John J. Collins

A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

2nd edition


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John J. Collins, the Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School, has written several erudite and lucid works, including ones on theology and the ethics of violence in the Bible. His ability to handle significant topics of general interest in biblical studies serves him admirably in this second edition of A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. Aiming for pithiness, concision, and elucidation of the ethical, historical, and interpretive paradigms for the Bible without imbalance, lack of attention to indispensable matters, or mere summarizing of contents, Collins for the most part succeeds. In addition, the wit and verve of his prose style (i.e., at one point he compares Ezra’s reforms to the politics of the Taliban) should appeal to the contemporary sensibilities of nonspecialist readers and students alike.

Indeed, this text serves as students’ pedagogical companion. There are manifold maps, charts, bibliographies for further reading, and, in particular, illustrations. The stunning photographs, a major aide to student comprehension and appreciation of the vast historical range of representations of Near Eastern material, include everything from the Aleppo Codex, maps of every important phase of ancient Near East and Israelite religion and history, the Rosetta Stone, Hieronymus Bosch’s The Flood, and Marc Chagall’s Israelites Eating the Paschal Lamb to illustrations of Stone Age Megeddo, Jacopo
Amigoni’s *Jael and Sisera*, Herod’s temple, and the Cyrus Cylinder. There is also a dedicated webpage that includes test banks, classroom resources, and instructions on how to craft a research paper (http://collinstext.com). However, the problem with these materials is twofold: the entire study guide refers to the first edition, not the second, and the student questions asked in this guide are principally (if not exclusively) factually based, as opposed to questions that develop critical thinking abilities by demanding analysis or interpretation. On the other hand, while remaining appropriately rooted in Jewish textual convention and interpretation, Collins stays splendidly ecumenical throughout and not only alludes on occasion to the Christian Scriptures but also includes some apocryphal (i.e., deuterocanonical) books within the Catholic Bible. This book reflects on and can be used within Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions and gives a broad but focused overview of the Hebrew Bible.

In the introduction Collins outlines ancient Near East history (aided by a helpful table) and discusses the major issues in biblical dating and authorship, as well as the various contemporary methods of biblical criticism, which he characterizes as “a sequence of attempts to come to grips with the composite character of the biblical text” (10). The work itself is divided into four parts: The Torah/Pentateuch, the Deuteronomic History, Prophecy, and the Writings. Collins has decided, for the most part, to follow the order of the books in the Hebrew or Jewish Bible, which avoids the slightest hint of Christian supersessionism, while providing a coherent “historical” mega-story to convey to the reader stretching from the garden of Eden to the return of the exiles (and beyond into the deuterocanonical works).

Part 1 is particularly successful in lucidly explaining the impact of ancient Near Eastern civilization and literature, and the Documentary Hypothesis, on scholarly interpretation of the biblical text. Given the complexities of the Documentary Hypothesis, this is no inconsiderable feat. In his discussion of the garden of Eden narrative, Collins challenges the long history of misogynistic interpretations of the story, stating that “Adam bears the major responsibility” and that “both suffer the consequences” (45) of disobedience. Collins conducts such an absorbing analysis of the ethical and philosophical issues raised by the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac, noting that for Kant “the problem was how one can know whether such a command comes from God in the first place” (58), that one wishes that such analytical ethical explorations were more frequent in the text. Collins treats the narratives in Exodus as “legendary and folkloristic” in genre (66) but writes that the liberation story has “continued to inspire and support liberation movements down to modern times” (71), which again underscores his commitment to relating the Hebrew Bible to contemporary readers’ concerns. Happily, he does not shy away from elucidating the controversies surrounding male and female homosexuality, which he does in the
context of analyzing the Priestly legislation. He also does an excellent job describing the particular qualities of Deuteronomy and the tragic nature of Moses’s death.

In part 2 Collins sensibly approaches the Deuteronomic History as reflecting a unique theological approach that sees “a pattern of reward and punishment in history” (112). Students can then trace this pattern as it operates to control historical cause and effect in the biblical text, even when, as in Judges, this ideological vision “imposes a schematic design” that “does some violence to the stories” (131). This imposition of a “schematic design” on the biblical text does not occur, however, in the morally grotesque story that concludes Judges: the raping to death of the concubine at Gibeah, followed by a civil war. However, here as elsewhere Collins argues that morally “outrageous” conduct in this story receives “no comment” (137). While this is formally true, Collins does not mention that often the biblical text withholds commentary but not judgment and invites the reader to enter the text and draw her own inferences and conclusions. Biblical narrative is famously characterized by terse stylistics and structural parallelisms, multivalence and ambiguity, allusion and intertextuality, and the opacity that surrounds the inner life of the characters and their motivations. The Hebrew Bible requires active interpretation, and one wishes that Collins had mentioned these facts. Conversely, he nicely elucidates the “conflict of interest” between Samuel and Saul that also reflects the “conflict of interest between two theologies” (143)—one a belief in absolute subservience to YHWH and the other a more moderate pragmatism that gradually prevails in 1 and 2 Samuel with the advent of King David.

