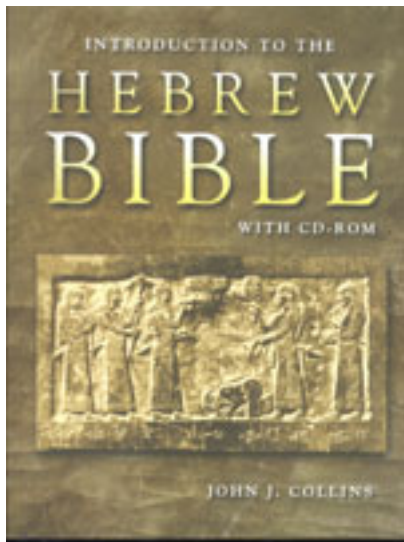


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Collins, John J.

Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, with CD-ROM

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. Pp. xii + 613 + 20 black and white images + 13 maps. Paper. \$49.00. ISBN 0800629914.

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John Collins is a recognized authority in Second Temple Judaism, and he brings his expertise to the task of producing a historical-critical introduction to the Hebrew Bible “for those who are beginning serious study rather than for experts.”

The introduction (1–20) discusses some preliminary issues regarding the canon, the transmission of the texts, the Bible and history, chronology, and the methods of biblical study. The bulk of the volume is then divided into four parts that basically follow the division and canonical order of the Hebrew Bible: the Torah/Pentateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, Prophecy, and the Writings. Every book of the Hebrew Bible is discussed separately, though the deuterocanonical books are included as well. This writer has no particular objection to the inclusion of the books that are considered Scripture by Roman Catholics, but Collins never offers any justification for including them in an introduction to the *Hebrew Bible*. In most cases each chapter is devoted to a book or a number of books, but there are exceptions. The first chapter in part 1 (25–45) provides an overview of the history and religion in the ancient Near Eastern context; the second chapter (47–64) outlines the Documentary Hypothesis; and there are a few instances where a chapter covers a particular portion of Scripture (e.g., the primeval history, the division of the kingdom, and Isa 40–66). There is also a brief concluding chapter (599–604) that discusses the formation of the canon and a glossary of terms (607–13).

Initially, there are no summaries of the content of the Scriptures, and most of the discussion proceeds more like a commentary on selected portions of the biblical text with accompanying information from the historical context. Thus, chapter 6 on the revelation at Sinai introduces Hittite treaties as the background for interpreting the covenant at Sinai, and there is an extended discussion of the laws in the Decalogue (125–30) and the Book of the Covenant (130–34). Chapter 7 (“The Priestly Theology”) includes a discussion of the tabernacle (Exod 25–31; 35–40), the sacrificial system (Lev 1–7), the Day of Atonement (Lev 16), the consecration of priests (Lev 8–10), the impurity laws (Lev 11–15), the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26), and a brief acknowledgement of the book of Numbers (153–56). The format allows Collins to comment in a fair degree of detail on significant concerns for understanding the text. For example, the chapter on Joshua includes a very helpful summary of the views on the conquest of the land as well as a discussion of the moral issues involved (186–99). Generally speaking, the remarks in each case are informative and judicious, and there is an annotated bibliography at the end of each chapter.

Though the format is one of the strengths of the volume, it also has its shortcomings. Collins’s comments are balanced, but there is some reason to quibble over a lack of balance in the choice of the material and the way that it is treated. For example, initially the introduction comments on historical matters that affect the interpretation of the biblical text and does not provide summaries of the content. However, from the book of Judges forward the comments are frequently based around a summary of the particular book. The aim of the introduction is also questionable when the comments on the book of Numbers total less than four pages and an odd incident such as Miriam’s affliction with leprosy in Num 12 receives no mention. In other ways there is less than a systematic approach followed. For instance, the Psalms have a specific section devoted to “The Theology of the Psalms” (471–79), which is well done, and Collins does engage theological concerns at other points directly (e.g., “Theological Misconceptions” about the fall [73–74]; Deuteronomistic theology), but elsewhere he refers to “themes” (e.g., Second and Third Isaiah [381–99]; Qoheleth [520–25]) or the “purpose” of the writer (e.g., the Chronicler [458–60]). The result is that Collins’s volume vacillates between an introduction that addresses historical-critical matters and a commentary that sometimes assumes specialist knowledge. For instance, Collins offers a helpful understanding of the Documentary Hypothesis, but when he discusses “Methods in Biblical Study” his explanations for source, form, redaction, and literary criticism are too brief, and there are no examples (16–19).

The treatment of Esther offers an excellent example of how the approach of this introduction may vary. The first three pages offer a summary of the book (536–39), while the next three discuss questions about the historicity and historical importance of Esther

(539–42). There is then one page that discusses the “religious character” of the book (542–43), and it concludes with less than half a page that summarizes the content of the additions. In the introduction to Esther there is one paragraph that offers a brief outline of the differences in the LXX and Alpha-text versions of the book, but there is barely any detail about the differences between the three versions. The references for where the additions occur are not even provided. An introduction written for those interested in serious study of the Hebrew Bible should have less summary here and more information.

The aforementioned absence of a critical discussion about the versions leads to the most disappointing aspect of this text. The author is an expert in Second Temple Judaism, its literature, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, but that knowledge makes little impression in this historical introduction. The variant texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the LXX have significant implications for interpreting the texts as well as the development of the canon, but in many cases they are not even mentioned. The variations in the LXX version of Jeremiah are summarized in one paragraph (334), while two brief sentences are allotted to inform the reader that the LXX has “a very different form” of Dan 4–6 (559). The alternative texts in Exodus, Joshua, and Job are nowhere mentioned. Collins includes a brief discussion of the canon (2–7; see 599–603) and the textual witnesses (7–9) in which he affirms several times that the Torah and the Prophetic sections of the canon were closed at “the beginning of the second century B.C.E.” He seems content to make the point that “the various canons were eventually determined by the decisions of religious communities” (7) and that there was textual fluidity (8–9), because the discussion in the rest of the volume focuses on the Hebrew text. While both points are true, they are not mutually independent. The textual fluidity of the Qumran texts and the Septuagint is evidence that contradicts his notion of the development of the Hebrew canon, and the majority of the contributors to one of the volumes that he cites (Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002]) would disagree with his position. One is also left wondering why Collins would give such preference to the Hebrew Bible, even though he also discusses the deuterocanonical/apocryphal books. Students would have benefited from more detailed discussions of the textual evidence in this historical-critical introduction. Collins’s conservative approach regarding the texts is evident as well in his views on the relationship between biblical Israel and what can be established from archaeology. Though he acknowledges that most of the books of the Hebrew Bible received their final form in the postexilic period (13), the dating for the pentateuchal sources remains relatively early (59–61), and there is no discussion of those who would view the preexilic narratives as postexilic literary creations.

On a more trivial note, it should be pointed out that the publishers could have put more effort into the presentation of the volume. All the maps and pictures are black and white,

and the tables are quite plain. For that reason I expected that the CD-ROM would make up for this lack, particularly for students, but the advertised CD is somewhat disappointing. It consists of a version of the book with study questions, additional bibliography, and online resources. Most of this material could have been included in the print volume.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, this volume has much to offer seminary and graduate students. Furthermore, even though Collins normally affirms critical positions, the style of the presentation is such that even some of those who are theologically conservative will find this useful as a class text.