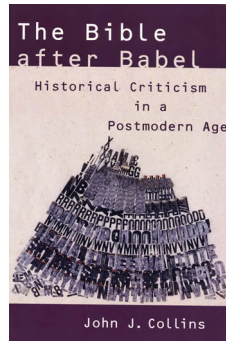


○ REVIEW OF JOHN J. COLLINS, *THE BIBLE AFTER BABEL: HISTORICAL CRITICISM IN A POSTMODERN AGE*

(GRAND RAPIDS, MI: WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO., 2005)

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In the horizon of the infinite. – We have left the land and have embarked! We have burned our bridges behind us – indeed, we have gone further and destroyed the land behind us! Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness. But hours will come when you will realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt free and now strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom* – and there is no longer any ‘land’!

Friedrich Nietzsche’s aphorism (#124 in *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann), as I understand it, could serve well as a motto for postmodernism. It also suggests some of the more troubling dimensions of postmodernism, as explored in John J. Collins’s book, *The Bible After Babel*.

The Bible After Babel contains the 2004 Gunning lectures, which Collins delivered at the University of Edinburgh Divinity School. As the subtitle indicates, these lectures discuss prospects for modernist historical criticism in ‘a postmodern age’, and thus the focus throughout is primarily on historical criticism, not postmodernism. Of course there are varieties of historical criticism, just as there are varieties of postmodernism, but Collins does not get into these distinctions and neither will I here. In addition to the book’s six chapter-lectures, there is a brief preface, a bibliography (at least one book cited is omitted), and indexes of names and of ancient literature. Collins’s book is very readable and engaging and suitable for any reasonably educated adult audience.

The first chapter introduces the conflict between historical criticism and postmodernism, and it is evident that Collins is aware of many of the major issues involved. Examples are presented and critiqued from the writings of Yvonne Sherwood and David Clines. Collins presents historical criticism as a form of modern science, forming hypotheses which are either confirmed or disconfirmed by evidence. He describes it as a conversation between scholars which gradually approximates closer and closer to the truth of the text, uncovered through plausible exegesis of the text's 'valid meaning' (p. 17) – that is, what its author intended (p. 4). This truth is 'objective' (Collins's term, but I suspect that 'intersubjective' might have been a better choice) without being 'absolute' (p. 10). Although Collins frequently invokes the Enlightenment, this discussion suggests to me a more Hegelian or Romantic understanding of truth and meaning as an asymptotic approach to some extra-textual Reality (which is very much an absolute, and as becomes clearer in Collins's final chapter – to revisit Nietzsche's metaphor, we may never see the land, but we must believe that it is there). This model of knowledge is very far indeed from Richard Rorty's understanding of philosophy as pragmatic conversation or Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern parody of micronarratives, as Collins evidently realizes.

The next four chapters of this book focus primarily on historical critical issues, with only passing mention of postmodern aspects or implications. This is unfortunate, as these issues could provide sites of productive dialogue between the two 'camps'. Chapter Two concerns historiographical aspects of the 'minimalist' debates in Hebrew Bible studies. Indeed, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, and Roland Barthes have a great deal to say about 'history' and its relationship to 'reality', but none of that appears here. Collins hints that at least some of the disagreement with the minimalists is driven by the (mainly Christian) beliefs of some of the scholars involved, but he does not pursue the possibility that questions of the historicity of the New Testament may also have something to do with this debate. Chapter Three discusses liberation theology and postcolonial readings of the Bible, with special attention to the exodus and conquest narratives. Liberation theology and postcolonialism are no doubt related at the level of ideology, but this lumping together needs further discussion. In addition, Collins asserts that postcolonialism 'is not defined by a method as such, scarcely even by a theory' (p. 69); he does mention Edward Said several times but seems unaware of the work of Homi Bhabha, among others. Chapter Four concerns issues of sexuality and gender in the Bible, and various forms of feminism, which he describes following distinctions made in *The Postmodern Bible*. He seems to be aware that not all feminisms are postmodern, but he spends most of the chapter discussing modernist forms, which focus heavily on historical critical issues. Incidentally, Collins explicitly states in his Preface that he does not consider queer theory in this book, but he does allude to it at points in this chapter (e.g., pp. 97–98). Chapter Five focuses on the question of polytheism in the Bible and especially the debates regarding a goddess consort for Yahweh, and again Collins's focus is largely on the religion of ancient Israel, not any postmodern interests in polytheism (apart from a few nods at David Penchansky's writings). Collins's remark that 'ancient history [must be granted] its own integrity' (p. 123) would itself be a fit subject for discussion between postmodernists and historical critics.

In the final chapter, the confrontation between modernism and postmodernism comes to the fore again as Collins discusses the highly problematic issues of biblical theology and biblical ethics. It was apparent already in the earlier chapters that these issues are important to him. The idea that the Bible contains or conveys either a theology or an ethics to be properly exegeted

would seem antithetical to postmodernism, were it not for postmodern scholars such as Walter Brueggemann who talk about these topics. Insofar as ‘biblical theology’ denotes a view that the Bible expresses a single, coherent message as the sum of its canonical parts, then Collins is correct that ‘a postmodernist [biblical] theology would have to be considerably more modest, and less convinced in its claims, than any proposed hitherto’ (p. 148). However, Collins’s quotations from Brueggemann’s writings followed by his own analyses of Brueggemann’s words give the impression that Collins is not playing fair here, and this impression is reinforced later in the same chapter, in his discussion of ethics, by patently cheap shots directed at Paul de Man, Foucault, and Stanley Fish. Indeed, Collins seems to miss the point that most postmodernists are not interested in ethics as a message (a ‘transcendental value’, p. 25) conveyed through the biblical canon, but rather in the interests involved and consequences entailed in acts of reading and interpretation – that is, the responsibility of readers to other readers – as is demonstrated in the writings of Daniel Patte among others.

Although Collins’s first and last chapter-lectures do attempt some engagement between postmodernism and historical criticism, as a modernist historical critic, Collins still accepts that the Bible is finally ‘about something,’ i.e., some reality outside of the biblical texts themselves. In Collins’s view, this something can only be properly accessed (even if provisionally) by the scientific-historical method that he describes. To translate this into Derrida’s terminology, historical criticism is profoundly, ineradicably logocentric – and my guess is that this logocentrism and the associated onto-theology are precisely what is desired by Collins and his modernist colleagues, i.e., what drives their study of the Bible. Postmodernists also live in a logocentric universe, for as Collins notes, following Lyotard, postmodernism lives within modernism, not as something over against it. Nevertheless, for the postmodernist critic, logocentrism is not the object of desire or the ground of motivation, but rather that which must be endlessly deconstructed.

The task is not to bridge somehow the profound differences between historical criticism and postmodernism (and much less is it to ‘reconcile’ them) but to find ways to explore and understand these differences – that is, topics by way of which each ‘camp’ might learn something from the other. Collins has described some of these joint topics, and if his book does not develop them very far, at least it makes a start. I expect no more from a series of lectures. I do not fault Collins for his historical critical preferences or for the understandable predominance of attention that he pays to the Hebrew Bible as opposed to the New Testament, although I suspect that the influence of theological agendas upon historical criticism is far greater in regards to New Testament studies, where the truth of the texts’ ‘history’ has greater value and consequence for modernist Christianity. All that aside, if we read Collins’s book as an attempt to expand the ‘conversation’ of historical critical studies to include at least some forms of postmodernism – as I do – then it should be welcomed.