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# Review

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*John Barton. The Bible: The Basics. Second Edition. Routledge, 2019.*

*Michael Coogan. The Bible: What Everyone Needs to Know. Oxford, 2021.*

It is almost impossible to provide a useful introduction to the Bible in under 200 pocket-sized pages. Yet Coogan and Barton were tasked with just that. Coogan organised his discussion around a series of questions a non-expert might ask, under clusters such as language, authorship, and values. Barton's more streamlined approach begins with the Bible's position in society presently, then examining historical and literary aspects. Both present the reader with the information each author deems most fundamental to understanding the Bible, but the resulting publications are very different.

## Overviews

Barton's *The Bible: The Basics* has seven chapters. Chapter 1 situates the Bible in terms of its contemporary uses, primarily among Christians. Chapters 2 and 3 cover canon and genres, largely from a Western Christian perspective. Barton mentions (28-29) how canons are less fixed than we might imagine, which is important to create space for nuance. Oddly, the section on the Origins of the Bible begins with the New Testament (36) and only later discusses texts that came to form the Hebrew Bible (40). Chapter 4, Religious Themes, includes headings with a largely Christian flavour: the nature of God, ethics, Jesus and Christology. Chapter 5, the Bible and History, gives a historical-critical overview of the Bible and its contexts, including a section on quests for the Historical Jesus. The next chapter continues in a historical-critical vein, giving details about biblical ritual practices and community behaviours. Finally, it provides an overview of some major ways that scholars read the biblical texts, with an emphasis on traditionalist, historical-critical oriented methodologies.

Coogan's *The Bible: What Everyone Needs to Know*, includes 9 chapters, subdivided into responses to questions from a hypothetical reader. Bible and Bibles deals with canons, including Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox, as well some non-canonical texts. Languages, Texts, and Translations (ch. 2) covers the compositional languages of the Bible and the methods used by scholars (e.g., textual criticism) to develop ancient and more recent translations. The Contents of the Bible surveys the books and genres of the biblical texts. Chapter 4 outlines ideas about ancient authorship. Chapter 5, Contexts of the Bible, details the geography, history, archaeology, and social milieu of the Bible, including influences from other ancient cultures. The sixth chapter is dedicated to Interpretive Strategies, focused, like Barton, on traditional scholarly methods. Coogan provides textual examples to demonstrate the complexities of applying each method. Chapter 7, Uses of the Bible, discusses reception, surveying biblical support for holidays and for the use of the Bible in liturgy. It also examines debates about the Bible and the contemporary legal system and the relationship between the Bible and science. In chapter 8, Biblical Concepts, Coogan turns to theological concepts such as monotheism, the nature of God, and covenant. Coogan is careful to treat concepts important to Jewish theology alongside Christian ones. The final chapter outlines the notion of biblical values and provides a topical overview of love for one's neighbour, gender and

sexuality, abortion, slavery, and antisemitism. Coogan's approach balances a critical, scholarly overview of the biblical text with pressing questions any reader might have about the Bible.

### Different Approaches

While both Barton's *The Bible: The Basics* and Coogan's *The Bible: What Everyone Needs to Know* cover much of the same ground, their approaches differ.

An indicative difference between the authors' approaches is in how each author surveys the methods scholars use to engage with the Bible. Barton approaches methods at the end of the book. Under the subheading 'Objective and Subjective,' Barton critiques methods that he views as subjective, such as liberationist and feminist ways of reading. He misunderstands feminist readings of the Bible, claiming that such readings aim 'to identify an objective meaning in the text—to argue that the Bible, *properly read*, supports liberation for the poor and for women. The word "properly" is crucial here' (177, italics original). In other words, he claims that feminist criticism argues that the liberation of women is the *objective meaning of the Bible*. This is not what feminist readings (or other so-called 'subjective' approaches) do. Feminist approaches to the Bible notice, rather than elide, experiences of women, bringing to light any oppressive qualities in the text, and on the rare occasion when a biblical text allows female characters agency, authority, or autonomy, noticing those aspects as well. The book dismisses feminist and other 'subjective' methods by constructing a false opposition between accurate objectivity and liberationist wishful thinking; liberationist approaches are presented as having vulnerabilities (178; Barton points out 'problems' in canonical criticism [174-175], but these are complexities rather than as weaknesses), while methods more frequently used by Protestant male scholars of the previous generations, such as textual criticism, form criticism or the other 'traditional' methods, are implied to be more neutral (Parks [2019] critiques this false dichotomy).

Though he does not disparage ideological criticisms, Coogan likewise disappoints; traditionalist approaches are covered in detail but "cultural and ideological criticisms" are addressed together with no examples. Coogan only avoids defining non-traditionalist approaches incorrectly because he merely lists them rather than explaining them.

Further, each book has a different relationship to Christian theology. While both books tend to neglect how non-Christians engage with the Bible, Coogan allows more space for Judaism than Barton. Coogan prioritises the Jewish Bible early on, and talks about it as distinct from the Old Testament (3–5); he also includes examples of ancient Jewish diversity, such as the Samaritans. Coogan includes a brief mention of ancient Jewish biblical translation efforts (16), but neglects later Jewish interpreters. He discusses Jewish holy days (112) but the chapter Biblical Concepts emphasizes Christian-centric concepts (messiah, son of man, new covenant, son of God). Notably, Coogan describes Paul as a Jewish thinker (141; cf. Barton 147). While Coogan is still Christian-centric in his overview of the Bible, he has made an attempt to be even-handed with his treatment of Judaism, especially in the structure of the book and its inclusion of biblical aspects that are important within Judaism, e.g., holy days. When Judaism is included, it is described at a scholarly arm's length and with awareness of its independence from Christian theology.

Though Barton's book is presented as useful to a variety of audiences, his engagement with Judaism is less even-handed. On the back cover, Barton's book is described as 'an ideal starting point for people of any faith, or none, who are studying the Bible in any setting or who simply want to know more about the best-selling book of all time.' In the First Edition's Preface, Barton writes, 'I have not written with any religious intention, but simply to elucidate what is often a difficult and complex book' (ix). In the Preface to the Second Edition, he states that chapter 2 has been amended to

explain 'how the Bible taken as a whole presents itself to Christians and Jews respectively, emphasizing the different ways of reading that characterize the two traditions' (xi). The book does not deliver on this description; consistently, it presents Judaism as deviant from the main (Protestant) import of the Bible. Numerous examples show how the text presents Western Protestant Christianity as normative but two will illustrate my point. One is structural: e.g., the subheading 'Conformity with Christian Belief' has no parallel 'Conformity with Jewish Belief.' The book disproportionately covers specialised Christian theological questions (e.g., high and low Christologies (86–90); the Trinity (90)); there is no special attention paid to Jewish theology in the way that there is to uniquely Christian understandings of God-as-Jesus. Despite its claims of neutrality, the book presents Protestant Christianity as normative and dominant.

### Conclusion

Both authors provide an overview of the Bible which will provide readers with important information about its history and use today. "The Bible" can refer to a number of collections, and while there is nothing wrong with Barton's insider Protestant definition, its marketing as a neutral text of interested to people of any/no religion is misleading. Coogan's volume is written in clear, straightforward language, serves a broader readership, draws from more diverse scholarship and traditions, and provides examples showing the nuances of a particular issue. Barton's book doesn't achieve its claims of neutrality, but will be useful for those with Protestant Christian theological interests.

### Works Cited

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