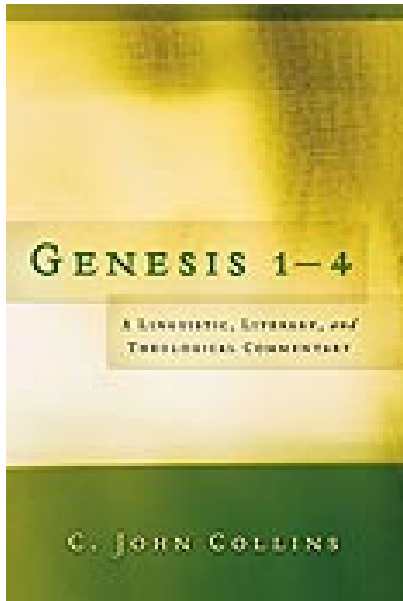


RBL 04/2008



Collins, C. John

Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary

Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2006. Pp. xiv + 317.
Paper. \$17.99. ISBN 0875526195.

Philippe Guillaume
University of Bern
Bern, Switzerland

The subtitle of this work, *A Linguistic, Literary and Theological Commentary*, sets it as part of a quest for academic recognition by evangelicals illustrated by the recent launch of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (Eisenbrauns). The aim is to return to the Bible as Christian Scriptures to reverse the ebb started by J. S. Semler, who fostered rational investigation of the Bible away from the polemic of dogmatic theology (see further J. B. Green, “The [Re]Turn to Theology,” *JThI* 1/1 [2007]: 1–3). In a similar way, Collins insists upon an academically rigorous treatment of the first chapters of Genesis with the integration of their impact on life today. Since the target audience of this commentary is pastors and students, the amount of footnotes and engagement with rival hypotheses is minimal in order to produce something that people would read. Hence the volume dispenses of the characteristics of academic exegesis.

Instead, Collins’s vision of academic rigor includes a literary-theological method informed by contemporary discourse analysis. Chapter 2 presents this method as the most important contribution to the field. It is said to allow modern readers to read the text the way a competent reader in the original audience would have read it, to the best that we can reconstruct that competence (5). At this point, Collins posits that the original audience was ancient Israel before the Hellenistic period and refers the modern reader to

chapter 8 for a discussion of authorship. The doctrine of biblical inspiration requires the cooperation of the believing community with the intentions of God's authorized spokespersons (6). A cursory definition of discourse analysis as the search for the effect of a text upon its audience is deemed sufficient, since the goal is to press its insights into the service of interpretation. Then the author explains that he will use a conservative literary approach that focuses on the text having a meaning: not searching how the text came about to be as it is, but explaining how the Bible should function as a religious text (10). Such a conservative literary approach is set against modern and postmodern approaches characterized by their restless multiplicity and factionalism (10), as if conservative Protestantism was not rife with bitter factionalism. Collins admits that biblical narratives are stories, but this does not downplay whatever historical claims the texts might make. A section on history defines it as referring to events that actually happened, since the intention of the biblical authors was to have their readers believe that the narrated events took place. A citation from Aristotle's *Poetics* shows that the ancients knew the difference between history and edifying fiction, and there is reason to think that the Greeks were the first ones to think so. The Old Testament authors were already aware of the importance of history. The literary approach soon turns into a redemptive-historical reading that requires the narratives to be real history, the real history of God's dealing with his people who instantiate God's faithfulness. Biblical texts do not merely narrate moral stories of what always happens but report true salvation history, a cosmic drama of what did happen.

The last ten pages of the introduction apply the method to 1 Sam 3 and Matt 4 in order to demonstrate how to identify the delimitation, structure, peak, and message of a pericope. The search for the covenantal principles within a text is part of the exegetical task, as it provides the starting point for theologically sensitive application to the modern reader (29).

The next chapter (33–37) discusses the setting of Genesis 1–4 within the larger context of Genesis and the Pentateuch, closing with the claim that we best read the Pentateuch when we read it *as if* it records the words of Moses (implied author) to Israel, since the task of a good reader is to try to put oneself in the sandals of the implied reader.

