement in Romans 3:26 that God is just and justifies those who have faith in Christ:

'God's justice can be celebrated, presumably because in dealing with sin, to punish, destroy and root it out, he displays his commitment against all that disfigures and corrupts his creation. The sacrificial system and what it expressed embodied that justice. But it also manifested God's commitment to redeem and uphold those who trusted in him – not simply to be just, but to justify. It is this commitment of God, manifested in creation, in the choice of Israel, and in Israel's sacrificial system, which Paul now sees as expressed most fully in Christ and in those who trust in Jesus.'⁷³

This cannot, as Barton appears to suggest, be reduced to the idea that Paul's teaching is simply about 'inclusion and exclusion.' This simply does not do justice to what either Dunn (or Paul) is saying,

Barton also fails to deal adequately with Paul's teaching in Romans 9-11. Contrary to what Barton says, Paul's position in these chapters is very consistent. What Paul gives us in these chapters is an extended exposition of a series of key Old Testament passages which together explain the otherwise baffling fact that God's covenant people had rejected the promised messiah. In a very tightly integrated argument Paul argues that three truths go together (a) that God is sovereign, (b) that in his sovereignty he has grafted the Gentiles into his people and that (c) he remains faithful to his covenant with the Jewish people and that in spite of their current unbelief he will use the inclusion of the Gentiles to bring salvation to the Jews as well.

and Grand Rapids: T&T Clark/ Eerdmans 1998). p.227.

⁷² For the Patristic interpretation of Proverbs 8 see Matthew Emerson 'The Role of Proverbs 8: Eternal Generation and Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern' in Fred Sanders and Scott Swain, eds., *Retrieving Eternal Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017), pp.44-66.

⁷³ James Dunn, *Romans* (Oxford: BRF, 2001), p. 49.

Barton's idea that we cannot take Paul's teaching in these chapters as authoritative but that we need to 'to think through this issue with which he himself wrestled' is simply baffling. On what basis does Barton think that we can come to a better understanding of the matter than Paul did? What do we know that the apostle Paul did not?

Finally, in relation to Paul's teaching on worship and ministerial order, it is true that Paul does not give us detailed instructions about the conduct of liturgy, but this does not mean that in passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 he does not give us principles concerning the conduct of worship that we can understand and that we should obey.

On ministerial order we need to take into account the witness of all the Pauline epistles, plus Acts, plus the witness of the early church. and when we do this we find that a coherent picture emerges in which God equips his people with a variety of spiritual gifts and forms of ministerial service (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Ephesians 4:1-16), but in which there is also a basic twofold ministerial structure of elders/bishops and deacons (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1-16, 5:17-22, Titus 2:5-9) which operates under the authority of the apostles and of apostolic delegates such as Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete who were what the later church called bishops.

Barton's claim that Paul 'simply does not discuss' these matters is simply wrong as his claim that Hooker and Luther both held that the New Testament does not 'prescribe any determinate system for ministry.' Both of them in fact held that it did and that it was incumbent upon the later Church to order itself in the light of this fact.⁷⁴

L. The Bible and the meaning of Jesus' death

One of Barton's further claims is that the New Testament does not give us definite teaching about the meaning of Jesus' death. This also is wrong.

It is true that there are range of images that are used in the Bible to describe the significance of Jesus' death such as redemption, justification, sacrifice, victory, reconciliation and so forth. Nevertheless, it can be argued that underlying all these images there is the simple basic truth expressed by Peter in 1 Peter 2:24: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.' The 'tree' here is the cross understood in the light of Deuteronomy 21:23 as the place where God's curse upon sin is enacted and what Peter is saying is that on the cross Jesus took our place, bore our sins and died our death just as the prophet Isaiah had said he would (Isaiah 52:3). The reason he did this was that by dying for us he might bring an end to our sinful existence ('For he who has died is freed from sin' Romans 6:7) so that we might enter into the new life of righteousness made possible for us by his resurrection.

The images of redemption (being set free from sin and death), justification (being declared righteous in the sight of God) sacrifice (an action being taken to make reparation for our sin), victory (overcoming the spiritual powers that hold us in bondage) and reconciliation (having our relationship with God restored) are all ways of expressing the nature or the consequence of the saving action of Jesus Christ which Peter describes.

