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DAVID M. CARR (ED.), THE STATE OF THE FIELD OF HEBREW BIBLE STUDY: IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN J. COLLINS, *THE BIBLE AFTER BABEL: HISTORICAL CRITICISM IN A POSTMODERN AGE*

**THE STATE OF THE FIELD OF HEBREW BIBLE
STUDY: IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN J.
COLLINS, *THE BIBLE AFTER BABEL:
HISTORICAL CRITICISM IN A POSTMODERN AGE*
(EERDMANS, 2005)**

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1. John J. Collins, [Introductory Remarks](#)
2. David M. Carr, [The Bible After Babel Indeed](#)
3. F. W. (Chip) Dobbs-Allsop, [Brief Comments](#)
4. Amy Kalmanofsky, [My Response to The Bible After Babel](#)

BACKGROUND

The following reflections come from a forum on the state of the field of Hebrew Bible study in the Columbia University Hebrew Bible Seminar on March 22, 2006. The primary focus for the forum was reviews and responses to John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Eerdmans, 2005). The respondents were asked to offer “a few comments building on the book, aimed at spurring a broader discussion among colleagues about where things are going in our field.” The discussion that followed was lively, and the hope is that sharing these contributions, with much of their oral character preserved, may be useful for further reflection by a wider circle.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

JOHN J. COLLINS
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The six chapters that make up *The Bible after Babel* originated as the Gunning Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in November 2004. I had been asked to speak on “The Bible in the Twenty-First Century.” I ended up speaking primarily about the changes in biblical (Hebrew Bible) scholarship in the last quarter of the twentieth. I took the theme of Postmodernism, because this rather loosely defined term is often used to characterize the cultural and intellectual trends that dominated society at large in this period. My book, however, is about biblical scholarship. (Hence the sub-title). It was not my purpose to ask how biblical scholarship might be done in light of postmodernist theory, a task for which I would be ill-equipped. Rather, I set out to look at the changes that have in fact come about, and ask how they relate to the broader cultural trends with which Postmodernism is associated.

In fact, I found remarkably little explicit appeal to postmodernist theory in recent biblical scholarship, apart from the work of a small number of scholars such as Yvonne Sherwood, Mieke Bal and David Clines. [To be sure, there is more than I discuss in this book, since I focus on areas that have been traditionally of central importance to the field, while some of the most interesting postmodern work, such as Tod Linafelt’s *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), have focused, characteristically, on works that have been marginal.] But most discussions of Postmodernism characterize it by such traits as the suspicion of metanarratives and attention to voices from the margins, and these traits have indeed been prominent in recent biblical scholarship. The shift in perspective has not been due to theoretical considerations so much as to the changing demography of the field. As recently as the 1960’s, the Society of Biblical Literature was primarily constituted by white male Christians,

mostly Protestant ministers. The first Catholic president of the Society was in the late sixties (John McKenzie). The first woman president some 20 years later (Elizabeth Fiorenza). Jewish scholars became much more active in the guild from the 1970's on. While African American and Asian scholars are still very much a minority, their presence and influence has grown. Each of these groups has brought a new perspective to the field, and it is this growing diversity that has led to the decline of the master paradigms of the past.

The central chapters of my book deal with some of the debates in major areas of biblical scholarship over the last few decades. Obviously, other examples could be chosen. In the area of historiography, the so-called minimalists, such as Thomas Thompson, have often been labeled "postmodernists," especially by William Dever. In fact, they seem to me to be rather old-fashioned positivist historians, often with a naïve reliance on the factuality of the results of archeology. The growing skepticism about the historicity of the biblical account (shared to a great degree even by Dever himself) is due not to any distrust of objectivity but to the limitations of the biblical evidence. But it is quite postmodern in the sense that it results in suspicion of the received account in both the Bible and traditional scholarship. A more important shift, in my view concerns the ethical implications of the biblical narrative. The "Canaanite perspective" on the Exodus and Conquest was first articulated by Edward Said in an exchange with Michael Waltzer, and was forcefully brought to the attention of biblical scholars by Keith Whitelam. For most modern Westerners, the conquest of another country and slaughter of its inhabitants, as reported in the Bible whether historically accurate or not, is an outrage, and the justification of such action by alleged divine command is viewed with grave suspicion. What is remarkable in the biblical context is that it took so long for this Canaanite perspective to find a voice.

