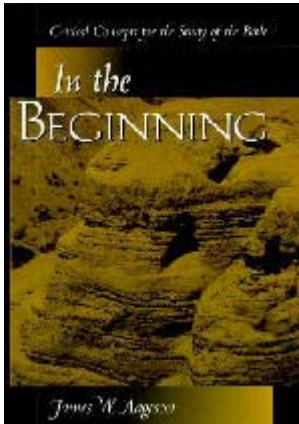


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**Aageson, James W.**

***In the Beginning: Critical Concepts for the Study of the Bible***

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One might suppose that a book entitled *In the Beginning* would relate primarily to the early chapters of the book of Genesis, or perhaps to some other ancient “beginning.” However, the “beginning” of Aageson’s title is a student’s earliest forays into biblical criticism. Aageson aims to provide students with an introduction to ways of thinking about the Bible, biblical interpretation, and the religious uses of the Bible.

Each of the sixteen essays in this volume could stand independently of the others. The chapters treat a variety of topics. They do not build upon each other, nor do they advance an overall argument. The volume thus provides considerable flexibility for individual and classroom use, as its chapters may be read, for the most part, in any order with equal profit.

Because of the independence of the chapters, each chapter deserves some independent mention here. Two of the chapters discuss basic characteristics of the Bible. Chapter 8, “The Bible: A Book or a Library?” introduces students to the diversity of genres, provenances, and theologies evident in the biblical texts. Chapter 12, “This Canon Has One ‘N’” (a “cute” title that ill serves, since the letter “n” manifestly appears *twice* in the word “canon,” not once) discusses the types of processes that may have led to the canonization of the Tanakh and the New Testament. These chapters provide basic information helpful to beginning students.

Other chapters focus more on attitudes toward biblical interpretation as a scholarly enterprise. Chapter 2, “Two Religions, One Set of Texts,” invites readers to consider the religious and critical implications of using the terms “Tanakh” and “Old Testament” for

the collection (*sic*; Aageson seems to assume that the contents of the Tanakh and “the” Old Testament are the same) these terms name. Aageson does not suggest that Christians abandon the term “Old Testament” (or that Jews adopt it!); rather, his goal is to spur readers to consider why the texts common to both Jews and Christians are read differently (sometimes drastically so) within the different traditions. Similarly, chapter 6, “To Hear and to See,” prompts reflection on textuality and orality and has a helpful section on the physical forms of biblical books in antiquity. Chapter 5, “What about Language?” briefly surveys the history of biblical translations from the Septuagint and Targums to modern-language translations.

Aageson seems particularly keen to discuss issues related to historicity and “truth,” as he devotes three chapters to these matters. Chapter 7, “Be It History or Literature?” describes a range of attitudes toward the historicity of biblical narratives, drawing examples from the study of the gospels. Here again, Aageson does not champion any one attitude, but attempts to expose readers to the range of actual critical practices. Later, in chapter 10, “Let’s Just Read It Literally,” Aageson stresses that a “surface” reading of the text is not necessarily the same as what might be called the “plain sense” of the text. He calls on readers to take into account genre conventions and authorial intention when determining whether a particular biblical text might be figurative or fictional. Closely related is chapter 11, “What Is Truth? Fact, Myth, and Moral Critique,” in which Aageson gently guides readers toward openness to thinking of “truth” in terms other than correspondence to external reality. Yet Aageson may lead readers too far in this direction. He does not avoid leaving the impression that *any* claim that is not subject to empirical verification by modern historians *must* be operating with some notion of truth other than correspondence to reality. There is also a certain tension between chapter 11’s emphasis on “the truth of myth” and chapter 10’s emphasis on authorial intention. One wonders whether Matthew and Luke would agree with Aageson that the biological facts regarding Jesus’ conception have no bearing on the truth value of their gospels’ birth narratives.

Simple introductions to historical-critical methodologies occupy yet other chapters. Chapter 3, “A Matter of Method,” introduces source criticism and redaction criticism, while tradition criticism is treated in chapter 9, “Like an Ever-Flowing Stream.” Chapter 4, “From a Hunch to a Hypothesis,” starts out promisingly with a comparison of inductive and deductive reasoning and the process by which biblical scholars move from hunches to hypotheses. This methodological discussion gets sidetracked, however, by its example: the two-source solution to the synoptic problem. Chapter 15, “Digging in the Text and in the Dirt,” discusses the relationship between textual interpretation and archaeological investigation.