We can thus know from the Bible what Jesus did for us. In the great words of Karl Barth:

⁷⁴ For Hooker see *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* Bk VII and for Luther see Dorothea Wendebourg, 'The Reformation in Germany and the Episcopal Office in *Visible Unity and the Ministry of Oversight* (London: Church House Publishing, 1997), pp. 49-78.

'In the death of Jesus Christ, God took man's place in order to suffer in his place the destruction of sinful man and, at the same time, to realise the existence of the new sinful man. The way is therefore open to restore the lost right of men, his right to live as the creature of God. The grace of God against which man sins triumphs in Jesus Christ'⁷⁵

M. Jesus' descent to the dead

A final element of traditional Christian faith which Barton thinks lacks biblical support is the affirmation in the creed that after his death Jesus 'descended to the dead.' However, contrary to Barton this is explicitly taught in three New Testament passages (Ephesians 4:9-10, 1 Peter 3:18-19, 1 Peter 4:6) and is also implicit in the New Testament message as a whole. This is because if Christ was truly human, and if he truly died then his soul must have separated from his body and gone to the place of the dead while his body remained in the tomb.⁷⁶ There is perhaps room for legitimate debate about what Jesus achieved while in the place of the dead, but it does seem necessary to believe that he went there.

N. The reliability of the biblical text

Barton's last reason for doubt about the Bible concerns the reliability of the biblical text.

As we have noted Barton thinks that (a) we need to acknowledge the fact that we can never reliably know the precise words originally written by the biblical authors and therefore (b) we can never rightly appeal to 'the exact wording of the biblical text' since we will always be unsure about this.

What Barton does not seem to have appreciated is that taken to its logical conclusion his approach means that we can never have any confidence in the Bible at all.

This is because even if we want to appeal not to the 'exact wording' of the Bible but to its general sense we are still in difficulties. If we ask what the 'general sense' of the Bible is, the answer is that it is the overall impression of its sense given from a study of the individual texts of which it is made up. If, however, these individual texts are all potentially unreliable then it follows that the general sense of what the Bible says that we derive from them will also potentially be unreliable, and to exactly the same degree.

To put it simply, if we cannot trust the wording of the individual texts then we cannot trust the wording of the larger text that they make up.

Should we therefore give up in despair? Not at all.

The first point to note is the fact that we have not got the autograph copies any of the Biblical writings is irrelevant to the issue. As I have already noted, a text is web of words conveying meaning that can exist in any format. Therefore, a later copy that is as reliable as the autograph is essentially the same text. I do not have access to the autographs of *The Lord of the Rings*, but this does not lead me to believe that I cannot know what Tolkien intended to say. The copy I have on my shelves, being an accurate gives me the ability to know this. What matters is not Tolkien's autograph but what he intended to say and I do have access to this.

⁷⁵ Karl Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ Through the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp.72-73.

⁷⁶ For a helpful discussion of the evidence on this point see E Harold Browne, *An Exposition of the Thirty Nine Articles* (London: John Parker 1860), pp. 78-97.

In the case of the Bible we are likewise not looking for the lost autographs but for the divine text, the meaning intended by God and committed by him to a biblical writer for future preservation in written form. Because in a fallen world errors creep in when written texts are transmitted, we cannot be sure that any given text is free from such error. Textual criticism therefore consists in comparing the texts we currently have available to us and by a process of comparison working out where particular texts have fallen into error. By this process we work towards creating a more reliable text, i.e. a text which is as close as we can make it to the wording originally given by God to the first human author.

If we ask where this process has got to with regard to the Old Testament the answer is that by work on copies of the Hebrew Masoretic text, on copies from other Hebrew textual traditions such as the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Dead Sea Scrolls and on copies of early translations of the Old Testament in Syriac, Greek, Latin and other ancient languages we now have a very reliable Old Testament text. As Walter Kaiser writes:

‘...it is possible to say with Bruce Waltke that over 90 percent of the Old Testament is textually sound and uniformly witnessed to us by major exemplars. Of the remaining 10 percent that exhibits any type of variation, extremely few are of such significance that they would involve any major issues.’⁷⁷

Furthermore, because we know where the remaining areas of uncertainty are and what these involve, we are in a position to make informed decisions about them. In addition we can be confident that we know have representative examples of the textual tradition so it is not likely that future discoveries will change the current situation in any major way.

What all this means is that we can have a very high degree of confidence that we can know the message which God wanted to convey through the Old Testament text. A final point worth noting in this regard is that in the words of Wenham ‘...Our Lord himself (in the case of the Old Testament) has set us an example by taking his own medicine.’⁷⁸ Jesus trusted the text of the Old Testament as the vehicle of God’s communication and so therefore should we.