The most successful, and arguably the most important, voice from the margins in recent biblical scholarship is that of feminist criticism. The validity of feminist perspectives is now so widely acknowledged that it is easy to forget how revolutionary the work of Phyllis Trible was in the 1970's. That work now seems a little dated, insofar as it is "recuperative" scholarship that tries to redeem the biblical text by stripping away the layers of patriarchal exegesis. More recent scholarship is suspicious of the claim that a pristine "gender-free" (the phrase of Tikvah Frymer-Kensky) state was envisioned in the original account of creation before the Fall. Yahweh is depicted as a patriarchal god from the beginning, and while subordination is introduced as a punishment after the Fall there is no apparent reason why

the punishment should take the form of subordination of one gender to the other. I barely touch, however, on the point at which postmodern gender theory poses its greatest challenge to the biblical account of creation – the idea that gender roles are socially created rather than given as part of the order of nature. That challenge has not as yet been articulated forcefully in biblical scholarship, but it will surely have to be addressed in the future.

The chapter on the religion of Israel is related to the one on feminist scholarship, insofar as it focuses on the evidence for goddess worship (Asherah). Here again we see the collapse of an old master-narrative. The idea that religion in pre-exilic Israel was continuous with, and not radically different from, Canaanite religion was at most a minority viewpoint a generation ago. Now it has a claim to be the new “master-narrative.”

In the last chapter, I try to pull the threads of the discussion together by looking at the implications for biblical theology, broadly defined as the relevance of the Bible for the modern world. Thirty-five years ago, such scholars as G. E. Wright and Roland de Vaux could write that history provided “the foundations of our faith.” In the meantime, these foundations have eroded, and this development coincides with the rise of “non-foundationalism” as a movement in philosophy and theology. Some theologians try to make a virtue of the lack of foundations, arguing that the only foundation for theology is faith. But the point of non-foundationalism is that there are no demonstrable foundations, and this is not relieved by the appeal to faith. Postmodernists tend to be skeptical of claims to universal truth. Consequently, there is a tendency to say that different traditions are self-validating for those who stand within them. After 9/11/2001 Stanley Fish wrote an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* (“What Is Truth?” Oct. 15, 2001) in which he rightly criticized attempts to frame the conflict as Good vs. Evil. He rightly noted that the terrorists had reasons, in their tradition, for what they did. But, wrote Fish, “our convictions are by definition preferred, that is what makes them *our* convictions.” The terrorists could say the same. Fish conjures up a vision of a postmodern world where people have no hope of finding common ground and can only act on their own convictions, even if these lead directly to conflict with others.

I argue however that this bleak scenario is not a necessary one. It is still possible to find values that are shared between different traditions or that can be shared between people of different faiths. As an example I take Emanuel Levinas’s concern for the face of the other, which is at root a variant of the Golden Rule. Such a concern for the other is not alien to biblical tradition. It is central to both Testaments, as Levinas was well

aware. But he does not base his argument on an appeal to canonical tradition, but to philosophical phenomenology. Such concern is in no way peculiar to Judaism and Christianity. Concern for the other is not necessarily the only biblical value that finds resonance in other traditions, but it is a significant one. It provides a criterion from which other positions can be criticized, and I think it is obvious that much of the biblical tradition itself is found wanting by this criterion, as the prophets and Jesus already knew.

The collapse of metanarratives in the postmodern era brings with it a danger of chaos, of incompatible voices each convinced that their convictions are by definition preferred. But this danger can be averted. On the whole, the experience of the last quarter century has been a positive one. The broadening conversation has brought new voices to the table, and the persistent attention to the “others” who have hitherto been neglected is a salutary exercise for biblical scholarship.

