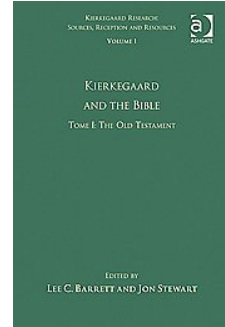


Kierkegaard and the Bible. Tome I: The Old Testament, and Kierkegaard and the Bible. Tome II: The New Testament, edited by Lee C. Barrett and Jon Stewart

Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 1 | Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010 | xix + 273; xiii + 338 pages | ISBN: 978-1-4094-0285-5; 978-1-4094-0443-9 (hardback) £65.00; £70.00



According to the publishers' website "the *Kierkegaard Research Series* is a multi volume series dedicated to a systematic coverage of all aspects of Kierkegaard Studies" and "is the most important, significant and comprehensive publishing treatment in English of the work and impact of Søren Kierkegaard." It also asserts that "this series serves as both a reference work for Kierkegaard students and as a forum for new research."

Such claims invite us to judge the work by the highest possible standards and it is in relation to these that the following comments are made. The final claim is, of course, fairly unproblematic. There have been various previous attempts to create a kind of Kierkegaard Encyclopedia, notably Niels Thulstrup's *Biblioteca Kierkegaardiana*. Unfortunately, that by no means lived up to its own ambitions and, despite a number of good articles, had a somewhat desultory and arbitrary outcome. In comparison, Jon Stewart's project has a far more systematic approach and looks to provide a set of materials that will be of great value to those engaged in Kierkegaard research, who comprise a much greater number of scholars (and in a wide variety of fields) than when I was writing my PhD in the early 1980s. Even in philosophy, Kierkegaard scholars today can be found both amongst the Anglo-American and the Continental traditions. There is therefore a substantial body of readers out there for whom this project should be of interest. On the other hand, one might question whether the kind of maximum coverage at which the series aims is really achievable and whether there the intention to serve as "both a reference work for Kierkegaard students and as a forum for new research" is not attempting to mix oil and water.

Clearly the two volumes on the Bible being reviewed here make a significant contribution to an area of Kierkegaard studies that, as several contributors point out, has been notably understudied. Even theologians who have engaged with Kierkegaard have generally been more interested in the big systematic questions he raises than in his use of the Bible and, as is also pointed

out a number of times in this volume, Kierkegaard deliberately set himself against the kinds of approaches to the Bible that would become normative for modern theology. Philosophers and scholars of literature, who have mostly approached Kierkegaard from a more secular perspective, have, for obvious reasons, had no strong motivation to bother themselves with his use of this arcane set of books. The cumulative argument of these volumes, that this is seriously to neglect a major and constant element in Kierkegaard's whole way of thinking, is well made and theologians, philosophers, and literary scholars alike should pay heed.

Many of the articles are by well-established Kierkegaard scholars such as Timothy H. Polk, Joel Rasmussen, and Lee Barrett (the co-editor) himself as well as several researchers based in the Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen, and although the quality of contributions is not uniform, it is impressive enough. Cumulatively we learn a lot about the state of biblical scholarship in Kierkegaard's time and about how he used it (or ignored it). Yet there are also tensions in a number of the articles between the ambition of providing a reference work and the desire to contribute to ongoing research. This is perhaps less of an issue in essays, such as those by Iben Damgaard and Joel Rasmussen, that are expressly interpretative, but it is—perhaps unavoidably—apparent in articles such as that on Adam or Job. What one expects from a reference article is a more or less pedestrian run-through of the relevant Kierkegaard texts and of the main lines of interpretation, without the reader's judgement being bent too much in any particular direction. It is simply a presentation of materials and an overview of the state of play. In an interpretative article, however, one would allow the author the freedom not to have to mention every single Kierkegaard passage dealing with the subject in question, no matter how insignificant, but only to highlight the most important passages and to give a more profiled reading of the overall role of the given biblical text in Kierkegaard's work. Moreover, if an article is genuinely interpretative, it is much better for the reader to know that and one can then formulate a different kind of response. For example, Timothy Polk's assimilation of the Job presented in *Repetition* to the Job about whom Kierkegaard wrote an upbuilding discourse is a provocative interpretative move, albeit one for which he argues very carefully and well; but there are also counter-arguments that have been made a number of times in the secondary literature. Now whilst an interpretative piece may not be obliged to offer all the counter-arguments and can limit itself to a strong presentation of its own distinctive position, it certainly should be the task of a reference

article—but that is not what is offered here. This is fine in its own terms, and it is asking a lot of an author to have him or her cover both bases—but the reader should know to which genre the article in question belongs. The problem with the reference-article approach, on the other hand, is illustrated by the essay on the Psalms. It is perhaps almost inevitable that, having had to trawl through every reference to the relevant texts, this comes out as a rather fragmented list. Here would have been a strong case for allowing the author to make more of a few select exemplary instances.