Chapter 4 (39–100) analyzes the creation week. In spite of the absence of *wayyiqtol* forms in the first two verses, Collins considers that they narrate the initial creation event and thus constitute a period before day one, because this is consistent with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* found here by later writers (43). The translation from the English Standard Version and the footnotes that accompany it cover a mere five pages, while six pages are devoted to the confirmation of creation out of nothing as implied but not stated in Gen 1. The plural in Gen 1:26, "let us make," does not in itself lead to the Trinity, but a

sensus plenior consistent with the intent of Gen 1 allows one to see the Trinity in Gen 1, especially since the Spirit of God is already mentioned in verse 2 (61). Genesis 1:28 is discussed in light of environmental ethics. The order to subdue and dominate the earth has been wrongly charged with instilling an ethic of exploitation, since the worse polluters have been societies that repudiate biblical ethics (e.g., the Iron Curtain countries). Nothing is said about countries that refused to sign the Kyoto protocol. The chapter closes with reverberations in the Psalms and the New Testament.

Chapter 5 (101–47) examines Gen 2:4–25. The *toledot* of verse 4a is attributed to the Eden narrative because of the chiasmic structure of verse 4. As in the previous chapter, the actual exegesis is cursory. The main focus is on establishing the subordination of women through the marriage covenant (Eve is Adam's *wife*) as well as other themes dear to some conservative readers, such as the length of the creation week, all of which are foreign to the text itself. The aim is to harmonize contradictions and to avoid innovations.

Chapter 6 deals with Gen 3:1–24. The main target here is James Barr, a mighty debunker of fundamentalism, in order to support the Pauline reading of this chapter as the fall of humankind. “The proper remedy is a return to the creational pattern of the man's leadership, loving but not dominating” (160). The reversal of the tyranny of desire in Gen 3:16 by Song 7:10 is noted but not discussed.

Chapter 7 (189–220) covers Gen 4:1–26. Collins stresses that the rejection of Cain's offering is not due to divine caprice but to Cain's resentfulness and the fact that the brothers were morally distinct prior to offering the sacrifices.

The volume concludes with four chapters on sources, unity, and authorship (221–35); the communicative purpose of Gen 1–4 (237–47); Gen 1–4, history and science (249–67); and seeing the world through the eyes of Gen 1–4 (269–78). In dealing with sources, Friedman's Documentary Hypothesis is Collins's preferred model. It accepts the preexilic date of P advocated by the Kaufmann school. However, this has no consequence on the understanding of the text, since Collins is more interested in the meaning of the final text than in its genesis: “if someone produced this text by stitching sources together, he left the seams smooth indeed” (231). Collins does his part in smoothing by downplaying the significance of Pg's claim that the name of Yhwh was first revealed to Moses (Exod 6:3). Kenneth Kitchen is called upon to dismiss the presence of different sources; although Collins concedes that there might have been sources, they were put together in a coherent whole no later than the end of the second millennium B.C.E. (235). Genesis may not be a polemic against Mesopotamian myths but an alternative story offering the true story of humankind's past. Mesopotamian tradition may have gotten the broad structure right, yet Genesis corrects many of the details and offers the true interpretation of these events

(243). On the subject of history and science, Collins warns against too high a level of literalism in reading Genesis and even allows for a level of anachronism (252–53). There is unspecified time between creation *ex nihilo* and day one of the creation week, which can reconcile scientific and creationist positions. Collins appeals to historical truth value, good faith communication, and phenomenological language to steer a course acceptable to moderate conservative Christians. Genesis is not a scientific account, but this does not mean that it is inferior. In fact, Genesis lays the foundation for all good science and philosophy (266). Interestingly, Collins states that controversies about the age of the earth and the history of life that divide conservative Christians miss the focus of the biblical texts. The conclusion even asserts that the biblical worldview prevents Christians from withdrawing from social witness. However, such witness focuses upon the right to life, racial discrimination, the proper definition of marriage, and even foreign policy. Social witness is important since the dark power of evil affects social structures; police and armed forces must be used, since not everyone will choose the good (276). Twenty pages of bibliography followed by indices of biblical and extrabiblical references, subjects, and names complete this book of excellent editorial quality.