THE BIBLE AFTER BABEL, INDEED

DAVID M. CARR

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In the few minutes I have here, I will explain why I think the main title better describes the contribution of John Collins's book. And I think the contribution of this study -- this "account of some of the main changes in the study of the Hebrew Bible ... in the last third of the 20th century" as he puts it in his preface (p. vii) -- is significant.

Overall, despite the space given to discussion of Postmodernism and associated movements, despite the care taken to read secondary literature regarding Postmodernism and the handful of truly poststructuralist Biblical studies, the book as a whole appears to less focused on the Bible and Postmodernism *per se*, and more generally an assessment of the increasing de-centering of Biblical criticism and disenchantment of the Bible in Biblical study.

It is as if Biblical studies at the SBL once was a tower being built to heaven, a scientific edifice of assured results about a shared text. And now suddenly, you get the annual program in the mail, and realize -- whatever common language we thought we once had in Biblical studies is gone. We have a multitude of different languages: the old sections divided by parts of the Bible now stand alongside a panoply of sections on history of interpretation, the Bible in the third world, various methodologies, social-history, cultural studies, etc. And so, if you are like me, you try to plot a way through the annual meeting -- if you have any time to visit sessions at all -- finding sessions that promise to somehow speak a language of Biblical study that is intelligible to you.

As with the story of the Tower of Babel, this development can be viewed in different ways. Some might see the end of the tower project to be a disaster to be mourned -- "Where did the coherence that once was Biblical studies go?" For others, however, it can be celebrated -- where the

end of tower building, means the end of a center from which many were excluded. "Now we have different languages of interpretation -- let's celebrate!"

Yet in either case, all too rarely do scholars attempt to learn a second language, to engage perspectives unfamiliar to them, to try to really learn from them -- to stop the initial impulse to dismiss those who speak another language, to listen as carefully as possible, and see what one can learn.

John aims to do just that. He devotes five chapters to engaging various ways in which the languages have been confused and the peoples scattered in Biblical studies. Two chapters focus particularly on the inclusion of new voices in Biblical studies: an engagement of liberationist and other approaches to the Exodus and an engagement of various feminist approaches to the Bible. Two other chapters look at the collapse of older consensus surrounding history of Israel and history of Israelite religion. The last chapter is a reflection on the ongoing potential for doing Biblical theology in this de-centered ideological world. Along the way, among other things, there is one of the best brief descriptions of the presuppositions of historical criticism that I know, a very even-handed, even kind engagement with the polarized alternatives in the minimalist-maximalist debate around historicity, a superb negotiation between various takes on the Exodus story, a succinct, balanced discussion of the issue of Asherah data and its implications, and many other examples of thoughtful engagement and balancing of different perspectives that all too often run their parallel ways in separate SBL sessions or other circles of discussion.

One thread that runs throughout the book is a discussion of Postmodernism and possible postmodern aspects of the above developments. The first chapter juxtaposes the assumptions of historical criticism with those of Poststructuralism, and every other chapter includes a consideration of whether and how these developments reflect aspects of Postmodernism, deconstruction or related movements. So, for example, much of the heat surrounding the minimalists revolves around their refusal to accept triumphalist historical metanarratives that were once dominant in Biblical studies. The controversy over takes on the Exodus story underline the extent to which no text, even the Exodus story, is so stably good that it can be taken as an "intrinsic authority." Similar issues come up in dealing with the androcentrism of the Genesis creation stories. And so on.

John admits at the outset that, "by training and temperament I am on the modern side of the modern/postmodern debate. My brain," he says, "has not incubated in the languages of Jacques Derrida, Michel

Foucault, or Stanley Fish...” (p. 3) And this is, frankly evident, as the reader of this book digs deeper, looking for characteristics of Postmodernism. As a mind incubated, or “pickled” as he puts it elsewhere, in historical criticism at its best, John does not engage more fundamental aspects of theory behind Postmodernism, Poststructuralism and related discourses. We hear -- a bit of Derrida, and Fish, but little substantial of Foucault, Butler, Lacan, Althusser -- concepts such as the formation of the subject, interpellation, non-genetic forms of intertextuality, the play of language, etc.

