Collins, John J.

*The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*


Philip Davies
University of Sheffield
Sheffield, United Kingdom

Originating as a series of lectures, this book addresses some of the challenges to biblical criticism in recent years and suggests how the discipline might react to them. The chapters are entitled “Historical Criticism and Its Postmodern Critics”; “The Crisis in Historiography”; Exodus and Liberation in Postcolonial Perspective”; “The Impact of Feminism and Gender Studies”; “Israelite Religion: The Return of the Goddess”; and “Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible.” The viewpoint is that of a traditional scholar who wants to embrace, though with some caution, these challenges—without feeling the need for any radical revision of the discipline as traditionally practiced.

The first chapter offers some working definitions of historical criticism and postmodern biblical criticism. Although Collins is right to observe that neither of these is monolithic, the former is rather easier to define than the latter. Historical criticism, we are reminded, covers a range of methods each of which sought to kill its predecessor (a nice observation that recalls Harold Bloom as well as James Frazer). These have their roots in the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Among the principles of historical criticism are (1) the *autonomy of the historian* (anchored in the philosophy of Kant); (b) *analogy*, which puts the biblical text on the same footing as other human cultural creations and makes the history it narrates subject to the same laws as all other history; and (c) *criticism*, the
necessity of evidence and argument and of the provisional and undogmatic nature of critically achieved results. In its favor is its ability to permit conversation between scholars of different ideologies, and it is “not something that should be lightly abandoned” (11). What should be—and largely has been—abandoned is certitude, and Collins is sanguine about that and thus sees postmodernism both positively and negatively. The changing demography of the discipline has collapsed the (ivory) tower of Babel: we now all speak different languages and belong to different nations; also in ruins are the privileges once accorded to biblical values, the biblical god, and his followers. Collins does not observe that some confessional scholars, feeling themselves not only dethroned but under attack, now take refuge in the relativity of a postmodern position, claiming their beliefs to be as justified as anyone else’s, but he does insist, and with every justification, that postmodernism offers no shelter from rational critique.

The account of postmodernism (11–16) is less easy, although superficially plausible enough: a rejection (or at least suspicion) of “objectivity,” consensus, master narratives; of univocal, determinate, or unambiguous meaning; of what he refers to as “time” (diachronicity? history of scholarship?)—and, in some cases, the ultimate irreconcilability of different discourses. It concludes with one example of deconstructive reading, by Yvonne Sherwood, and one of ideological criticism, David Clines (Sherwood’s thesis supervisor at Sheffield). Collins likes Sherwood’s *The Prostitute and the Prophet* but questions her claim that the purity of the newborn child is deconstructed by that of the harlot bride. He finds her “more successful” in other respects (now, there’s a modernist way of putting it—he means he finds it easier to agree!). A better line of attack might have been to suggest that poets do not need to reconcile their metaphors and that deconstruction unfortunately requires stable meaning in order to work. Poetry is, after all, by its very nature deconstructive of “ordinary” language and thought. Collins’s observation that Hosea was “a prophet, who said one thing one day and something else the next” (22) is uncharacteristically lame and clearly so much from a modernist direction that it hardly dents Sherwood’s thesis. Still, Collins’s comments are generally positive, and he remarks (as he will throughout the book) on what “traditional” criticism has to learn: a willingness to forego logic and an insistence on seeing Yahweh as a textual construct and not a metaphysical (and stable) “given.”

For his example of ideological criticism, Collins selects a Clines essay from *Interested Parties* on Amos, which asks what is wrong with having ivory beds or singing, why the poor should suffer exile as a result of the injustice of the rich, and whether Yahweh is exempt from his own demands for justice. Collins approves of the ethical challenge to a text that is often unquestionably taken as an ethical norm. “What ethical responsibility do I carry,” he quotes (from a different Clines essay), “if I go on helping this text to stay alive?” (25). Here again Clines might have been challenged to defend his career as a Bible
scholar (criticism, after all, helps the Bible to stay alive too). For there is a serious issue here that Collins never raises: biblical scholars trade on the Bible’s status; destroying/deconstructing the plant on which you parasitically feed is possibly suicidal. One could also ask whether Clines’s own morality is in any way less open to challenge than the Bible’s. But while unhappy with the implication that the Bible might cease to have any role in Western civilization, or in its morality, Collins is generally benign to this kind of critique, although he returns to the topic later.

The second chapter deals with the crisis in biblical historiography. While historiography as a whole has certainly entertained postmodernist critique, the particular crisis in biblical historiography is better seen as a return of older historical-critical principles invigorated by ideological and literary criticism. “New Historicism,” with which it has more in common, has Marxist roots. Collins is therefore absolutely correct to observe that “Thompson and Lemche seem to me to be quite old-fashioned empirical historians” (32). On the writings of Kitchen, Provan, and others in defense of biblical historical reliability he is quite dismissive, and he finally approves a middle course, while noting that the ideological differences between his “moderates,” Finkelstein and Dever (!), and the “minimalists” are minimal. Finkelstein (who seems to me to have no ideological differences with them at all), is briefly and fairly disposed of with the comment that he likes to date as much as possible to the seventh century. To this reviewer, who obviously has a partisan view of the issue, Collins has the right instincts, even in identifying the element of mischief in some “minimalist” writing. But that mischief itself is more serious than he recognizes and makes no sense without the wider political and religious context in which ancient Israelite and Judean history is being contested. “Playing” is a postmodern theme, indeed, but can also pose a direct challenge to the “serious” discourse in which so much biblical criticism is conducted.

