

This criticism aside, however, Trompf's work deserves careful attention, not only from church historians, but also theologians, ethicists, classicists, and those engaged in comparative religious studies. Unfortunately, one may become lost in Trompf's extensive detail and intricate primary source work and this may discourage non-specialists from reading the book, but Trompf is to be commended for producing a thoroughly researched, eminently readable and excellent work that pays rich dividends to those willing to read it carefully and thoughtfully.

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*The Bible: A Very Short Introduction.* By John Riches. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-19-285343-0. Pp. 157.

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The self-stated purpose of the Very Short Introductions series is to provide "stimulating ways into new subjects," and this book attempts with relative success to live up to this aim. It begins with the Bible as a "great book." Riches points out that the Bible is the world's all time best seller (3) and goes on to introduce the topic which will be primary in the rest of his work, the role of the interpreter in understanding the Bible. Chapter two consists of a brief introduction to historical-critical biblical study. Examples given make sense to a biblical scholar but might be less meaningful to someone to whom the biblical narrative is unknown. No outline of the biblical story is ever given, so that references to "the flood ... Abraham's migration ... God's covenant with Abraham" (17) and other biblical narratives might be baffling to readers who have no familiarity with these stories. The third chapter, on the process of canonisation, is clear and provides useful basic information on how the texts came together in the various canons. The remaining six chapters, out of a total of nine, continue the primary theme of the book, how the Bible has been and continues to be received by a variety of readers. The first of these chapters consists largely of a discussion of the reception of the Akedah throughout the centuries. The Jewish tradition of interpretation of this story is followed by a suggestion that gospel narratives of the suffering of Jesus before his crucifixion refer to the Akedah. The next chapter looks at the traditional attribution of wide-ranging authority to the Bible in the Christian West, gradually challenged and eventually destroyed by the growth of new scientific methods and principles, from Copernicus to Darwin, which tended to limit the authority of the Bible to the religious and ethical domains, narrowly defined. Riches continues with a brief discussion of how enlightenment principles led to the rise of historical criticism as applied to the Bible and to the related "Quest for the historical Jesus."

The remaining chapters focus on the socio-political and cultural use of the Bible, both in the past and today. The Bible in the realm of politics has been used to justify both oppression of indigenous peoples and their liberation from

such oppression. The developing world, as Riches points out, is currently the area of greatest growth for Christianity (84), where the Bible is frequently used creatively as a resource for liberation. The Bible is also introduced as a central resource in the culture of the West, in music, art and literature. Riches returns to the Bible's political influence in his final chapter, a survey of the relationship of biblical interpretation to politics, from the New Testament to Martin Luther to George Fox in Pennsylvania. This leads into a discussion of gender politics and feminist biblical interpretation.

The conclusion emphasises that the Bible has been subject to many readings, according to the needs of the communities who looked to it for inspiration and as a resource for community cohesion, and also sometimes used it to oppress outsiders. Riches implies that the role for of the Bible in the future should be formative rather than normative and increasingly critical (137-138), since texts have given rise to such a wide variety of readings that all may be seen as problematic. He acknowledges that readers will interpret the Bible according to the expectations of their communities. Given that so many of such communities are in the developing world and sometimes tend to interpret the Scriptures in traditional ways, his desire to expand the use of what is basically Western liberal academic biblical interpretation—his interpretive framework—may be disappointed. For those of us who espouse this hermeneutic, there is tension between affirming our preferred model and affirming the interpretations of residents of the developing world when they differ from our own and are derived at by different methods. The book ends with a brief bibliography.

I find this book to have a number of weaknesses as an introduction to the Bible, the most serious of which is lack of mention of biblical content. Someone not familiar with the Bible would know little about its content after reading this. Given the current lack of biblical literacy, I would not use this book as a text for an introduction to the Bible, at however basic a level. Another deficiency is the largely Christian emphasis of the text, with any mention of Jewish biblical interpretation disappearing after the fourth chapter. However, as an introduction to political and cultural use of the Bible and to issues of interpretation, this little book could be useful. I am considering assigning it for reading the next time that I teach a course in "The Bible in Western Culture."

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