Let me give a quick example related to my own work. John honors me, and I mean this seriously, with a brief mention of my analysis of the garden of Eden story, where, toward the conclusion of my discussion, I say that the vision of a “non-reproductive, joyful sexuality in Genesis 2 “can be applied by extension to various forms of intimate tender sexuality between partners who “correspond” to each other: male-female, male-male, female-female.”¹ John points out, truly enough, that the “text does not so much as acknowledge the possibility of same-sex relationships, let alone endorse them,” and he quotes approvingly Fewell and Gunn’s assertion that the female helper corresponding to the human/man is a sexual ‘Opposite.’” John concludes that, “there can be no doubt that, for better or worse, the story affirms normative heterosexuality.” (pp. 90-91)

But, what is “normative heterosexuality” -- if it is sex between man and woman, then yes. But this is where work by poststructuralist queer theorists like Butler, or Foucault-inspired studies of ancient sexuality suggest that “normative heterosexuality” in an ancient society like Israel meant much more -- it was an unequal relationship of power, where a man possessed the sexual reproductive potential of his wife. As John notes: none of this is present in Genesis 2 -- no possession, no reproduction.

Yet I would argue contra him and contra Fewell and Gunn that there is no focus on an “opposite” in Genesis 2 either. If there is any emphasis in Genesis 2, it is on “correspondence” and equality. And this comes not just in the expression כַּנְגִידוֹ but in the story of the making of the animals in a failed attempt to make someone truly corresponding to the male. Yes, the text lets its readers conclude that these partners are bodily male and female. What else would we expect of a text from this time and place? But given this -- you could hardly write a description of creation sexual partners, male and female, that is farther from “normative

¹ David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality and Spirituality in the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 32.

heterosexuality” in the ancient Israelite sense than Genesis 2. Indeed, in describing pre-garden humanity to focus so much on correspondence and so little on reproduction, one can see in Genesis 2 what would qualify as a “queer” description of sexuality by the standards of ancient Israelite society.

So we can decide then, how to extend or interpret this difference in Genesis 2 (and 3 I’d add). Let me be clear, I don’t mean that we should anachronistically project endorsement of same-sex sexuality into the ancient world of the text itself. But neither should we project “normative heterosexuality” on the pre-garden world of Genesis 2 as John does, something I find equally unfitting to the semiotic elements of the text as we have it, indeed an inadequate historical reading. The text contains various fragments of meaning that are not fully homogenized to each other. Poststructuralist approaches can give the Biblical scholar openness to tease out the ways texts (and readings of them) splay out in different directions, without attempting to subdue them to one, “normative” (or “counter-normative” I’d add) model.

So in this instance and some others John does not engage Postmodernism and Poststructuralism in its real otherness. This is not unusual in Biblical studies. As Stephen Moore has pointed out in several recent writings and presentations, true Poststructuralism has hardly made any inroads in Biblical scholarship, aside from studies such as Yvonne-Sherwood’s, and particularly various culture-critical studies of history of interpretation. In contrast to the success of more centered forms of literary approaches to texts, Poststructuralism, Moore argues, is just too contradictory to the logocentric character of Biblical studies.

So the contribution of Postmodernism at its best, in John’s eyes, seems to involve recognition of textual indeterminacy, diversity among interpreters, deepened appreciation of “the other” without subsuming that other to a master narrative, and a heightening of historical criticism’s already existing provisional character by more radically critiquing various master narratives/theories. If this version of Postmodernism discussed by John Collins was a wine, it would be a nice dry, full bodied historical-criticism with hints of Postmodernism. It is a historical criticism taken further towards its own goals: the autonomy of the interpreter expanded to true freedom from various metanarratives, a sober analysis of the Bible as a document closer to its Ancient Near Eastern roots than to the Christian theological presuppositions it has been used to support, and an even deeper and truer embrace of the provisional character of even the best exegetical efforts.