It is not surprising that despite a noticeable Danish minority voice, the volumes have a strongly Anglophone orientation. However, most serious Kierkegaard students today will have at least German as a working academic language, and probably French. Requiring summaries of relevant secondary discussion in these languages would be a big ask of any prospective author and, in the light of comments in the preceding paragraph, could simply lead to the whole thing becoming bogged down in footnotes (several contributions are already in the grey zone here). However, one might have expected more thoroughness in the bibliographies, where it would be not unreasonable to have looked for a greater balance of English-language works and those of other major European languages (German, French, and Italian, for starters, not to mention Danish)—not least because these have often been crucial for Anglophone Kierkegaard scholars. It may be true, but I find it hard to believe that there have only been ten German-language works on Abraham worth citing. A further problem with the bibliographies is that there are many important discussions of the relevant text or topic located in works on Kierkegaard where the key reference is not apparent in the work's title. Thus, to stay with the example of Abraham (although it is not unique), students are not directed to relevant works by Geismar, Hirsch, Shestov or Wahl or other "classic" studies of Kierkegaard. Nor is Derrida's *The Gift of Death* included, despite it having been a major focus of interpretation in at least one strand of contemporary Kierkegaard-commentary. There are also other, less serious omissions, such as (with reference to Adam) John Tanner's *Anxiety in Eden*, a comparative study of Kierkegaard and Milton on the Fall. Doubtless some of these figures and works will get due attention in later volumes (the present reviewer has contributed an article on Shestov for the volume on existentialism), but that should not have precluded their also being listed here. This may, worryingly, represent a tendency in our contemporary research culture, aided and abetted by Google searches (and by time pressure on completion and publishing), namely, that students are led only to sources in which key

words appear prominently and do not pick up on arguments and discussions that can be learned about only through extensive background reading. Perhaps this would not matter quite so much, if readers were advised that the bibliographies were of a more representative rather than an exhaustive nature. Otherwise younger scholars may be led into thinking they've done all the work, when they've really scarcely begun.

A further feature rather typical of much contemporary research culture is that the contributors are mostly primarily Kierkegaard scholars (as Ashgate's blurb makes clear). In the same way, we might expect a collection on Aquinas and Modern Culture to feature more Aquinas scholars than contributors to modern culture. However, this can lead to a certain limitation, and it would have been good to have had several biblical scholars offering their take on what, if anything, a Kierkegaardian reading of the Bible can contribute today. Increasingly, the academy seems to be splintering into an infinite number of special interest groups, and we need more invitations to outsiders to offer their perspectives—although (another feature of contemporary research culture) whether they will have the time or inclination is a whole other matter.

It is hard to fault the selection of topics in the Old Testament volume, although the New Testament has at least one rather surprising omission, since there is no article on the earthly ministry of Jesus. Despite Lee Barrett's own excellent article on the crucifixion and resurrection and Jolita Pons's discussion of miracles, little is said of Kierkegaard's view of "the life of Jesus"—as found, for example, in the mini-life offered in *Judge for Yourself*. Of course, Kierkegaard is his own worst enemy here and many readers have taken at face value the comment made in *Philosophical Fragments* that all we need to know about him is that he took the form of a slave, lived among us and died. But that was clearly not Kierkegaard's own view, and a rather interesting "Life" *could*, I think, be compiled from various sources. A further significant shortcoming is that although there is an article on James, this gives only three pages to Kierkegaard's use of what he himself called his "favourite" biblical text. This is clearly inadequate. Not only does Kierkegaard devote three of the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* to James's words about "Every good and perfect gift comes from above," but James is also present in *Works of Love*, *Purity of Heart*, and *For Self-Examination*. This is noted in the relevant article, but not much and certainly not enough is said.

Editors of volumes such as these need to be especially vigilant with articles written by non-native speakers. The opening sentence of Leo Stan's article on

“The lily of the field” raised immediate alarm bells when he not only spoke of the “creationist assumptions of monotheistic thought” but added that “Most of Søren Kierkegaard’s religious thought presupposes this creationist worldview” (55). The word *creationist* has, of course, acquired a very particular set of connotations in recent years that should not be applied to monotheism in general, certainly not to Christianity in particular, and by no means to Kierkegaard, for whom a dispute about the causal agency by which the physical universe was produced could scarcely have counted as edifying! Almost certainly, Stan did not intend us to hear such connotations and a firmer editorial hand could have averted the discomfort.

For a work that aspires to “reference” status, the indexing is far from complete, and this reviewer noted several references to his own work that didn’t make it into the index. Several random follow-up searches suggested that something similar has happened in other cases, although the basis on which authors are selected or omitted is not made clear.

Undoubtedly, these collections of essays will be a useful addition to libraries buying works on Kierkegaard. Many individual essays are of a high standard, but whilst fulfilling the modest yet reputable task of resourcing ongoing research, it is unlikely—it is not in the nature of things—that these volumes, worthy as they are, will set the direction for that research.

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