The other chapters in the book cluster around issues of the relationships between the Bible, its interpreters, and their various academic and religious constituencies. Chapter 1, “An Issue of Distance,” urges students to stand at a “critical distance” from the biblical text. Such a stance, Aageson argues, mediates between an extreme immediacy in which

interpreters take biblical texts as direct addresses to the interpreters themselves (as in much devotional reading of the Bible) and an opposite but equally extreme remoteness in which interpreters feel the Bible is so far removed from their own experience that they may even despair of understanding it at all. In chapter 13, "The Three Legs of Biblical Interpretation," Aageson invites students to reflect on the effects on biblical interpretation of reading communities, social location, and the intended function of biblical texts. In the final chapter, "The Bible and the Examined Life," Aageson briefly describes his own pedagogical goals for introductory courses in biblical interpretation, which he locates within a general humanities or liberal arts curriculum. Unfortunately, in this chapter that seems aimed primarily at instructors in introductory courses, Aageson's succinct presentation and justification of his pedagogical *goals* is not accompanied by helpful suggestions of pedagogical *technique*. Readers may well find themselves agreeing with Aageson's objectives, but unsure of how to achieve them in practice.

Chapter 14, "A Question of Purity," seems a little bit out of place in this volume. Its discussion of biblical notions of purity is a brief and helpful introduction to the topic, but one wonders why this topic in particular appears in this volume. This chapter might helpfully be used as an example of the use of anthropology in biblical studies, but a more direct look at the methodology would have been more helpful.

In some cases, Aageson seems to stop short of making more helpful suggestions, or he seems to leave out too much in the interests of simplicity. After several pages discussing the generic and theological diversity of the Bible, for example, Aageson simply encourages readers to recognize and deal creatively with such diversity. He does not provide any suggestions or models for what such creative handling would look like. Similarly, when discussing canonical process, Aageson cites Roger Beckwith's account of the canonical process leading to the Tanakh as an alternative to the older view that held canonization to be largely a function of the rabbinical school at Jabneh/Jamnia, but he declines (apparently to keep the discussion brief) to provide any alternative to Beckwith's views, which may well place the stabilization of the Writings rather too early. Nor does Aageson discuss the canonization of the Christian Old Testament independently of the canonization of the Tanakh, although these processes resulted in manifestly different collections, as Aageson's own chart of canon lists shows. Other examples could be adduced in which Aageson seems to simply stop, rather than end, a chapter, leaving readers hanging and desiring more. That, however, may be precisely the point; Aageson wants to prod readers to learn *how* to think about biblical texts and their interpretation; he does not want to tell them *what* to think.

The volume's biggest weakness is a lack of attention to critical methods that are not primarily historical-critical. Literary-aesthetic analysis of a formalist bent is briefly described in chapter 7, "Be It History or Literature?" That discussion even seems to allude to reader-response criticism. However, structuralist and poststructuralist approaches, deconstruction, and the various forms of ideological critique and advocacy

criticisms are left out of this volume. Similarly, in chapter 10, Aageson insists that “a truly literal reading will take into account the intent of the author,” even though authorial intent may have been to have *not* been taken literally. These omissions and overstatements may give beginning students the impression that historical-critical studies and searches for authorial intent should be the norm for biblical studies, casting other approaches as either aberrations, or as less “critical” (lacking rigor, vitality, or both) than historically-oriented studies, or as advanced, complex methods that cannot be understood except as approached through historically-oriented studies. Yet all of these inferences are contestable.

Overall, Aageson’s volume provides readers with a gentle introduction into the world of critical biblical studies. Aageson carefully describes the methods, attitudes, and features of the type of biblical studies that has now become traditional in scholarly circles. *In the Beginning: Critical Concepts for the Study of the Bible* is a fine starting point for any nonspecialists interested in the scholarly study of the Bible, and deserves serious consideration as a resource for introductory coursework by undergraduates or beginning seminarians.