There are shifts in the discipline more fundamental than the superficial impact of Postmodernism, and these shifts John does engage, and engage seriously. The discipline is not as it once was. Some has to do with poststructuralist developments, and much else -- as John says -- with the radically shifting context in which Biblical studies is done and the personnel who do it. In the past, it has been all too easy to marginalize the growing number of divergent voices, dismiss them as graduate students, pre-tenure scholars and errant professors at university programs known for their avant garde character. John, speaks as a well-respected and established scholar from the center -- whatever center is left -- of Biblical studies. This statement is an important step forward in the development of a productively de-centered form of Biblical studies

BRIEF COMMENTS ON JOHN COLLINS'S *THE BIBLE AFTER BABEL*

F. W. DOBBS-ALLSOP
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Let me begin with a word of appreciation for John and what he has done here. I like *The Bible After Babel* very much. In particular, I admire John's willingness to read through a large swath of literature, including a lot of theoretical work from outside of our field and much from within the field written under the banner of Postmodernism that is not always so very compelling. I also greatly appreciate the good sense of so much of his own commentary, sober and judicious throughout—this is one instance in which the accompanying blurbs (on my copy they are on the back cover) get it mostly right. This good sense is evident, for example, in John's appreciation of how historical criticism “created an arena where people with different faith commitments” could work together and have meaningful conversations (10), in his awareness that if a text may have more than one possible meaning, “it cannot mean just anything” (10), and in his recognition that many of the so-called “minimalists” do not evidence a postmodern agenda whatsoever (33) and as often as not are as totalizing and foundationalist as the scholars and positions they criticize (43). Further, John insightfully observes that a major implication of postcolonialism, feminist theory and the like “is a cautionary one against according intrinsic authority to any story or to any text” (74)—indeed, it is the question of biblical authority and how it is to be negotiated that postmodernist theory in its various stripes “raises in an acute way” (97). And one last example, John perceptively discerns in his reading of the work of Emmanuel Levinas the abiding relevance of what he calls “universal principles” (156)—as Jeff Stout (along with other pragmatist thinkers) reminds us, here much depends on how we parse matters: “An obligation can be universal in the sense of applying ... to everyone, without requiring a supposedly universal

point of view (wholly independent of the ethical life of a people) for its justification.”² In other words, one of the things that John takes away from Levinas is the notion that ideas, even according to a metanarrative-wary Postmodernism, can still have a transhistorical and transcultural reach, even if their validity will always need to be negotiated, adjudicated locally. Finally by way of appreciation, let me applaud the book’s coverage. As John notes he could have included chapters on other relevant topics. However, the ones he has selected seem to me, at any rate, to be of recurring importance and interest and they routinely appear in the course I teach every-other year on biblical interpretation in a postmodern world, including the Waltzer-Said debate and, interestingly, the question of the goddess in Israelite religion. So here I finally have a book focused on biblical criticism that I can confidently put in the hands of students which illustrates well how we might begin to thoughtfully and creatively negotiate some of the new interpretive terrain in our field.

David [Carr’s] instructions were not to offer a review of *The Bible After Babel*, but more to begin to think about the future of the field of Biblical Studies in light of some of the paradigm shifts that the book charts. Even that seems to me to be a very tall task and I will ultimately beg off (mostly) from attempting it. One of the realities of our post-Enlightenment moment is that the kinds of knowledge that can be generated in the field—the types of research one can undertake—if not totally unlimited is incredibly broad and wide-ranging. Guessing what might catch some subset of the field’s fancy is certainly beyond my abilities and something I’m not very interested in anyway. I suspect that we will continue for some time now being a field marked more by pluralities of interests than a core of assumed paradigms of study. I, for one, find this exciting and think it a good thing.

