Collins, John J.

Encounters with Biblical Theology


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John Collins, well-known Professor of Old Testament criticism and interpretation at Yale University, reprints in this volume fifteen of his articles that he published since 1977 in different places (cf. 231–32). Together they form a well-structured whole, founded on his biblical hermeneutics and highlighting some main parts of the Bible.

Already in his introduction (1–7) Collins shows how he wants to proceed. As the basis for biblical exegesis, he assumes historical criticism. He defines it as an attempt, using several methods, to understand biblical texts in light of historical and literary contexts striving for objectivity. Although he concedes that “the objectivity in question is never absolute” and a given text can have also other meanings, he prefers this approach above all because it can offer as an academic discipline an open platform “for public discussion regardless of faith commitments.” To Jon Levenson’s (1993) counterargument that historical criticism is also a tradition in the wake of Enlightenment and Western humanism, Collins argues for its impartiality: “Any position can be defended, so long as evidence is adduced and arguments are made” (2–3). On the other hand: “It is better to recognize that faith in supernatural beings or events can never be confirmed by historical or literary research” (4).
Whether this objectivity is the full truth may be doubted after one reads on which effects of biblical texts Collins lays special stress and asks for engagement: “on human behavior and society” (6). This view is obviously a heritage of humanism, in the vein of modern secularism (“modern ethics” [6]). Compare also: “We are shaped by rational humanism” (17).

In Part 1 “Theoretical Issues” (11–46), Collins explains his hermeneutical standpoint in three chapters: (1) “Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?” (11–23); (2) “Biblical Theology and the History of Israelite Religion” (24–33); (3) “The Politics of Biblical Interpretation” (34–44). They were written between 1989 and 2004, but all from the same conviction.

To answer the question posed by the first essay, Collins gives first a short overview of developments in the history of biblical theology, starting with Gabler (whose main intention as a Lutheran theologian was, however, presupposing the immediate authority of the Bible, to gain out of it “pure notions” as building stones for a true dogmatic!) and moving to Troeltsch, Wrede, G. E. Wright, Childs and to critiques of historical criticism. The task of biblical theology Collins explains, is “the critical evaluation of biblical speech about God” (18). This not only in narrative texts but also in several genres. One can ask: On what measures? An additional aspect is that biblical “history” is fiction, which means that the “living God” is different from God in the Hebrew Bible. In the second essay Collins proposes an alternative to the choice between B. Childs’s “canonical criticism” and “the Bible without theology” (Gottwald, Oden [add P. R. Davies]) by declaring that biblical theology is “an area of Historical Theology,” overlapping with (no alternative to) the history of religion. The third chapter deals mainly with theories of the origin of Israel: W. F. Albright versus K. Whitelam (The Invention of Ancient Israel, 1996), who proposes to replace the history of ancient Israel by a Canaanite history.

Part 2, “Topics in the Pentateuch” (45–88), contains four chapters. Chapter 4, “Faith without Works: Biblical Ethics and the Sacrifice of Israel,” on Gen 22 (47–58) deserves special attention. Collins takes the sacrifice of the child as the real theme of the chapter. Collins compares it with Jephthah’s offer (Judg 11) and states that child sacrifice originally was legitimate, even commanded (Exod 22:28–29). Jephthah is not condemned for the offer of his daughter, and Abraham is even commended for his obedience to God’s command, although actually the offer is not executed. But already ancient readers noticed a moral problem in the text. I. Kant’s classical objections are better known. Collins solves the moral problem by regarding the story as fiction—in the way of R. Alter. Even the question whether Abraham was a historical person loses any importance! “It is no longer possible to defend the historicity of the stories of Abraham” (57). One can object that,
granting that stories like Gen 22 have a poetic-legendary character, they may transport true memory about the past. Tradition history taught us how the remembrance of the past was transmitted from mouth to mouth in legendary form but starting from real events.

