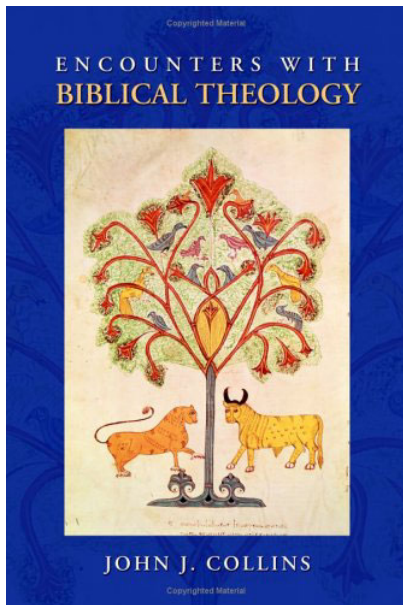


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Encounters with Biblical Theology

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John Collins has become one of the most interesting and trustworthy observers of the current field of pre-Christian biblical studies. (See his more recent *The Bible since Babel*, 2006, for a critique of the various subdisciplines today in critical study of the Bible.) Here he offers fifteen studies about what has been happening (and not happening) in the area of biblical theology. Each had been published earlier, most during the last quarter of the last century, five more recently. An Irish Catholic with no personal investment in defending any particular view of “Scripture” (as Catholics prefer to call the Christian double-Testament Bible, but without the “sole authority” Protestants invest in it), Collins is an astute observer of serious efforts to make theological sense of the Bible. He has critiqued such efforts without attempting himself to do a biblical theology.

“If ... everyone has a power-seeking agenda (the thesis of Stanley Fish in *The Trouble with Principle*, 1999), then it is better to have these agendas out in the open” (37). This Collins attempts as well as anyone in the field today. “Biblical theology” at the mid-twentieth century was an effort to base a generally accepted theology of the Bible on the work of biblical criticism. The effort by and large failed, as heralded by Brevard Childs’s *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970). Childs cited, among other things, the format of *The Interpreter’s Bible* (1951–57) as an indication of its failure, with its commentary bifurcated

into “exegesis” and “exposition” of each passage, one rarely relating to the other. Biblical criticism as an Enlightenment method of historical/literary study of the Bible has created an arena for conversation and dialogue across the spectrum of the individual scholars’ personal faith commitments but has failed to provide a firm base for a generally accepted biblical theology.

The Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) was founded under the leadership of Prof. Philip Schaff of Union Seminary in New York in 1880 to sponsor and organize critical study of the Bible and soon attracted Protestant scholars of the Bible of differing faith stances; some Jewish scholars later joined the Society, along with a few adventurous Catholic students of philology and archaeology of the Bible. It attracted anyone who was committed, for the conversations, not to a faith position but to open, critical study of the histories of the formation and transmission of the text of the various parts of the Bible. As the modernist-fundamentalist controversies of the latter part of the nineteenth century subsided, the SBL attracted increasing numbers of those who subscribed to critical study of Scripture no matter how they spent their weekends.

By the end of the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925, most seminaries of most denominations included critical study of the Bible in their curricula, including the Presbyterian denomination that had in 1893 condemned a Union scholar as a heretic for teaching the Bible by the historical-critical method instead of through the prism of the Westminster Confession. Then when Pope Pius XII promulgated the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* encyclical in 1943, Catholic scholars were free to study Scripture critically without restraint and joined the SBL freely, some eventually becoming officers of the Society. The Catholic Biblical Association (CBA) was founded in 1936 in anticipation of the *Divino* but “in a context of faith.” Actually, the SBL and the CBA are now in essence parallel groups, with the CBA open to non-Catholic membership, so that the “context of faith” is clearly subordinate to critical study of the Bible. (The present writer, a member of both societies, was among a few non-Catholics invited to participate in a symposium held in the Vatican in 1999 sponsored by the Holy Office on “The Bible in the Church” and the only one invited to read a paper; see *L’interpretazione della bibbia nella chiesa*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana [2001], 121–43)

When one steps into such gatherings, especially the SBL, one is expected to set aside his or her faith commitment and to dialogue on the basis of critical study of the Bible only. The minutes and records of the SBL meetings in the 1890s offer not a hint of the modernist-fundamentalist controversies raging outside the meetings but inside Union Seminary itself, where they were held (see Ernest Saunders’s *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880-1980* [1983]; and see my “The Bible at Union: 1835 to the Present,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 52/3–4 [1998]: 123–30).

