**Kitchissippi Men’s Book Club, April 2021**

***The History of the Bible***

**by John Barton (2019)**

Review by Paul Hitschfeld

***The History of the Bible*** is a 500-page book with many details on all aspects of the Bible. It is not a religious book, it deals with the putting together of the various texts, who wrote them, each in its own historical context. It is not light reading, but the book helped me to understand even more the roots of my beliefs, and those of my fellow-citizens. Where the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is concerned, ecumenically-minded people like to stress that Christians and Jews at least have these texts in common, even though Christians also acknowledge the New Testament and Jews do not. But the interpretative keys that each community brings to the texts are so different that it is almost as though they recognized two different Bibles. This book deals with this issue in detail.

Christians think that the Old Testament tells a story, which goes on to find its completion in the New Testament. The Christian view is that the Old Testament story is about a disaster and a planned rescue mission, Paradise lost and Paradise regained. It tells of the loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden, a consequent history of human disobedience throughout the stories related in the narrative books, and a promise of coming redemption and salvation in the books of the prophets, leading naturally into the New Testament, where we learn how God’s planned rescue of the human race came to effect in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To anyone who has grown up in a Christian-dominated culture this way of reading the Old Testament seems simply obvious. It is the “natural” way of understanding the Bible, as Part 1 and Part 2.

What a shock when Christians encounter a Jewish mode of reading these same books. Where Christians see the Bible as a story about God, humanity and salvation, Jews read it as being about God, people and land. The story of Adam and Eve is a minor theme. Much more central is God’s call of Abraham to be the father of a great nation, and a blessing to the whole world through his obedient following of God’s way. There is no grand narrative in the Hebrew Bible, certainly not one that would culminate in the coming of Jesus. Instead, it is more a collection of individual stories, sayings and teachings that together constitute a tissue of instructions on how to live a good life as a Jew. There is little emphasis on “salvation,” if that is understood in otherworldly terms as “heaven,” and much more stress on the life of God’s people under the covenant. The prophetic books of the Old Testament are not a lead into the New Testament. A neutral view of this is to accept that the Bible can support both these approaches and, probably, many other ways of reading it, while mandating none.

The Christian and the Jewish readings of the Hebrew Bible are both driven by forces external to the actual text. For Christians, the writings of Paul, part of the New Testament, are one such major influence. He initiated the reading of the Hebrew Bible in terms of a universal human disaster, followed by a rescue mission focused in Jesus. This interpretation then became standard in the Church throughout the early centuries, and has remained so to this day. For Jews, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE—an event that forced a reorientation of the way the religion was observed—the rabbinic tradition increasingly saw the Bible as a closed corpus that could be used as a guide for living in the present, rather than as orientated to the future of the world. Mainstream Judaism has continued to read what we call the Old Testament —guidance for living a Jewish life — though there have been, and are, Jewish groups that still look for a coming divine intervention in world affairs.

We could portray the relation of the Bible and the faiths that claim it as their basis by a diagram of intersecting circles. To take the case of Christianity: there are many issues which Christian see as central to their faith, and which are prominent in the Church’s creeds, that are poorly attested in the Bible, even in the New Testament—God as Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the nature of his resurrection, Christian ethical stances. And, conversely, there are central features in the New Testament that do not appear in the creeds. It is not that the Bible and the creeds contradict each other, simply that they have different emphases. Similarly, in Judaism, central features such as dietary or purity laws are by no means absent from the Hebrew Bible, but they have nothing like the prominence there that they enjoy in Judaism today.

So, the relation of the Bible to its faiths is elliptical, not direct: “Scripture alone” does not work for either Christianity or Judaism as an explanation of what is actually believed or done. Nevertheless, both faiths find it hard to believe that the Bible does not in some way have a point-by-point correspondence with their religion.

The Hebrew Bible consists of a collection of the various writings of ancient Israel, written and compiled, probably, between the eighth and second centuries BCE. There is no way that such a collection could be identical with Judaism as a worldwide religion that has flourished and developed throughout subsequent centuries, and is still developing today. The New Testament is a first- and second-century CE compendium of writings from an originally Jewish, but later predominantly Gentile, sect in the eastern Mediterranean—one that evolved into one of the most successful faiths in the world.

Christians, like Jews, have always held steadfastly to their Scriptures; yet, especially through contact with philosophy, they have developed ideas that would have surprised the New Testament writers. The Bible stands at the beginning of two traditions of faith, without being identical with either as they now are, as the world has changed considerably since the time the various books of the Bible were written.

Available at the Ottawa Public Library.