In chapter 6, “The Exodus and Biblical Theology” (67–77), Collins follows the way of the exodus tradition through the Bible. He stresses (with Sanders) that each generation read the tradition in the light of its own situation. Another aspect of his is that the exodus as a real event disappears more or less—especially in light of the archeological situation in Palestine, which is as at least of minor importance. All in all, Collins regards the central role of the exodus theme as a comparatively late development, whereas from what we know from the book of Judges—in Collins’s opinion containing rather early material—quite another picture of the society in early Israel becomes visible.

Collins’s engagement is vivid in chapter 7, “The Biblical Vision of the Common God” (78–88). This is something like a draft of social ethics in the Bible, motivated by the actual situation in the United States. On one side, we meet again with a statement such as, “From the viewpoint of critical biblical scholarship … the Bible cannot support the claim to transcendent authority” (78). On the other side, in Collins’s judgment, it is important as a religious tradition for a Christian community “that derives its identity from continuity with the past” (78). Here we meet with an argumentation that differs from Collins’s usual ones on the basis of historical criticism. He even remarks: “The Bible is relevant to our present discussion” (78). He gives two reasons. The first can conform with Collins’s humanistic standpoint: “The biblical ethics has had a profound and long-lasting influence on human civilization especially in the West.” The second is remarkable for him: for Christianity as bearer of a special religious tradition, the Bible “is the foundational document” and therefore fundamental “in the definition of Christian identity” (78). The attentive reader asks whether on this basis a special Christian form of biblical theology might not be possible and also conceded by Collins.

As to the Bible itself, Collins states: “There is no doubt that a vision of the social order is at the very heart of biblical faith” (80). If one regards the cultic universe of P or the individual piety in the Psalms, this seems a bit exaggerated. But it is true that justice is an important theme in the Bible. Collins places the origin of the laws as “tribal law” in the early period before the monarchy (see Judg 19:25). Covenant, divine ownership of the land, and sabbatical laws are catchwords for a communitarian ethic. But the divine command can no longer motivate a modern retrieval of biblical ethics, especially because as a rhetorical device it was conventional for lawgivers in the ancient Near East (84). The social message of the prophets (Amos and Isaiah) against the rich intends to preserve the common good that is endangered by their behavior. The Israelite belief in a moral order in history cannot be now affirmed without qualification. But Collins reminds us “that
social and economic problems cannot be isolated from the political welfare of the society as a whole” (86). For a Christian believer this is not very much!

Part 3, “Wisdom and Biblical Theology” (91–128), contains three essays: “The Biblical Precedent for Natural Theology” (91–104); “Proverbial Wisdom and the Yahwist Vision” (142–54); “Natural Theology and Biblical Tradition: The Case of Hellenistic Judaism” (155–66). In the first essay, the characterization of biblical wisdom by Collins is stamped by the distinction of, on one side, “the human sense of limit and the recognition of cosmic order” (97). This can already be regarded as its religious dimension. On the other side are the history and institutions of Israel. Collins here follows G. von Rad’s indications. In a certain parallel to European natural theology, biblical wisdom tries to connect human experience with the specific traditions of Israel. Wisdom influence in other parts of the biblical corpus can also be observed. This does no more than show that human experience is the basis of all literature. Against the traditional biblical theology the reproach can be made that it neglected the importance of wisdom in the Bible (G. von Rad’s last work should be excepted). At the conclusion of this essay Collins asserts that wisdom literature is important “as a resource for the ongoing enterprise of natural theology” (103). Although this could be in the vein of his own convictions, he, however, also states that “Wisdom cannot in any sense supersede the historical and prophetic materials that constitute the great bulk of the OT” (103). The next chapter supplements in a way the preceding one by focusing on the book of Proverbs. It is important, for example, by emphasizing that Proverbs often points to the limits of wisdom (with parallels to prophetic utterances on wisdom), attributing the last word to God. The unpredictability of experience and common creaturehood belong in the same context. The last essay in this part deals with the Wisdom of Solomon, Greek philosophy, and the situation of the Jews in Alexandria. Collins describes the situation between Jewish wisdom and Greek philosophy as mainly harmonious, although the polemics against idolatry in Wis 13 shows the relationship as not without religious tensions.