Collins first situates Israelite prophecy in the context of older prophetic traditions in the ancient Near East, thus counteracting the widely held if fallacious belief that prophecy originated in Israel. He considers two eighth-century prophets of the northern kingdom, Amos and Hosea, and has a fine discussion of their criticism of the sacrificial cult and, in Hosea, the metaphor of the marriage between YHWH and Israel. His discussion of First Isaiah notes that the purification of Isaiah comes when his lips touch a burning coal, which implies that “the human condition can only be purified by the painful and radical remedy of burning” (205). Collins remarks that what unites the disparate materials in Isa 1–39 is the theme on “bringing down the proud,” which, as I inform students, echoes Hannah’s prayer in the opening of 1 Samuel. He does an excellent job exploring Jeremiah’s critique of the kingship and the prophets attached to the court and his controversial argument to succumb to the invading Babylonians in order to avoid complete destruction. Throughout the entire section on prophecy, Collins conducts an in-depth and illuminating discussion of themes of anti-idolatry, anti-cultic sacrifice (with the exception of Ezekiel), and hope for the future. He remarks upon the famous passage in Jeremiah, reminiscent of Habakkuk, “Why do the ways of the wicked prosper?” (Jer 12), which is an excellent philosophical issue to raise with students. I especially appreciate
the analysis of Ezekiel’s vision of the “valley of dry bones” and the distinction between belief in individual resurrection (which might reflect Zoroastrian influence on the text), on the one hand, and faith in the historical restoration of “the whole house of Israel” (234), on the other.

The Writings, the fourth and final section, first takes up a discussion of Ezra and Nehemiah, focusing on an examination of the historical situation for the returning exiles, as well as the controversial issue of intermarriage with foreign women. Collins handles the revulsion this issue arouses in contemporary readers by noting that it “bespeaks a more extreme fear of contact with strangers,” as well as the idea, heretofore foreign to the Hebrew Bible, that the “holy seed” would be defiled, which presumes “a greater gulf between Jew and Gentile than anything we have seen hitherto” (279). The Psalms, which are part of the religious poetry common throughout the ancient Near East, are divided into four types, which makes them more readily understandable as a genre, but Collins admits that several psalms defy categorization. He examines the wisdom tradition in part through the prism of Qoheleth, who is “exceptional in attempting to verify traditional wisdom for himself” (310) rather than accepting its authority as handed down from generation to generation. Collins contrasts the smooth assurances of Proverbs in the providential design of the world with Job, where the justice of God cannot be measured by human standards. At last, in chapter 26, titled “The Hebrew Short Story,” right before treatment of the deuterocanonical books, Collins turns to this genre, under which he includes Ruth and Esther, even though he says he will consider Ruth, Jonah, and Esther in this chapter (329). It appears that the copy of this edition has been haphazardly proofread here, and I for one would have preferred Jonah considered under this genre, where, like Ruth, it constitutes one of the major achievements of Western culture in the short story. Although there is only one indirect reference to God in Ruth (when Ruth “chances” to glean in Boaz’s fields), Collins argues that the occasional references to YHWH are “enough to suggest that the entire action is being guided by divine providence” (329). He offers a good analysis of the comic, hyperbolic character of some of Esther and describes how the hiddenness of God in this story reflects ideas from the wisdom tradition.

My only qualms about this Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, other than the curious omission of crucially important biblical materials, concern the very large portion of the book that consists solely of chapter-by-chapter synopses. In the introduction Collins promises that the text will conduct analytical discussions of the “ethical implications” of the Old Testament, since this its “primary importance” for contemporary audiences (xiv), but these conversations, although excellent, are too infrequent. In addition, while these summaries offer no more than an in-depth overview, they nonetheless give sufficient information that students could evade reading the biblical texts themselves. If instructors intend to use this volume, they should be very careful to hone their focus and do close
readings of select passages or detailed discussions of historical-ethical and interpretive paradigms as applied to analyses of the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, although appearances can deceive, the syllabi Collins provides on the dedicated website appear very much geared to generalist approaches.

In addition, Collins altogether omits discussion of the stories of Cain and Abel and the Tower of Babel while spending much time and space in this section (“The Primeval History”) discussing the Priestly and Yahwistic accounts of creation. These oversights are so glaring as to prompt contemplation of how and why Collins made such choices. The Cain and Abel narrative inaugurates the theme of homicidal fratricidal passions that runs throughout Genesis and into 1 and 2 Samuel. This motif runs throughout ancient Near East literature and, in the Hebrew Bible, reaches two climaxes of complex storytelling power: the saga of Joseph and his brothers, and the thwarted effort of Adonijah, David’s eldest son, to dispossess his younger brother Solomon. Perhaps making mention of this theme runs counter to theorizations of biblical authorship in the Documentary Hypothesis, although Collins has already averred to problems with this hypothesis, noting that “the recent debates about the Pentateuch show that the reconstruction of earlier forms of the biblical text is a highly speculative enterprise” (39). The one story represents the first shedding of human blood (David Hume famously called history “the story of Cain and Abel writ large”). The other, alluding back to God’s twice repeated command to humankind to “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28, 9: 1) and parodying Babylonian hubris, scatters humankind “over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:8) for seeking to disobey this commandment (and imitate centralized and insular Babylonian culture).

However, such drawbacks are almost inevitable in a text that demands such great scope yet brevity of treatment. Students and general readers will appreciate how it reaches out to them, and therefore it can be recommended for adoption almost without reservation.