When, as late as 2004, a resolution was circulated within the SBL that in essence criticized politicized “faith-based” stances of the current federal government, 44 percent, nearly half, of the membership rejected it as irrelevant to the business of the Society, and it was dropped. Clearly, the Society still cherishes its commitment to critical study of Scripture as well as its own “irrelevance” to current theological and political issues.

The issue here is whether biblical theology in any guise can be done solely on the basis of biblical criticism. The answer would be yes, if one deals simply with what the texts “meant” in terms of ancient beliefs and belief systems, but probably no, if one insists on it being relevant to life today, that is, what it “means.” The former would, however, be “a history of religions” treatise and not “a biblical theology.” “Theological language is an integral part of the biblical material and should not be simply bypassed”(23), but while it must be dealt with in a history of religions approach, doing so is, nonetheless, not necessarily part of “a biblical theology.” Even the text critic knows that God language in certain passages may determine the critically most responsible text to establish. If one dealt only with what the texts meant, there would be “theologies” to treat that are sometimes in conflict, but this would indeed be a history of religions approach. Collins’s conclusion about whether a critical biblical theology is even possible he sums up thus: “It is my thesis that there is a legitimate enterprise that goes beyond the simple description of what was thought and believed..., while stopping short of the projection of faith into facts” (23). With this the reviewer is in hearty agreement (as Collins notes on 72), but I would go further to assert that the biblical exegete has an obligation to make his or her critical findings accessible to lay readers for whom they would not otherwise be available.

After treating some recent efforts at doing biblical theology Collins groups the fifteen studies under four headings: those that treat of theoretical issues involved in the enterprise; topics in the Pentateuch (e.g., the binding of Isaac, the exodus; 47–88); wisdom and biblical theology (wisdom was essentially ignored in the “biblical theology movement”; 91–126); wisdom and apocalyptic literature (129–66); and Christian adaptations of Jewish traditions (specifically, the concepts of messiah and of monotheism; 169–89).

Brevard Childs opted for the faith horn of the dilemma by taking an explicitly confessional starting point for his efforts to read the Bible “in canonical context.” The result has been a construct based on the extrinsic concept of “canon” imposed from without (25). Using that construct, Childs has been quite successful in keeping a Reformed theology of the Word alive into the beginning of the twenty-first century. Norman Gottwald avoided Childs’s “mystification of the text” by a rigorous sociological approach, which guards against the disinterest of secular critics, who tend to bracket the theological dimension of the biblical text. Walter Brueggemann has essentially avoided it

by applying his teacher James Muilenburg's "rhetorical criticism" to the task, which becomes a testimony of many, even contradictory, facets to belief in Yahweh. Jon Levinson, who objects to any kind of biblical theology based on historical criticism, nonetheless admires Childs's confessional approach, although he cannot subscribe to it. Levinson feels that criticism, which provides a common base for dialogue on the historical and philological levels, cannot nonetheless provide common ground for a biblical theology.

Collins, in a particularly perceptive study of the similarities and distinctions between biblical theology and the history of religions approaches, treats the widespread influence of Gerhard von Rad's view of the centrality of early recitals (which the latter first called creeds) of the Mosaic/exodus and Davidic/royal covenants in the Torah and the Prophets. Collins notes that von Rad's was a largely history of religions approach in the guise of biblical theology. Collins counters Childs's exclusively confessional approach (which has the merit of being quite clear about which horn of the dilemma he chooses), saying that in combination with a sociohistorical perspective the ongoing quest for a "biblical theology" can be fruitful, if not claimed as the only approach. It is at this point that Collins shows appreciation for what my students and I have been doing over the years in focusing on canon as function—the phenomenon of repetition/recitation of certain central traditions, like that of the exodus but others as well, in ever-changing sociohistorical contexts—and the use of comparative midrash and the "hermeneutic triangle" to discern how the multivalency of a tradition worked, in later biblical and nonbiblical works, well into rabbinic and Christian literature.¹

