

What Ever Happened to Historical Criticism?¹

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A Review Essay

[1] The great cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt observed that historical sources are more revealing in what they conceal than in what they claim; their value lies more in what they unwittingly attest than in what they consciously aver. If their claims are instructive, then their lies are doubly so.

[2] Recently, a leading biblical scholar, John J. Collins of Yale University, published an important book on the state of contemporary biblical criticism: *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*. The author describes the book, which originated as a lecture series at the University of Edinburgh, as “an account of some of the main changes in the study of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament in the last third of the 20th century” (2005: vii). As the title indicates, it is concerned more specifically with the relation between what might be called conventional biblical scholarship, or “historical criticism,” and the “postmodern” situation in which we find ourselves. These published lectures provide a magisterial overview, not only of some perennial questions in biblical scholarship but also of discoveries, proposals, and methods that have had an impact on the discipline in recent years.

[3] Interested readers will learn a good deal from John Collins’s impressive survey of postmodern interpretive frameworks. They will observe the skillful and erudite way in which Collins assesses the impact of specific feminist and postcolonial readings on “conventional” scholarly proposals. The clear and articulate way in which Collins argues his proposals and qualifies his judgments certainly provides important insights into current debates. To read *The Bible after Babel* is to hear the learned musings of a first-rate scholar on a host of

¹ My thanks to R. R. Reno for incisive comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

contemporary issues. However, I suspect that those reading in a Burckhardtian mode will learn a good deal more.

[4] Although Collins never says so, the overall purpose of *The Bible after Babel* is conservative. Philip Davies has it right when he says that Collins, in this book, wants to embrace cautiously the challenges of the newer interpretive methods. According to Davies, Collins engages a formidable array of postmodern proposals, the kind that make conventional historical critics queasy – but he does so “without feeling the need for any radical revision of the discipline as traditionally practiced.” The book offers a perspective that is “irenic, benign, reasonable,” taking new postmodern methods seriously while reaching conclusions that are, with respect to the enduring relevance of conventional scholarship, “rather comforting.” In the end, Collins assures the reader that the difference between modern and postmodern is not so great after all.

[5] Collins concedes the existence of a “general pattern” (2005: vii) that recurs throughout the book. When a new method challenges modernist orthodoxy the “postness” of this or that “postmodern” methodology turns out to be overstated; its fundamental insights are assimilated to questions, concerns, and methods squarely within the purview of modern criticism. In this way, the book defends modern criticism against a kind of postmodern methodological supersessionism. Yet Collins does so by recasting, fatefully, the nature and purpose of historical criticism itself. *The Bible after Babel* is an important book because it bears startlingly clear witness to the fundamental commitments of modern biblical scholarship, and, in so doing, unintentionally sounds the retreat for an entire discipline, revealing that “historical criticism,” from the point of view of an eminent historical critic, is no longer concerned with history in any fundamental sense. What was once an intellectual program for making sense of the Bible appears, in this book, to have become a sociopolitical proposal for regulating dialogue. In coming to the defense of the scholarly mainstream, Collins defends not historical criticism but *academic* criticism.

History, Too, Has a History

[6] The author is an experienced, influential, and articulate spokesman for modern biblical scholarship. Now the Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School, Collins has, in the past, taught in influential biblical studies programs at University of Notre Dame and at the University of Chicago. His affiliations with these universities and with leading professional organizations have allowed Collins to operate at the center of the discipline. Collins has served in the past as president both of the Catholic Biblical Association and of the Society of Biblical Literature. He also served the latter for many years, perhaps more importantly, as editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, which has long been the discipline’s flagship journal. Collins is an extremely accomplished scholar in his own right. His alarmingly prolific and consistently first-rate work on apocalyptic literature in the Bible, Hellenistic Judaism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls further qualify him to speak authoritatively about the aims and methods of mainstream biblical scholarship.