I will restrict my comments here, then, to identifying what I see as two of the more important implications for future scholarship in the field that may be teased out from John’s work, and then I will close by calling attention briefly to one area of research that I hope we will see more of in the future. The first implication that I want to identify is the need for our research to be theoretically informed. The awareness that all paradigms of study, whatever their nature, are theoretically motivated and always assume certain presuppositions proscribes the kind of theoretical naivete that has characterized much of our field’s research in the past. It is not that such theoretical awareness always needs to be made explicit in our writing, but

² *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2004) 195.

that all of our research should be carried out knowingly³ in light of theory's enabling conceptualizations. Moreover, insofar as there is nothing in the kinds of research we undertake that distinguishes Biblical Studies from other disciplines in the humanities, we will want to emulate John's example by engaging, integrating, and adapting theoretical insights generated in other fields. It is no longer viable for us to stop reading at the borders of our own discipline. And, indeed, we may even aspire to producing the kind of work that will inspire appropriation and adaptation by other fields.⁴

The other implication of John's work that I want to underscore here I hope is plain for all to see, namely: that Postmodernism (by whatever definition) does not presuppose or in any way require ignorance of history or the constraints that history places upon all intellectual work. To the contrary, Postmodernism asserts (sometimes quite emphatically) in Stanley Fish's words that all matters "are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that give them their local and changeable shape."⁵ To make the point I habitually begin my "Biblical Interpretation in a Postmodern World" class by having students read pieces that speak in various ways to the historical nature of life as we currently know it—most recently I had them read through Charles Sherover's wonderfully stimulating collection of essays on time entitled *Are We In Time?*⁶—and thus embed and ground everything we

³ Of course, the shaping force of theory remains no matter what; the only question is to what degree are we, as researchers, aware of our theoretical indebtedness and how effectively do we wield the instruments of theory for our own selected ends.

⁴ By this I do not mean to imply that biblical criticism has not had influence beyond its disciplinary borders in the past. It has. An outstanding recent example is the literary critic Jerome J. McGann, whose re-immersion in the tradition of philological scholarship that dominated biblical and classical studies from 1780 to 1930 (e.g., J. G. Eichhorn, J. G. Herder, A. Geddes, and J. S. Vater) proved to be the catalyst for his own historicist program of literary study. Of this tradition, he writes, "it provides criticism with a model case history" and "an exemplary methodology" (*Social Value and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgment of Literary Work* [Cambridge: Harvard University, 1988] 60). However, it is my own sense that this is not the norm and that, more often than not, Biblical Studies is on the receiving (or user) end of inter-disciplinary discourse.

⁵ *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University, 1989) 342.

⁶ *Are We In Time? And Other Studies on Time and Temporality* (ed. G. R. Johnson; Evanston: Northwestern University, 2003).

do in that course within a larger awareness of life's informing historicity. Sometimes I think we fail to remember that whatever heuristic benefits may be gained from synchronically oriented studies—and there are many—at the end of the day pure synchrony is, as R. Jakobson pointed out early on, illusory, since "every synchronic system has as its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system: (a) archaism as a fact of style; the linguistic and literary background recognized as the rejected old-fashion style; (b) the tendency toward innovation in language and literature recognized as a remnant of the system."⁷ That is, synchrony is always part and parcel of a larger informing diachrony, and there is no way of ignoring the force of the latter. And thus, I welcome the focus given to John's book by its subtitle, *Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, for I think that one of the challenges for us today is *precisely not* to lose sight of the fact that it is above all the historical dimension of our particular field of study that most distinguishes what we can do and how we do it. As noted earlier, for all practical purposes there is no limit to the kinds of knowledge we can generate in our research. What constraints there are are precisely those imposed by the socio-historical situatedness of the texts, languages, and cultures we study and all of the attendant difficulties that accompany any (and every) program of historical research.⁸

⁷ R. Jakobson and J. Tynjanov, "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language," in *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time* (R. Jakobson; eds. K. Pomorska and S. Rudy; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985) 26. Jakobson's critique here has de Saussure's championing of synchrony uppermost in mind. He is intent on stressing that there is no way of avoiding the reality of diachrony: "each system necessarily comes forth as evolution and on the other hand evolution inevitably carries with it the character of a system" (Ibid.). Or as he states in another essay, a "true-to-the-fact synchronic description of language must consistently consider the dynamics of language" (R. Jakobson, "Sign and System of Language: A Reassessment of Saussure's Doctrine," in *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, 29).