However much I would have liked to hail the birth of a new exegetical method, this volume merely demonstrates how deep fundamentalism runs in American culture, as patriarchalism, antifeminism, anticommunism keep surfacing. Given the power of evangelicals in the United States, the dangers of this type of theology should be taken seriously. I only note a few of the many points of disagreement. First, while God finished creating the land and its troops before the seventh day (Gen 2:1), the narrative introducing verse 2 shows that the work was not finished and that the Sabbath is a creation, even the highest one, since it is the only one to be sanctified. Hence, if the narration of the sixth day is the longest, it is not true that the sixth day gets the most focus (72). The importance of the Sabbath is supported by the fact that calendrical elements are the sole focus of days one, four, and seven. This was unacceptable to the LXX translators, who wrote that Elohim completed his work in six days instead of the seven days of the Masoretic Text (Gen 2:2). Second, beautiful chiasms can be the work of redactors, such as in Gen 2:4. Third, in Gen 2:24 man does not leave his parents but abandons them, a nuance that seriously undermines the misuse of this text for the celebration of the marriage covenant (143).

In a more positive vein, it is interesting to note that by reading Gen 2 as an elaboration of 1:26-28, Collins finds himself (unconsciously?) close to the post-Wellhausen trend that considers J as a commentary of the *Priesterschrift*.

However, the lip service paid to academic methods does little to broaden the narrow-mindedness of this approach. That the work is written for an audience of pastors is no

excuse. The laudable insistence on faith communities as the locale for interpretation calls for the production of jargon-free but high-quality exegesis to equip the clergy with the best educational tools. Unfortunately, this theological commentary disguises conservative Protestant dogmatics as exegesis.

I looked forward to the harmonization between Bible and science Collins calls for in the methodological chapter, yet the chapter devoted to it misses out on promising avenues opened by the Dead Sea Scrolls, which revealed the existence of major calendar controversies. This indicates that a major concern for some of the ancient audience of Gen 1 was not *cosmogensis* but the accounting of time. Genesis 1 and its sequel in the Priestly narrative accomplished the major feat of turning the schematic calendar of MUL.APIN into the so-called sabbatical calendar, which turns out to be more precise than our Julian calendar. Read in light of calendars, Gen 1 reflects mathematical science produced by scribes who did not consider the scientific knowledge of their time as the tool of a dark power. Read as the introduction to a theological treatise delineating a new way to count time and intercalate years, Gen 1 has the potential of overcoming the disastrous deadlock of creationism that fosters a schizophrenic stance in believers who have to operate on two different and irreconcilable modes. Unfortunately, Collins does not mention any of these works. The pioneering work of Annie Jaubert is not mentioned even in the bibliography, although an English translation was produced in 1965. The absence of any of Uwe Glessmer's articles, some of them in English, from a commentary claiming to discuss how Genesis relates to science is unforgivable, since Gen 1 compares favorably in the context of ancient Babylonian science.

As doctrinal eisegesis of the first chapters of Genesis, this work has no place in an academic curriculum where eisegesis is what beginners are expected to unlearn. However, I would not dismiss it totally. Iron sharpens iron, and Collins's work is a good illustration of how not to do exegesis, since we all are guilty of logical shortcuts and ideological slips. If there is one gimmick from the exegetical guild that a conservative could have profitably debunked, authorship is the one. This notion is not only irrelevant for biblical texts; it is very misleading. However, Collins uses the category of authorship throughout, claiming that Moses is the implied author of the Pentateuch. As far as I can see, apart from Qoheleth, the implied author of the Hebrew Scriptures is God himself.