[7] According to Collins, historical criticism originated within Protestant Christianity, developed within the context of the Enlightenment, and was refined by “critical historiography” in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the underlying principles of modern criticism were articulated “insightfully” by Ernst Troeltsch and “lucidly” by Van

Harvey (2005: 4-5), even as modern practitioners, less theoretically minded, continued to illuminate the Bible by focusing on discrete problems related to the understanding of its cultural, historical, and philological backgrounds. Thus “modern” study has remained oriented, in a basic way, toward the ancient context of the Bible, that is, toward history. It is therefore not difficult to understand why it is *historical* criticism (and not another type) that stands for the whole panoply of modern criticisms, and why *it* is, as the author points out, “the label usually applied to what might be termed ‘mainline’ biblical scholarship over the last two centuries or so” (2005: 4). The term “historical criticism,” as it is used in this book, represents the entire sweep of methods, frameworks, and programs associated with the modern study of the Bible: from early modern attempts to formalize Semitic philology, to the heroic source criticisms of the nineteenth century, to broader historicizations of the Bible based on archaeology and social science.

[8] As an historical critic, Collins is committed to the ancient historical and literary context of the Bible as providing the “primary” or “basic” meaning of the text; historical criticism, in this formulation, comes first (2005: 4). Whatever is said about the contemporary significance of a biblical text by the biblical theologian, then, must account responsibly for the historical critic’s judgment of the meaning or intelligibility of that text in its ancient environment(s). Collins’s method operates with a fundamental distinction – to use the well-known formulation of Krister Stendahl – between what the biblical texts *meant* and what they *mean*. Furthermore, it is clear that in Collins’s explicit framework the more or less objective task of deciding what texts *meant* has a primary or even governing role in determining what they *mean*. The historical critic thus retains the right to circumscribe the pronouncements of the biblical theologian, in effect, by furnishing the theologian his or her materials. Collins thus makes it clear that he identifies with the basic method and concerns of conventional, modern scholarship and not with methods that refuse priority to historical meaning.

[9] This division of labor is not a recent innovation, and still less an innovation of Collins himself. Its beginnings, as Collins points out, can be traced to the foundational period of modern biblical studies, when in 1787 Johann Philipp Gabler insisted famously on the primacy of historical inquiry in theology. In subsequent periods, the distinction between historically descriptive and theologically normative biblical theologies has endured.² That the early modern “historical turn” in biblical studies was a fateful one cannot be denied; the significance of the “turn,” however, must be carefully understood. For the greater part of the twentieth century, the genesis of critical, historical method in biblical studies (such as Gabler

² Collins invokes the oft-cited inaugural address of Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826) at Altdorf in 1787 (2005: 135) and the more recent formulation of Krister Stendahl, who pitted “what the text meant” against “what it means” (2005: 133). Gabler divided famously between those materials in the Bible which were relevant only to the Israelite context and those which have timeless, universal significance. Collins reports that the distinction is “generally accepted as foundational” and that Gabler rightly “recognized that not everything in Scripture is normative for modernity” (2005: 135). Collins cites Gabler in at least three earlier articles on biblical theology (1990: 1; 1986: 14; 1979: 185) thus indicating the importance of Gabler’s formulation for Collins’s own project. In one article, Collins lionizes Gabler quite explicitly and describes his critical legacy in triumphalistic terms: “[i]n effect, Gabler demanded that the biblical witness be heard in its own right and not be filtered through later dogmatic presuppositions. This program for biblical theology was established in the following century by the triumph of the historical critical method” (1986: 14).

envisioned) was understood as the key moment in a narrative of progress. Classical scholars, for their part, had weathered the contentious humanisms of the seventeenth century, a period in which the “ancients” were pitted (fruitlessly) against the “moderns,” only to recover, in the late-eighteenth century, a “science of antiquity” by which to overcome this stale debate and deliver the ancient past in a kind of alien, historical splendor that was, paradoxically, yet amenable to modern cultural ideals. According to the narrative of progress, biblical scholars of the late-eighteenth century acted in a similar way. They activated the older philological tradition in an effort to replace the theological obscurantism inherent in confessional hermeneutics with a new mode of interpretation oriented empirically and thus irenically toward the objective analysis of text, language, and history. The new mode of criticism was thought to mark the arrival of a “biblical science” that could account for the true nature of the Bible by revealing its historical embeddedness.