⁸ This has important implications for how we think about shaping a future generation of scholars. The chief challenge, as I see it, is to ensure that students have a sufficient grounding in the history, cultures, and languages of the ancient Near East, a task that becomes increasingly difficult given the general brevity of doctoral education in the United States (normally consisting of 2-3 years of coursework) and the increasing cutbacks of funding for graduate education in the field. No program of research in Biblical Studies can be successful (or persuasive) in ignorance of historical knowledge, however difficult the latter may be to come by and adjudicate.

In closing, I want to echo the words of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi as quoted in the last chapter of *The Bible After Babel* in reference to Levinas's work: "It is exhilarating to see this biblical 'vocabulary' (i.e., frames of reference) and basic ideas applied to an interpretation of reality that extends beyond the confines of specifically biblical or even religious discourse" (154). There is much to admire in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, but like Eskenazi, I admire most how he uses biblical (and Talmudic) themes and ideas and stories to think by and how he then proceeds to move these ideas, themes, etc. onto ever larger and more encompassing planes of discourse, and does so without pleading special privilege (i.e., the presumed authority of divine revelation). One of the chief gains of postmodernity is that religious discourse is no longer (automatically) ruled out of bounds.⁹ This is not to say that such discourse need not be critical, it does, and religious thinkers must attend more carefully to how they move and frame ideas motivated by religious conviction in a pluralistic conversation (this is the principle burden of Jeff Stout's recent *Democracy and Tradition* from which I quoted earlier), but still postmodernity makes a place for religion and religious discourse in a way quite different from that in the Enlightenment, and thus, like John, I would answer in the affirmative to the question he poses in his last chapter title, "Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?"¹⁰ But there is no reason why the thinking we do through biblical texts must be confined to an explicitly theological idiom, pitched primarily to a mostly parochial audience (e.g., synagogue or church), and this I take to be the central thrust of Eskenazi's exhilaration in Levinas (and is one of the themes that may be teased out as well from Michael Fox's recent post on the SBL Forum¹¹). This is an exhilaration that I, too, share and an avenue of criticism that postmodernist thought, in its various strands, opens onto in a provocative and perhaps timely way. The Bible, as well as other literature from the ancient Near East, potentially has much to contribute to intellectual discourse on a whole host of issues, including, as John himself

⁹ See, for example, John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁰ Here, let me be clear that the kind of postmodern biblical theology that John has in mind (and one that I would subscribe to) is unabashedly critical and explicitly nonfoundationalist (and thus non-fideistic) in orientation. For my own efforts in this direction, see, for example, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations* (IBC; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), esp. 23-48.

¹¹ See <http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=490>

highlights, most crucially matters that bear on our notions of human flourishing and well-being (i.e., ethics).¹²

There is much else that one could (and should) say about *The Bible After Babel*, and hopefully we will do that shortly. I'll end my own initial observations as I began them (and thus framing them appropriately with a thematic inclusio) by reaffirming my appreciation to John for a stimulating and thoughtful book.

¹² For one example of how biblical texts can be used to enjoin intellectual conversations beyond theology, see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, "The Delight of Beauty and Song 4:1-7," *Interpretation* 59 (July, 2005) 260-77.

MY RESPONSE TO *THE BIBLE AFTER BABEL*

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My contribution to a discussion of the future of the field is to offer myself, a newly minted Bible scholar, and my orientation to the Bible and biblical scholarship as a subject for scrutiny and critique. At the risk of narcissism, I believe that as a recent product of the field—I, for better and for worse, provide a glimpse into the future of the field. By describing myself and my interests, I hope to spark discussion about where the field may be heading under the direction of new scholars like me.

I will begin with a comment that Collins makes on page 9; he writes: “The 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. Up to the 1960s, biblical studies was largely the preserve of white male Christian professors, largely Protestant.”

I am white, female, and Jewish. And these factors, among others, certainly impact on my perspective and my scholarship. Another factor, I went to college in the mid to late 80s. Still more factors that shape me and my scholarship—I am a rabbi, but a liberal one. My first critical Bible teacher was Tikva Frymer-Kensky. My Ph.D. is from a Jewish seminary. I was trained by scholars who were trained in the methods of historical criticism. I’m currently teaching at The Jewish Theological Seminary.