Part 4, “Apocalyptic Literature” (127–66), begins with an essay entitled “Temporality and Politics in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature” (129–41). Collins distinguishes between three types of millennial expectations: (1) the triumphant millenarism of the powerful, (2) the deferred eschatology of the depressed who hope for a liberating future but are submissive to the ruling power for the present, and (3) the revolutionary expectation of a imminent radical upheaval. Collins regards the last model as the original impulse, but sometimes it was later transmuted in Jewish and Christian millenarianism (131). As testimony he reminds us of the scheme of the four kingdoms in Dan 2 and 7 and similar expectations in the Greek and Roman periods. Daniel 2:38 is an example of deferred eschatology because Nebuchadnezzar could not be afraid of events prophesied for a distant future. Radical eschatology is represented by Dan 7; 4 Ezra 12; and Revelation.
Quietism, on one side, the hope of a new order to come, on the other, and “the sense of an ending” rejecting and condemning the present order are characteristic for apocalyptic texts. “The Book of Truth: Daniel as Reliable Witness to Past and Future in the United States” (142–54; with A. Yarbro Collins) describes the Wirkungsgeschichte of the book of Daniel in the United States under Millerites, fundamentalists and liberals. Collins concludes that, under conservative influence it was less revolutionary than in Europe. Chapter 13, “The Legacy of Apocalypticism” (155–66), starts with K. Koch’s book Ratlos vor der Apokalyptik (1970), but Collins makes clear that we presently are less helpless. Listing the causes of embarrassment (exuberant symbolism versus literary interpretation, obsesion of predicting the future, especially the end of the world, moral dualism) he highlights the origin of the symbols in ancient Near Eastern mythology and the positive aspect “that they can be re-interpreted endlessly in the light of new circumstances” (158). As regards exact dates in the predictions (as in Dan 12:11–12), they are unreliable. The moral dualism is the most problematic aspect of the apocalypses. As positive heritage, however, Collins mentions “the store of images that it has supplied to religious language” (161)—with the risk of aggressive rhetoric. Other positive aspects are “a sense of transience” (“that the form is passing away” [163]) and the hope of a lasting kingdom ruled by justice. A paradox is that such expectations were always immune to disconfirmations.

Part 5, “Christian Adaptations of Jewish Traditions” (167–89), comprises two chapters. “Jesus and the Messias of Israel” (169–78) collects material about the messianic role of Jesus, arriving at the conclusion that he was primarily seen as the royal, warring messiah, less as the suffering servant. “Jewish Monotheism and Christian Theology” (179–89) shows that the strict Jewish monotheism by the end of the first century, which gave birth to the Christian movement, was a comparatively late development. Angelic figures, exalted human beings, and Wisdom and Logos as personalized figures show the contrary for earlier periods. The claim for Jesus being the Son of God (John 19:7) “was not inherently blasphemous in a Jewish context” (187). The doctrine of the Trinity remains mysterious, but Christianity has never abandoned its claim to be a monotheistic religion.

What can we say about this book? Collins proposes after the “collapse of history” (L. Perdue) a third way of biblical interpretation between a believing approach and atheism. In an intellectual climate of secularism on an academic level, a discussion between adherents of different faiths would be made possible, so to speak, on neutral ground. Collins does not only find a secular atmosphere; he supports it expressly as the heritage of humanism and Enlightenment and regards it as quasi-natural basis of any dispute. Can this be a biblical theology? It is clear that the Bible was collected as a witness of belief (B. Childs’s was only partly convincing in his “canonical” approach because he mainly stressed the outer frame, not the motives of the early church for selecting especially these
books). The Enlightenment failed in its attempt to arrive at a reason without presuppositions. Humanism was undoubtedly motivated by clear presuppositions: a moralism inherited from the antique, especially Stoic, ethic stamps to a high degree the modern Western worldview. On this basis only a restricted discussion of biblical matters is possible. Instead, an open discussion between adherents of different faiths who refer to the Bible on all relevant topics could be helpful for coming to new results. Stimulations to such dialogues are manifold in this book, which is suggestive in many directions.