[10] The story, though, is more complicated. The development of historical criticism is not fundamentally the story of one but of two related projects: an intellectual one and a sociopolitical one. The latter included the effort to set the parameters for an intellectually responsible model of interpretation capable of overcoming the religious divisions long reinforced by traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Bible. By making the historical settings of the biblical writers the determinative context for interpretation, historical critics sought to free interpretation. Instead of furnishing the exegetical arguments for the fruitless discussion of irresolvable theological antinomies, emancipated biblical critics could undertake the more promising and, indeed, more ambitious task of reconstructing the biblical tradition in light of new discoveries and new critical canons in order to lay bare its human contours and to develop an objective method for determining its meaning. Implicit in the early modern historical approaches to the Bible (over against confessional interpretation) was the belief that the recovery of the Bible as an ancient cultural artifact (whatever else it might be) was the first step in making the Bible intelligible to modern people. Though the world of early modern interpretation was extraordinarily diverse, the proliferation of methods found unity in the primacy of the historical sense. The antiquarian researches of the early humanists, the discrete philologies of the lower critics, the ethnographic inquiries of European explorers, the exacting *Textgeschichte* of early source critics, and the poetics of the sublime cultivated by early Romantic interpreters all participated in the quintessentially modern attempt to access the meaning of the Bible by identifying ever more satisfactory frames of historical reference. This intellectual quest for the historical contours of the biblical tradition had a distinct, academic social context. Many of these projects (though not all), moreover, were *institutionalized* at the Enlightenment university. They were gathered up by German academic theologians and philologists in the eighteenth century and assimilated to the aims and methods of a new science oriented toward a rational, historical, and philosophically robust reconceptualization of the entire Christian tradition. This included the development, within the context of the Enlightenment university, of a new academic discipline (*Bibelwissenschaft*), itself a subset of the study of antiquity (*Altertumswissenschaft*).

[11] The social utility and significance of a rational, empirical, and academic program of biblical study must not be overlooked. As Jon Levenson has pointed out, it is significant that the early days of modern criticism coincided with the aftermath of European religious wars.

The intellectual modes of the Enlightenment reinforced its political ideals. Thus: “historical criticism is the form of biblical studies that corresponds to the classical liberal political ideal. . . The academy must refuse everything to scholars as faithful members of religious communities, but it must give them everything as individuals; they must become critics” (118). Historical criticism did not develop merely as an intellectual project. Rather, it emerged, with its appeals to reason and a shared human past, as an interpretive framework thought to be capable of uniting humanity, overcoming religious divisions, and advancing an enterprise in which all confessional commitments were treated equally – because all commitments were equally excluded. In this way it merely facilitated the relocation of personal commitment: from belief in the creeds of the Church to belief in the critical canons of the academy (Levenson: 125).³

[12] *The Bible after Babel* is an important statement of a leader of the contemporary biblical establishment because it makes clear what really remains of “historical criticism.” Despite Collins’s affirmations of history, the present importance of the great modern tradition of biblical study is, for him, its social, institutional mission: to cultivate civil and open-ended dialogue and a virtuous suspension of (religious) belief. This social mission explains Collins’s prudential (but fateful) readjustment of the aims and methods of historical criticism in light of postmodern challenges. Its main strategy is to assure the reader that “postmodern” constituencies – deconstructive readers, historical minimalists, liberation theologians, feminist interpreters, and the increasing number of “voices from the margin” (2005: 161) – raise questions that accord with conventional, critical inquiries. Surely postmoderns did not invent skepticism, ideological criticism, and intertextuality, Collins suggests; postmodern critics have merely pushed historical criticism to its limits. It would be a mistake to think that Collins’s facile reappropriation of postmodern interpretation stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of postmodernism on his part. On the contrary, he understands it very well. The realizations that questions of social location and of the politics of inquiry are actually the most urgent ones in contemporary “historical criticism” and that these comport nicely with postmodern critiques of conventional scholarship is a genuine and important insight.

Not “What?” but “Who?”

