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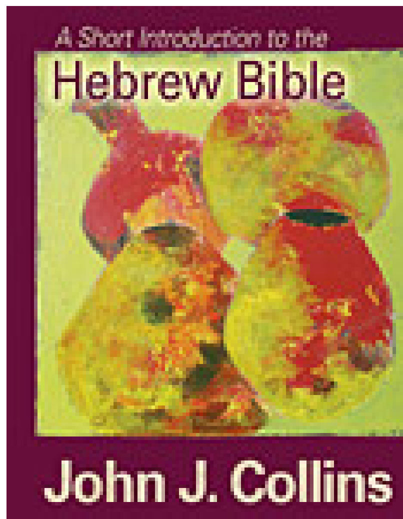

Collins, John J.

A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. Pp. xi + 324. Paper. $30.00.
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A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible does (almost) what it says: it introduces a (shortened) version of the Hebrew Bible from an academic perspective. Taken from *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible with CD-ROM* (Fortress, 2004), the book is an abridgement. Reading through the chapters, one can virtually hear John J. Collins, Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism at Yale University, delivering his lectures and picture his lucky students taking notes fast and furiously. Collins writes in short sentences that accommodate a breath. No doubt his students greeted this book with relief because they no longer have to poke a neighbor or raise a hand to ask for a spelling clarification.

Collins begins his preface (ix–x) by saying the abridgment consists of omitting five of the Minor Prophets (Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Obadiah, and Habakkuk) and some of the deuterocanonical books (Tobit, Judith, Baruch). Collins's book is so well written that the omissions leave the reader (at least this reader) with a sense of loss. As someone who has worked on Zephaniah and Habakkuk, I would like to see Collins's complete presentation in the 2007 version. To me, the omission of these five prophets, especially, undermines the book. How can an introduction to the Hebrew Bible lack five of its books? In all honesty, the title should be enlarged to reflect the abridgement: *A Short Introduction to (a Shortened) Hebrew Bible*.

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Collins designed his book for students beginning a study, a serious study, of the Hebrew Bible, rather than for experts (ix). In my view, that is all the more reason for including Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Obadiah, and Habakkuk! Furthermore, Tobit, Judith, and Baruch are getting increased scholarly attention and need an introductory scrutiny. After all, what kind of space are we talking about for these eight books? Chapters 21–26, a section on the Writings, contains commentary on twelve books in fifty-seven pages (220–77). The chapter on Amos and Hosea constitutes ten pages; similarly, the chapter on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and Joel tallies eleven. For me, a better alternative to cutting these eight books would have been to cut some pictures or two hundred words from each chapter.

This well-written book offers a seasoned, up-to-date introduction. It is pitched to those with solid critical thinking skills who are at least somewhat biblically literate. Collins's book is meant to be ecumenical in the sense that it does not seek to impose any particular theological perspective but to provide information that should be relevant to any student regardless of a faith commitment (ix).

A strength of the book is its placement of the Hebrew Bible in its chronological, historical, archaeological, and literary settings in the ancient Near East (1–35). Another strength is Collins's ability to summarize, categorize, and provide examples. For instance, he lists and gives ample descriptions of the three models of conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelites: the conquest model, the revolt model, and the gradual emergence model (96–100). Regarding the conquest model, he writes that new archaeological evidence suggests that the settlers did not come from outside the land but were of Canaanite origin (98).

For scholars not prone to his academic approach and favoring one that acknowledges faith more overtly, a comment such as this, as well as the overall tone of his book, might lead them to pass by Collins's work. Nonetheless, *A Short Introduction* would benefit them and be a good book for their classes because of Collins's fine writing and the clarity of his summaries. I will include *A Short Introduction* as recommended reading in my syllabus for Invitation to Old Testament and use it in my lectures.

Now a bit about the book's layout and presentation. The pages are bright white; the print is clear. The book is surprisingly heavy because of its high-quality paper; the margins give ample space for students to write comments. The book includes numerous photographs (color and black and white), maps, art, and boxes. The layout is eye-pleasing. Several of Collins's photos—including the gate at Megiddo (133), the Beth-shean tell and lower city (122), and Qumran (290)—grace the pages. Collins avoids footnotes and therefore scholarly entanglements and debates; he leaves much of that aspect to the next stage of a

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student's development. Collins's selections under "Further Reading" (which appear at the end of each chapter) are traditional, including standard commentaries and monographs.

A Short Introduction is historical-critical in the sense of its emphasis that the biblical text is a product of a particular time and place and is rooted in the culture of the ancient Near East (ix). Collins maintains that the "historylike appearance of biblical narration should not be confused with historiography in the modern sense" (x). He accepts the Documentary Hypothesis in general and notes parts of it throughout his book. He argues that Priestly theology was primarily concerned with God's commandments to Israel, but it also recognized that God's creation includes all humanity (43).

In the story of the sons of God in Gen 6:1–4, Collins brings in the view of the apocalyptic Book of the Watchers (1 En. 1–36). He cites the differences between Genesis and this third century B.C.E. work. In the Book of the Watchers, the sons of God become "the Watchers," those angelic beings who, in an act of rebellion, come to earth and beget giants who in turn cause great havoc on earth (42). Collins notes that the myth of the fallen angels is well-known in Western tradition, but the biblical text in the Yahwist tradition locates the "responsibility for sin in the actions of human beings rather than in those of fallen angels" (42).

