

complex and sometimes puzzling hermeneutical concepts.

One will certainly disagree with Barton at times since his perspective—despite his cautious and well-balanced argument—is necessarily shaped by his own agenda, i.e., his preference for a moderate *redaction criticism*. This becomes evident, for example, in his critique of rhetorical critics who ‘can nearly always “demonstrate” a rhetorical structure in any given text and so invalidate historical-critical arguments based on its apparent (or evident) formlessness’ (p. 201). While this is true in principle, the problem remains whether the texts in question are correctly described as formless or not. And although the answer will have to be given on an individual basis, Barton’s statement shows that the results we get are always determined by the questions we ask. It is therefore problematic to label the drive behind rhetorical criticism an apologetic one (p. 204), as it would be mistaken to condemn the historical-critical enterprise as simply destructive.

But these quarrels are not intended to lessen Barton’s achievements, which make his book—even if one does not agree with everything Barton says—an important contribution to the issue of Old Testament interpretation.

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***The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon***

**J. Barton**

London: SPCK, 1997, 210pp., £17.50, pb, ISBN 0 281 05011 2

**RÉSUMÉ**

*L'Esprit et la Lettre est le second ouvrage de Barton sur le canon biblique. Son premier ouvrage, Les Oracles de Dieu, traitait du canon juif de l'Ancien Testament et était très peu satisfaisant. Celui-ci traite du canon chrétien des deux Testaments; il est beaucoup plus positif et utile. Tout en reprenant des éléments de l'ouvrage précédant, il adopte une approche différente. Il insiste sur la fréquence des citations chez les Pères de l'église et sur les listes de livres bibliques. Sa conception selon laquelle la fréquence des citations serait plus importante que le statut scripturaire et que les listes de livres relèveraient d'une tendance tardive est intenable.*

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

*The Spirit and the Letter ist Bartons zweites Buch zum biblischen Kanon. Sein früheres Werk Oracles of God behandelte den jüdischen Kanon des Alten Testaments und war ausgesprochen unbefriedigend. Das vorliegende Werk thematisiert den christlichen Kanon beider Testamente und ist wesentlich positiver und hilfreicher. Obwohl es an einzelnen Punkten auf dem früheren Buch aufbaut, ist es doch prinzipiell grundverschieden. Besondere Beachtung wird der Häufigkeit, mit der die biblischen Bücher von den Kirchenvätern verwendet wurden, sowie den Verzeichnissen der Bücher gewidmet. Doch Bartons Behauptungen, daß die Häufigkeit der Benutzung von größerer Bedeutung sei als ihr Status als Heilige Schriften, und daß die Verzeichnisse eine späte Entwicklung darstellten, sind nicht aufrechtzuerhalten.*

John Barton is a writer who thinks adventurous thoughts about the canon. In *Oracles of God* (1986), dealing with the Jewish canon of the Old Testament, they were very wild thoughts indeed, and were capable of being comprehensively disproved (see ‘A Modern Theory of the Old Testament Canon,’ in *Vetus Testamentum* XLI:4, 1991). In the present work, dealing with the Christian canon of the Bible, and in particular of the New Testament, his thoughts are more disciplined. Based on his Hulsean lectures, to which he had clearly devoted a great deal of study, his approach remains challenging but makes a real contribution to understanding, whether or not his conclusions can be accepted as they stand.

Barton’s attitude to the New Testament is, on the whole, very positive. He recognises that the books were written early, and that most of them were early accepted as authoritative. He holds that they should be treated as self-consistent. Building on the work of Franz Stuhlhofer, he points out that the early Fathers use them more, proportionately, than they use the Old Testament. From this he makes the bold deduction that they were really more authoritative for the Fathers than the Old Testament was, though the Old Testament was reckoned as Holy Scripture, and the New Testament at first was not. He goes on to make the further bold deduction that the idea of Holy Scripture is merely theoretical, and that what really matters is how much a book is used. A more sober deduction would be that scriptural status and frequency of use are both significant, though in different ways, the former



speaking of the inspired origin of a book, the latter speaking of its experienced profitability.

The author also makes a second distinction, not between authoritative books and Scripture, but between Scripture and canon. By the latter, he understands the exact determination of which books are Scripture and which are not, a question not finally settled, in the case of the New Testament, earlier than the fourth century. He holds that the exact limits of the Jewish Old Testament were determined similarly late. It was only then that the books could be listed. In both cases, however, the books were used as authoritative much earlier, and certain other books as well—books like the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache in the case of the New Testament and books like the Apocrypha and Enoch in the case of the Old Testament. What Barton's attitude to these other books is remains obscure. Indeed, he does not really discuss the boundaries of the Christian Old Testament as a separate question from the Jewish, and if he did, he might be driven by consistency to the conclusion that the Christian boundaries and the Jewish are not the same.

This second distinction of Barton's is even more vulnerable than his first. The idea that one cannot speak of a canon until one has an exact list has no historical basis. It is true that the word 'canon' is not used until the fourth century, but the idea is present as soon as belief in Scripture is present, and extant Christian lists of the Scriptures date not from the fourth century but from the second. It is true that the second century list of the New Testament Scriptures, the Muratorian Fragment, is not altogether identical in content with the later lists, and mentions doubt about one of the books it includes, yet the amount of common ground is striking. And as to the second century list of the Old Testament Scriptures, that of Melito, it is identical, apart from one book, with the canon of the Hebrew Bible and with the lists provided by those of the later Fathers who adhere to the Hebrew canon.

Altogether, this is a worthwhile and thought-provoking book, but not to be treated as a manual. Its worst parts are those dependent on the author's earlier book, *Oracles of God*.

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***Children in The Early Church: Children in the Ancient World, the New Testament and the Early Church***

**W. A. Strange**

Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996,  
120pp., £ 8.99, ISBN 0 85364 763 1

**RÉSUMÉ**

*L'auteur expose brièvement, mais utilement, quelle attitude on avait vis-à-vis des enfants dans les familles et dans la société chez les Juifs, les Grecs et les Romains au temps de Jésus. Il présente l'attitude de Jésus et de l'Eglise primitive, telle qu'elle se dégage de la Bible. Il examine ensuite la place des enfants en rapport avec le baptême et la Sainte-Cène à travers les éges. Finalement il fait quelques remarques sur la situation actuelle.*

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

*Der Autor bietet einen kurzen, aber hilfreichen Überblick über die Einstellung zu Kindern in den Familien und der Gesellschaft der jüdischen, griechischen und römischen Kulturen zur Zeit Jesu. Außerdem skizziert er anhand des biblischen Berichts die Einstellung Jesu sowie die der frühen Kirche. Anschließend betrachtet er die Rolle von Kindern im Zusammenhang mit Taufe und Abendmahl durch die verschiedenen Zeitepochen und äußert schließlich einige Gedanken zur gegenwärtigen Situation.*

This book is timely in light of the continuing debate on the place and role of Children in the Church. Last November the Church of England Synod accepted guidelines in a report to the Synod about the admission of children to Holy Communion. Recently I saw a large poster outside a church which read 'Children welcome'—it is surely an indictment of the whole Church that we need to make a statement like that.

The author of this book began with a question in mind, 'if Jesus had so much to say about children, why did the early Church have so little to say?'

Answering this generated other questions which in turn give this short book its framework. In it Dr Strange provides a survey of the early cultures around Jesus' time, of the Jewish, Roman and Greek attitudes to children within the family and within society as a whole. He then briefly reviews the biblical