Textual criticism of the New Testament runs along the same lines as its Old Testament counterpart, using various different families of Greek texts and early versions in other languages to try to establish the most reliable form of the text. As Kostenberger and Kruger note, we can make four key points about the results of this critical work:

- ‘We have good reasons to think the original text is preserved (somewhere) in the overall textual tradition.
- The vast majority of scribal changes are minor and insignificant.
- Of the small proportion of variations that are significant, our text-critical methodology can determine, with a reasonable degree of certainty, which is the original text.
- The remaining number of truly unresolved variants is very few and not material to the story/teaching of the New Testament.’⁷⁹

As they go on to say:

‘When we recognize not only how few unresolved variants exist but also how little they impact the overall story of the New Testament, then we can have confidence that the message of the New

⁷⁷ Walter Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents, are they Reliable & Relevant?* (Downers Grove and Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 2001), p. 49.

⁷⁸ Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p. 186.

⁷⁹ Kostenberger and Kruger, p. 205.

Testament has been sufficiently preserved for the church. All the teaching of the New Testament – whether regarding the person of Jesus (divinity and humanity), the work of Jesus (his life, death and resurrection), the application of his work to the believer (justification, sanctification, glorification), or other doctrines – are left unaffected by the remaining textual variants ... the manuscript tradition is more than adequate. It is so very close to the originals that there is no material difference between what, say, Paul or John wrote and what we possess today.’⁸⁰

What all this means is that Barton’s doubts about the reliability of the text are unfounded. We can trust the particulars of the biblical text and therefore trust the text’s overall message.

6. Why the car is still intact

What, then, we say about the Bible?

First, have an extremely reliable biblical text. In both the Old and New Testaments we can know with a very high degree of confidence what the text originally said.

Secondly, what we learn by looking at Jesus’ teaching and practice and the history of the early church is that the Old and New Testament canons accepted by Protestant churches (including the Church of England) since the Reformation contain the books God intended to be canonical

Thirdly, what we learn by looking at Jesus’ teaching and practice is that these, books individually and together, carry God’s own authority. What these texts say, God says. The doctrine of the verbal inspiration is thus not something marginal, but central to a proper estimation of the Bible.

Fourthly, as Christian interpreters have always said, what we find in these texts is a massive story arc running from Genesis to Revelation which tells how God acted in Jesus Christ to fulfil God’s promise to rescue humanity and the whole created order from the ravages of sin and death.

Fifthly, the doctrine of the Trinity arises necessarily out of the biblical text as an accurate description of the identity of the God who reveals himself in this story arc.

Sixthly, because these texts are intended to fit together by God as a whole, an ultimately unharmonious reading of the biblical text is a bad reading of the text. Just as you know you are not doing a jigsaw right if a piece doesn’t fit in with the other pieces, so you are not reading the Bible right if you are not reading it in such a way that all the pieces fit together.⁸¹

Seventhly, what the text says theologically, and what we know from other fields of study, both lead us to believe in the historical accuracy of the biblical material. The Bible is not a coherent but fictional text like *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a coherent text that declares what really took place, even if this is sometimes depicted in symbolic fashion.

Eighthly, a good way of seeing the Bible is as a script for a drama. Some acts have already been performed and we know what the overall ending will be, but we as individuals and collectively as the Church of God have to improvise our parts in the light of the earlier acts and under the guidance of

⁸⁰ Kostenbeger and Kruger, p.228.

⁸¹ Just like with a jigsaw puzzle you also have to make all the pieces fit together. Even if there are things in the Bible, like the destruction of the Canaanites, or the more lurid bits of Revelation, that we might feel tempted to leave out of the picture, God has put them into the picture for a reason and we have to make canonical sense of them. Barton’s idea that there are things in the Bible that do not (or should not matter to us) is thus a non-starter.

the Spirit as our director.⁸² We don't always do this well (which is the element of truth in Barton's claim that the circles of the Bible and the Church's teaching and practice are not identical), but we are called to always try to do better so that the circles overlap more and more.

In summary, to re-use Green's image, the car is still intact. What the Church has always believed about the Bible and its meaning can still be said to be correct. Barton has not proved his case to the contrary. The challenge we face is to use the car to go in the direction God wants

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⁸² See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Westminster: John Knox press, 2005).