In a daring treatise on "the politics of biblical interpretation," Collins treats the uses and abuses of the basic biblical narrative to support modern political stances. He notes that William F. Albright, the great archaeologist and philologist of the early part of the last century, took the biblical story as "a master narrative" and compared it to the American master narrative. The biblical story put "the coming of Christianity as the climax of antiquity and the rise of (biblical) Israel as an essential step toward that goal." In so doing Albright noted that "a people of markedly inferior type would vanish before a people of superior potentialities since there is a point beyond which racial mixture cannot go without disaster" (39). The American master narrative almost obliterated Native Americans in this country and helped create the racism that rallied even nonslaveholders to the Southern cause, first of slavery and then of post-emancipation segregation and

1. In rebuttal he rightly shows how James Barr has misunderstood my interest in canon, which is sharply different from that of Childs (27, 31, 32, 72–74, 79). (Collins, incidentally, seems to fail to note the importance of the recital of the exodus traditions in 1 Sam 12:6–8 and its important function in the passage that marked the fateful transition to monarchy in Israel [73–76].)

repression. Albright, with his master narrative, increasingly became a supporter of Zionism. His was an organismic view of history in which evolutionary providence was on the side of the Jews; it was a goal-oriented view of history (38–49).

Collins then treats three theories advanced in the wake of Albright's stance: Norman Gottwald's, Israel Finkelstein's, and Keith Whitelam's. Gottwald's reconstruction of the history of Israel was part and parcel of the liberationist movements of the third quarter of the twentieth century, for which he saw Israel's story as model; in doing so, Gottwald never questioned Israel's right to the land nor acknowledged modern Palestinians' claims. While Finkelstein has seen no hard evidence of a foreign (Israelite) culture intruding on that of the Canaanites in the "settlement" period, he nonetheless used his findings to support Israel's claim to the land. Whitelam has been the clearest in questioning Albright's use of a biblical master narrative to make modern political decisions, but Collins notes that Whitelam has done nothing himself to offer a Palestinian history of the area. Nor has anyone, but it is doubtful that any attempt to do so would meet with anything but disdain from modern Jews or Christians in the West.

Now that we are in a more or less postmodern period one wonders if objective historical scholarship is even possible. Collins holds out the possibility that some measure of objectivity is possible if we are willing to recognize and acknowledge data that do not fit ideological presuppositions. When there is lack of sufficient evidence, he points out, even widely accepted theories eventually fall of their own weight, like Albright's and Gottwald's. Progress becomes possible when new data are made available. Collins concludes by noting that truth demands listening to "voices from the margins, to the Others of history who appear only as foil" in master narratives (44).² It may be that hearing those voices can come only from engaging in dialogue while doing criticism, and criticism must always be in revision and correction (43).³

2. Listening to the foils and the "others" in biblical narratives has been a major component of this writer's hermeneutic of biblical narratives as a whole. See, e.g., Sanders, *God Has a Story Too* (Fortress, 1979), especially "The New History: Joseph Our Brother" (41–56), in which the Joseph story is retold from the viewpoint of the brothers, and "What Happened at Nazareth?" in which Luke 4:16–30 is reread from the viewpoint of the Nazareth congregation (67–79).

3. See my proposal in "The Impact of the Judaean Desert Scrolls on Biblical Studies: Scripture in the First Century," in *The Hebrew Bible and Qumran* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; BIBAL, 2000), 29–42, esp. 42. It is necessary to remember that the observer is a part of the observed in human endeavor, and the most effective way to make progress in the quest for truth is through "dialogue between differing confessional and professional points of view and between differing hermeneutics addressing the same issues. Critique of one position by another should have as its purpose not to demolish the other, but to correct and strengthen it for the sake of dialogue, the kind of dialogue that is now essential more than ever before to the success of

This is one of the more poignant of Collins's observations: the very nature of criticism is its constant need for revision and correction. And yet each generation or school of thought wants to think it has found enduring solutions to the problems addressed. Even postmodernists seem to think they have found either the way or the wall of "reality." When and if humans arrive at a measure of humility in their quests, the fruits of criticism may indeed become the steps needed to progress to the goals the Bible sets, especially the monotheism that would at least prevent demonizing the "others" in any age.