The third chapter, on postcolonialism and liberation, focuses (inevitably) on the “exodus.” Taking Lohfink and Gottwald as instances, Collins notes the problems of historicity but approves of the aims of such approaches—the furtherance of social justice. His discussion revolves around the context of the story rather than any underlying event: What does the story really proclaim? Indeed, it also matters, he adds, where we end the story—at the Reed Sea, at Sinai, or with the conquest? Collins does not miss the modern political implications and includes a discussion of Edward Said’s critique. He defends biblical scholarship from Whitelam’s charge that it is complicit in the silencing of Palestinian history. But that the Bible is a colonial text and has been used in support of colonial expansion (including Zionism) is undeniable, and contemporary biblical scholarship at any rate can no longer claim neutrality on the issue of the biblical basis of contemporary attitudes to Middle Eastern politics, both in Israeli and Western countries (especially
America). Collins does not state the matter in this way but does observe that neither liberation nor colonization are good simply because they are in the Bible (74).

On feminism and gender (ch. 4), Collins moves through the standard issues, finally resting on the point that the crux is not the patriarchalism of ancient Israel (How could it have been anything else?) but the deduction of a divinely ordained hierarchical order subordinating women (here is an unexpected gap in Collins’s coverage: homosexuality in some ways is a more interesting issue). But the feminine remains the focus of interest in the fifth chapter, where we meet Mrs. Yahweh (Asherah) with the entailed question of monotheistic universal Yahwism and its place both in the Bible and in the history of Israelite and Judean religion(s). Asherah has been turned within the biblical texts either into a pillar (like Lot’s wife) or into a personification of Wisdom. Having accepted the truth of the “revisionist” (i.e., “mostly correct”) view that Israel’s religion was hardly distinguished from that of its neighbors, Collins holds that some distinctive elements existed from the outset (we are not told which ones). Still, he accepts that monotheism and the biblical view of religion both suppress other voices that deserve to be retrieved and that the ancient religion(s) of Israel were not as the Bible would have us see them.

The concluding chapter opens with a statement that encapsulates the thesis of the book: “the changes in our views of the history and the religion of Israel and of the ethical import of the Old Testament for political and feminist liberation … do not, to any degree, result from postmodernist critical theory. They do, however, result from a postmodern situation” (131). Since the older paradigms were (if often tacitly) theological, it is in the area of theology especially that the impact of their collapse should be felt. Collins notes the shift from “history” to “story,” the collapse of foundationalism (Barth) and the “canonical” approach of Childs. Brueggemann’s “postmodern” theological program is criticized for appealing unproblematically to “the text” without allowing it to fall under the same suspicion as everything else (Collins identifies this as Barthian). But it is ethics that concerns Collins most, and he discusses whether these can any longer have any objective basis, including the Bible. He explores the “concern for otherness” (Levinas) before returning to Amos (and Clines) and in particular Clines’s argument that ethical decisions must ultimately rest with the self. Surely, says Collins, the nature of the decision itself has some ethical value (mentioning Hitler). Yes, indeed. But there the book peters out, with the statement that biblical theology and ethics remain viable enterprises for those who want to “pursue consensus but not assume it” (161).

This book should, of course, be assessed as a set of published lectures and not a systematic account of postmodernism and biblical studies. It is full of mostly brief engagements with scholars and theories, usually perceptive comments and an overall thesis or two. The treatment is fairly programmatic: a few introductory statements, a rehearsal of names
with some comments, some examples of exegesis, and the occasional critical reflection. But isn’t that what makes a good lecture? The parts are more than the whole, too—but again, that is how a lecture series should work. What is a little disappointing is the lack of a large bite (there are plenty of small ones). The thesis that biblical criticism must remain committed to dialogue and to rationality is unlikely to evoke much dissent; that many of the developments are not driven by postmodernism but by cultural change of other kinds and that they are as much in continuity with traditional biblical scholarship was perhaps more in need of being said. But the overall treatment is irenic, benign, reasonable and the conclusions rather comforting. Collins’s often incisive criticism never becomes confrontational, never reaches the edge, nowhere stares at any kind of abyss. To invoke Pangloss would be disproportional, yet this reviewer had the feeling that we have to listen to these challenges, accept that they have much to say, and move on. Maybe this is right. It certainly reflects what most scholars believe and wish to be the case. But perhaps there are deeper issues and sharper problems. The Bible, as Collins says, is too important to disappear from modern cultural and especially ethical discourse. But that is largely because most people do not read it critically. Biblical scholarship is, after all, little more than a dot on the horizon of most modern Christian and Jewish believers, and yet it has much to say on contemporary politics and society. I missed that dimension: homosexuality and female ordination are rending some churches apart, and the underlying war between the Children of Religion and the Children of Secularity rages over “creationism” and abortion too. Is biblical scholarship ready to study the Bible in the same way that other religious canons are critically studied?

I have no doubt that the people of Edinburgh enjoyed and learned from these lectures, and so should every reader of the book. But it came to no serious conclusion: whether this is because Collins cannot or does not see one, or see the need for one, or see one and not wish to grasp it, I have no idea. But my map of the present terrain is not quite the same as this one.