[13] One need only look as far as Ernst Troeltsch, Collins’s great hero, to appreciate the difference between Collins’s historical criticism and the full-bodied historicism of his forebear. In a seminal essay, “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” Troeltsch elucidated three principles of critical inquiry, which he regarded as foundational for modern thought: 1) the principle of *criticism*, or the denial of certainty in historical research such that “there are only judgments of probability”; 2) the necessity of *analogy*, or the notion that the historian’s experience of what is possible and normal provides “the criterion of probability” for all past events; and 3) the principle of *correlation*, which maintains that all events are embedded in a web of causality “so that all historical happening is knit together” (1991b: 13-

³ An important qualification of this observation, argued by Levenson in the same volume (1-32) and, in another place, by James L. Kugel, is that historical criticism was much more congenial to Protestant interpretation than it was to Catholic and Jewish interpretation and that it, in fact, historical criticism owes a great deal to the theological and hermeneutical impulses of the Reformation.

15). Collins, for his part, regularly adduces three principles of historical research that he draws from Troeltsch: 1) the autonomy of the historian; 2) the need for analogy between present and past phenomena; 3) and the provisional, fallibilistic, and perpetually uncertain character of historical scholarship (2005: 4-6; cf. 1990: 1; 1986: 2). According to Collins, these three were articulated by Troeltsch and then reformulated by Van Harvey in his influential book, *The Historian and the Believer* (2005: 5). In fact, only the second and third are drawn explicitly from Troeltsch's seminal essay on the role of historical method in theology; the ideal of an "autonomous" historian daring to defy tradition, despite its clear Troeltschian (and Kantian) affinities, is actually commended by Harvey (39-42).

[14] The subtle reformulation of Troeltschian principles is significant. Collins, in *The Bible after Babel* and other writings, has replaced Troeltsch's principle of correlation with the principle of autonomy. According to the principle of correlation, history is a closed system of cause and effect: it is therefore, in theory, fully intelligible, as it denies appeals to supernatural interference. Impressed by the successes of historical criticism in illuminating the nature of the Bible, Troeltsch called famously for the application of a totalizing historical method to the study of Christianity. Troeltsch believed that this would allow a truer understanding of Christianity to be won from a principled, thoroughgoing analysis of its "involvement with general history," because Christianity is itself saturated by history (1991b: 19). This sort of inquiry, to be sure, requires a kind of critical autonomy on the part of the historian, but Troeltschian autonomy has specific contours. If it is a freedom *from* the strictures of the old, ahistorical dogmatic method, then it is *a fortiori* a freedom *to* discern the meaning of Christianity by and within history. In dispensing with the conceptual frameworks imposed on the Bible by confessional interpretation, Troeltsch turned to history in order to bring theology fully in line with critical canons, which he regarded as self-evident, and with modern truth-seeking sensibilities. As one element within Troeltsch's principled historicism, correlation opens the way for the individual to discern, in a new way, the meaning of history, to grasp its character (somewhat inconsistently) as "a disclosure of divine reason" (1991b: 27). Troeltsch was interested in discerning the historical shape of theological concepts and in demonstrating that their "contemporary power is bound to the contemporizing and enlivening power of its *historical foundations*" (1991a: 75, original emphasis). Historical inquiry for Troeltsch frees the individual to come to terms with religious traditions in a way that is both contemporary and lively; it allows him or her to discern his or her own spiritual foundations within the unbreakable web of historical events, and, finally, to obey the inner necessity of truths revealed in history.

[15] I believe that Troeltschian correlation, with its teleological cast and apologetic overtones, would either embarrass or repulse Collins and, indeed, many of his contemporaries.⁴ My task

⁴ Two examples will perhaps suffice to show the ways in which Troeltsch's historicism lent itself, in at least one period of his life, to a vindication of Christianity that "democratic pluralists," to use Collins's term (2005: 17), would find unacceptable. In "Historical and Dogmatic Method," Troeltsch is enthusiastic: "I have the greatest confidence, however, that the implication of the historical method will necessarily lead through the present confusion and derangement of biblical studies to its full and resolute application. Only then will the worst of our fears (regarding apologetics) be lifted from our hearts, and we shall be able to behold with greater detachment and freedom the glory of God in history" (1991b: 19). And, in another place, Troeltsch describes