Collins's treatment of wisdom in the Bible is insightful for the whole task of biblical study. "The task of modern exegesis may fairly be described as that of showing the relevance of the ancient biblical material to the universal, contemporary human experience" (104). That task embraces all the biblical material, not just wisdom. However, the wisdom tradition may be of particular interest to the exegete insofar as it provides an explicit precedent for the correlation of revelation and experience within the biblical corpus. Collins claims that wisdom in the Bible provides a base for natural theology. He offers four theses by which to express the significance of wisdom in the theological enterprise: wisdom is an integral part of the Bible; it articulates the religious dimension of universal human experience; it attempts (particularly in the later literature) to relate that experience to Israel's specific traditions; and elements of natural theology can be found within the wisdom the Bible espouses (93). Wisdom teaches and shows the limits of human experience, indeed human finitude. But it also points to a kind of cosmic order, and from this arose attempts at correlating wisdom to Israel's specifically apocalyptic traditions.

Collins, however, objects to the observation some have made of the influence of wisdom thinking on the prophets. In this he follows James Crenshaw's critique of the work, for example, of Samuel Terrien in this regard (103). However, wisdom vocabulary and rhetoric are clearly discernible in Amos's oracles, and when one asks where the prophet got his subversive hermeneutic, turning the exodus story on its head by insisting that, while Yahweh was the God of Israel's story he was also the God of the stories of Israel's enemies (Amos 9:7), wisdom can supply the answer. According to Amos, Yahweh was the judge of Israel and of all her neighbors (1:3–3:2). Where better might Amos have learned the "blasphemy" with which he was charged than from the wisdom traditions in the town of Tekoa that produced the likes of the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14)? Whence did Amos, in the middle of the eighth-century B.C.E., perceive such an international dimension to Israel's national deity? Amos in effect challenged the official master narrative by denying the nationalist exclusivity of the story. Amos need not have

the human enterprise. We need each other" (42). See also Sanders, "Lecture canonique," in *Guide des nouvelles lectures de la Bible* (ed. Andre Lacocque; Paris, Bayard, 2005), 67–93.

presented an integrated view of how to combine wisdom and prophecy in order to have learned, even as a child, the essential element of wisdom—its international and common-human dimension—from the same circles in Tekoa as Joab’s co-conspirator.

The tension that Collins observes in the Bible between universalism and particularism is that they rest on quite different presuppositions and “can never be fully reconciled” (126). I am not sure. Where did the monotheizing dimension so poignantly shown in the canonical process come from? The prophetic insistence on Yahweh being Israel’s judge as well as her redeemer and sustainer, which became an integral part eventually of the biblical story but which was resisted until utter calamity had to be explained in the exile, probably came from the wisdom traditions that developed parallel to the national traditions. Reconciling “different presuppositions” would not be a hindrance when it became increasingly important to see Yahweh as considerably more than the early national traditions allowed. The latter alone did not provide the explanation necessary when disaster occurred, but the prophets did provide the perspective needed—the reason canonically speaking the great prophets became an integral part of the larger Torah story. But where did they get the perspective? Undoubtedly from those who thought outside the box of the national-identity traditions, seeing God as creator of all as well as Israel’s deity.

To make such observations does not eliminate the differences between the universalism of wisdom and the particularism of the “master narrative.” The Bible itself, however, provides the frame for the dialogue that exists between them. Have modern students of the Bible learned what Amos apparently learned before he preached at Bethel? Not all, as evidenced in some recent very polytheistic “Christian” denunciations of Allah! The monotheizing process that the Bible launched is clearly not yet complete! But the Bible above all else is a dialogical literature, with many points of view about God and most all else, which also provides a kind of model for the ever-changing contours of criticism itself.⁴

Collins in this collection of essays has pulled together some of his most trenchant studies of efforts made in the last century toward biblical theology. It is a felicitous voice here at the beginning of this century, urging sanity and a measure of humility in efforts to make current sense of what these ancient texts were all about and why we still bother to probe into what they might mean for us today. As new generations come along with their fresh approaches and methods, Collins’s voice can help to guide new efforts to seek viable ways to bring the biblical past into the present in ever-changing contemporary and responsible terms.

⁴ See my *Torah and Canon* (2nd ed.; Eugene Ore.: Cascade, 2005), 136–41.