These are some of the details that help you define me, though there are others—some of which I’m even willing to share. And I think these biographical details matter and ought to raise certain questions. For example, which factor informs me most as a scholar—being a woman or being a Jew?

So what kind of a Bible scholar am I? Where do I fit on the spectrum presented by Collins between historical criticism and Postmodernism? This was the question I kept asking as I read through Collins’ book. What was

most surprising to me was the realization that despite my training, which had no *formal* exposure to postmodern methods and ideas yet plenty of exposure to Akkadian and Ugaritic, both my teaching and my scholarship is postmodern inflected.

By this I mean, to follow Collins' criteria, I value ambiguity in and multiple interpretations of text (though this may make me less a postmodernist than a traditional Jewish Bible interpreter) and I am suspicious of those who claim objectivity in interpretation and meaning. I believe that the biographical factors that I listed above do shape me as a scholar and interpreter of this text. I am a critical reader of the Hebrew Bible who considers the text to be more story than history. I am not invested in whether or not the Israelites were in Egypt and were carried out on eagles' wings. I am more interested in how national identity forms and evolves through story. And how these stories reflect the values and beliefs of ancient Israel.

My areas of interest are feminist criticism, rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism and biblical theology. My dissertation applied contemporary literary theory on the genre of horror to the Bible, an anachronistic endeavor for some, and examined a rhetoric of horror in the book of Jeremiah. I am currently interested in the use of metaphors in the Bible—particularly those that use gender specific images such as the laboring woman or Daughter Zion. I am interested in how these metaphors are constructed and used and what they reveal about gender differences in the Bible.

All of this, I realized as I read this book, makes me a fairly postmodernist scholar. And yet, I believe that every text should be understood in its historical context—as Collins said, “in light of the literary and cultural conventions” of its time. Scholars need to figure out these conventions as best they can through language study, archeology, and analogous texts from the ANE. For example, to better understand the metaphor of Daughter Zion, one should read the city-laments of the ANE. To better understand gender difference in the Bible, one must understand how ancient Israelite society was structured.

I believe there are and should be “limits to the conversation” and that historical criticism provides us with that. Appreciating ambiguity does not mean that a text can mean anything at all. To use Collins' own example, I do not think that the primary meaning of the word *almah* is virgin. And I do not believe that it's OK for me to draw an analogy between the Bible and Rosemary's Baby as if these ‘texts’ are not separated by at least 2000 years of history and perspective. Ideas and texts are bound

by the time that produced them. Some ideas may persist and appeal through the ages, but it is the responsibility of scholars—as opposed to theologians or philosophers—to consider these ideas in context.

Frankly, I find it difficult to categorize myself. Given my areas of interest and my overall orientation to the Bible, if cornered, I would say that I'm a postmodern scholar who consults and depends on historical critical scholarship.

Naturally, it is difficult for me to determine how much I exemplify new Bible scholars at large. I would be curious as part of our discussion for the veterans in the field to respond to that. How unique am I in terms of my orientation and biography? And what does that mean for the future of the field? Collins writes: "The main gain of postmodernist criticism, in my view, is that it has expanded the horizons of biblical studies, by going out to the highways and by-ways to bring new "voices from the margin" to the conversation." But I wonder, has biblical studies moved too far from its center so that we are offering new insights on marginal topics such as horror in the Bible? How many *new* Biblicists are committed and *skilled* historical critical scholars?

I am also curious about the question of audience. Who are Bible scholars writing for? Given the religious, uncritical orientation of most of the Bible's readers, are Bible scholars only writing for themselves? Or is it naïve to think that even the most secular among us are not in conversation with the Bible's religious readers. And what do Bible scholars, in particular, offer other academic disciplines?

Finally and with this I'll conclude, I hope we can discuss some more practical details about the future of the field. Will there be jobs? What kind of jobs will they be? Where will they be? Secular universities or seminaries? And perhaps most important of all, will there be tenure?