is neither to defend nor expound the subtleties of this principle, as this would surely fall outside the scope of this essay. I want rather to point out that historical criticism, which arguably reached its high-water mark with Troeltsch, can be ambitious and intellectually robust (whatever else might be said of it), and, indeed, that it was so at one time. One looks in vain for expositions of “correlation” in Collins’s frequent synopses of Troeltschian method. Instead, Collins has made the largely political principle of critical autonomy his primary one. Citing Van Harvey, Collins connects this principle not only to Kant but also to what he calls a modern “morality of knowledge” (2005: 5). By this he means that the medieval celebration of belief over against doubt has been replaced by the view that “regards doubt as a necessary step in the testing of knowledge and the will to believe as a threat to rational thought” (2005: 5). In short, the traditional order has been inverted: doubt is now virtuous and belief is now vicious. The ideal critic maintains virtue by withholding or disavowing religious commitment.

[16] By couching the principle of autonomy in terms of a secular morality, Collins conveys the idea that historical criticism, in the first instance, involves normative claims about the inward disposition and outward conduct of the critic. This is a highly significant maneuver as it shifts emphasis away from an intellectual program for making sense of the Bible and toward a means of evaluating the personal qualities of the interpreter. In the realm of “historical criticism,” the key qualification is not *what* is proposed but *what kind of person* is making the proposal. Collins, as we have seen, regards the “will to believe” (in contrast to involuntary belief?) as a menace. In this way, Collins highlights, in postmodern fashion, the political character of knowledge. After assessing recent research on the historicity of the Bible, Collins makes a telling qualification: “[t]he existence and importance of empirical data can not be denied, but this is not the major factor in the changing face of biblical studies. *Far more important is the changing demography of the field*” (2005: 9; emphasis added).

[17] He makes this point even more clearly in an essay on violence and the Bible, which originated as a 2002 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature. Collins argues that the Bible bears witness to a full range of human activity – violent, pacific, and otherwise. He sees the Bible’s strongest connections to violence not in the texts themselves but rather in the beliefs of interpreters:

The biblical portrayal of human reality becomes pernicious only when it is vested with authority and assumed to reflect, without qualification or differentiation, the wisdom of God or the will of God. . . . The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation (2000: 20-21).

This diagnosis, then, dramatizes the moral imperative of the biblical critic, who is called to respond to this situation by using critical tools not so much to foster understanding as to avert the moral and political dangers of certitude. It is highly significant that Collins, at precisely this point, does *not* call on the critic to correct misinterpretation by offering an

the telos of historical inquiry as “ultimate avowal of Christianity as the supreme religious force of history” (1991b: 26).

historical contextualization of the biblical texts that elucidates a better morality – or to reject biblical moralities, on historical grounds, as irrelevant. Though this is perhaps what historical criticism might have been expected to do, Collins makes no constructive proposal along this line or any other. Rather, his prescription is merely to neutralize belief: the critic's contribution, in Collins's words, is simply to show that "certitude is an illusion" (2000: 21).

[18] What remains, then, of Collins's historical criticism? In what sense is it historical at all? It must be said, first of all, that for all of his investment in critical history (especially of Hellenistic Judaism), Collins's assessment of "what two hundred years of historical criticism has achieved" (2005: 9) is rather dim, even morose; he seems strangely uninterested in the enterprise, or at least unconcerned with its plight. Whatever historical knowledge has been accumulated is offset, in his view, by a "progressive shedding of certitude" that culminates in a kind of historical agnosticism (2005: 9-10). While Collins admits that scholars have assembled a fair picture of daily life in the ancient world, Collins seems unwilling to credit any historiographic enterprise with lasting results. Indeed, Collins points out that the method's own programmatic skepticism – inspired by Troeltsch's principle of criticism – would seem to prevent it from achieving any. The real success of historical criticism, for Collins, is not intellectual but social, and it bears no intrinsic connection to historical inquiry. The relevant passage is worth quoting at length:

[Historical criticism] has created an arena where people with different faith commitments can work together and have meaningful conversations. The historical focus has been a way of getting distance from a text, of respecting its otherness. The neutrality and objectivity at which the discipline has aimed has allowed Jews and Christians to work together and has allowed feminists to make their case in ways that initially unsympathetic scholars have found compelling (2005: 10).

Cooperation and dialogue, for Collins, are the real goods. They become available when those who have joined the enterprise, or who have entered Collins's "arena," agree to suspend beliefs (presumably intellectual as well as religious) and reencounter the Bible as something fundamentally but equally remote from all participants. In this case, the ancient historical setting of the Bible serves as the framework by which to articulate and explore this "otherness." There can be no question that the ancient context of the Bible has proven to be a useful framework for understanding it. However, Collins offers no explicit rationale for choosing an historical framework over a non-historical one.

[19] According to Collins, the real genius of historical criticism is its ability to structure conversation, to set limits on what one can say by providing a set of assumptions, a fund of shared knowledge, and rules for argument that allow "participants" to pursue communally what he calls a "regional truth" (2005: 10). Collins's comments on biblical theology, for him a subset of historical criticism, are instructive. After affirming the Bible's "abiding significance for the modern world," Collins offers a prescription for any who seek to assess its "enduring relevance" (2005: 133). Nevertheless, he offers no actual program, no substantive proposal for how to do this; he merely insists that the would-be theologian take serious account of "biblical scholarship," whatever that happens to be at the time – or else risk being labeled a fundamentalist (2005: 134). By recommending in this instance such a

broad and internally diverse entity, biblical scholarship, Collins shows that his interest is not actually in specifying how to assess the relevance of the Bible for the modern world but rather in reinforcing the rules of the academy. When Collins justifies the need to consult historical scholarship, he actually has nothing to say about “history” or “historical criticism.” His motivation, once again, is social and ethical: Collins insists that his context is an “academic” one and that his concern, and presumably his moral duty, is to “tak[e] account of current scholarship as fully as possible” (2005: 134). Biblical scholars are often dual citizens: they have confessional loyalties while having agreed, at the same time, to work by the rules of the academy. According to Collins, it is ultimately the scholar’s identity as an heir of “rational humanism” that matters most, because it is rational humanism, in his view, that allows the broadest possible conversation (1990: 8).⁵

Conclusion

[20] Collins is a scholar’s scholar, and his loyalties clearly lie with the academy. Postmodern interpretive frameworks pose fundamental challenges to conventional biblical scholarship, and Collins has attempted to meet them. In responding to perceived challenges, Collins returns to what he believes are the foundational commitments of historical criticism and steps forward to offer not a robust defense of history or of historical inquiry, as one might expect, but only a plea for liberal academic values. Collins’s true scholarly mode reveals itself to be *academic* criticism and not *historical* criticism. He believes in the power of historical criticism to supply a convenient epistemology for academic dialogue and to shore up the community of scholars by providing a common language for the “otherness” of the Bible. Historical criticism, as we have seen, is also essential for Collins because it combats fundamentalism and stems religious violence by eroding certitude.

[21] The point here is not whether these are legitimate goods. It is rather that they have become, for at least one spokesman of the discipline, historical criticism’s *raison d’être*. This is as remarkable as it is lamentable. Historical criticism has, in times past, featured robust intellectual programs for making sense of the Bible. To be sure, Gabler’s quest to recover kernels of timeless truth by discarding the Bible’s historical chaff and Troeltsch’s hope of glimpsing divine reason soaring above the unbreakable web of events now seem quaint, wrongheaded, and grossly overconfident. Yet there is no denying that Collins’s heroes, Gabler and Troeltsch, offered serious, constructive, and ambitious proposals, while Collins, their late-born heir, has only a method to offer, a procedure shorn of any serious aspirations, a set of techniques for organizing *participants*. Whether it has the intellectual heft to call forth the best efforts of *scholars* drawn to the rigor and promise of historical inquiry is uncertain, even doubtful. More doubtful still is the ultimate flourishing of a method whose proponents, to use biblical imagery, find themselves scattered at the base of a tower they neither know nor care to build.

⁵ For trenchant criticism of Collins’s contention that rational humanism is self-evident and maximally inclusive, see Levenson (106-26).

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