Regarding the exodus from Egypt, Collins sees the stories in Exodus as legendary and folkloristic, yet containing some historical memory, for it "is unlikely that a people would claim that it had experienced the shameful condition of slavery if there were no historical basis for it" (58). He concludes that the exodus story, which he says became the founding myth of Israel (especially for the northern kingdom), "can fairly be regarded as one of the most influential stories in world literature" (63).

Collins cites aspects of God's character that the biblical text presents. Exodus 32 mentions God's anger toward sin; Exod 34:6–7, God's famous self-description to Moses, presents other qualities as well: compassion, graciousness, steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. These aspects of God's character continue to be developed in the biblical text as the story of Israel progresses. As an academic showing his students other literature from the ancient Near East, Collins notes that a Babylonian prayer to Marduk describes Marduk's anger as a deluge; when Marduk relents, he is like a merciful father (73).

Collins regards the last four chapters of Judges as part of a series of stories illustrating that at that time in Israel "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 17:6; 21:25 [114]). The biblical text recounts the stories of the founding of Dan, the gang rape/murder of the Levite's concubine by the men of Gibeah, the fate of Gibeah, and the taking of wives for Benjamin at Jabesh-gilead. Collins notes that the stories treat the

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women as disposable commodities. "The biblical text," he concludes, "seems designed to show the depravity of human, and specifically Israelite, nature and its need for divine mercy" (115).

Collins looks at the character of David and concludes that his story is one of the finest pieces of literature found in antiquity (129–30). He notes the progression of the story of David in biblical and extrabiblical literature. In Chronicles, David is pious, but in Samuel he is a fully human character: lusty, bloodthirsty, daring, and capable of extortion and exploitation. He also mourns the loss of his friend Jonathan, the loss of King Saul, the death of his unnamed son by Bathsheba, and the death of his son Absalom. The Dead Sea Scrolls credit David with 3,600 psalms and 450 songs, and the biblical text regards him as a prophet (2 Sam 23:2 [129]).

Regarding prophecy, Collins points out that much scholarship over the last two hundred years has been concerned with the prophets' original words. Current scholarship swings toward looking at the prophetic books in their canonical context (154). Collins cautions readers to consider the editing process: "The scribes who edited their books were part of the establishment of later generations," he writes. "Consequently, they often try to place the older oracles in the context of an authoritative tradition. The editorial process often takes the edge off powerful prophetic oracles and dulls their effect" (154). Collins views the fourth servant song (Isa 52:13–53:12) as introducing the possibility of a positive understanding of suffering, an idea crucial to the understanding of the death of Jesus in early Christianity (203).

In his section on the Song of Songs, one can easily picture the Yale students smiling when Collins says he sees the Song as offering little indication that the lovers are married (246). No doubt more smiles surface when Collins says the poems in the Song, which give voice especially to the woman, describe love as intoxicating, delightful, and irresistible (246).

Collins gives a fine summary of the opening vision of Ezekiel. He likens it to storm-god mythology and recounts that it became the cornerstone of Jewish mysticism. He notes that YHWH rides a chariot (Hebrew *merkabah*), which became a name for later Jewish mysticism (187). In comparing Ezekiel and Isaiah, Collins points out that Ezekiel sees his vision with less clarity. Ezekiel sees "something like" a throne and "something that seemed like a human form" (187). Collins posits that Ezekiel, unlike Isaiah in Isa 6, takes pains to emphasize the transcendent, surpassing nature of God (188); this connects the passage with the Priestly tradition. Isaiah, on the other hand, and Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kgs 22), claim to have seen the Lord seated on his throne (165). Still, Ezek 1 and Isa 6 each constitute a call of a prophet.

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In his final chapter (ch. 29), "From Tradition to Canon," Collins states his views. He advises three things (302–3): (1) recognize the inherent diversity of the documents of the Hebrew Bible; avoid seeking to impose a uniformity on this literature; (2) know that the Hebrew canon reflects the books cherished by the rabbis who laid the foundation of Judaism; the Greek Bible contains a larger collection reflecting a wider circulation of writings; and (3) be wary of imposing or seeing a canonical shape to the text; if there is one, it is largely in the eye of the beholder. For Collins, the "Bible consists of a collection of diverse writings that can be and always have been interpreted in various ways."

Collins exhibits sensitivity toward students who were not raised in a faith tradition or are not believers in a Jewish or Christian heritage. However, he notes that for Jews and Christians this collection of Hebrew documents pertinent to the religious history of ancient Israel is considered sacred scripture; these writings contain inspiration and revelation (303). Collins also addresses the question of inspiration. For him, it is better to ask whether a text is revelatory rather than if a text is revealed (303). He argues that there is no reason why a work of fiction cannot be inspired as easily as is a historical chronicle. Collins also advises students and readers to come to terms with the text in its own terms; one should not use allegory as a means of sanitizing it to fit a presupposition of propriety (304).

Collins's statements will make some sigh in relief and others angry. However, he stands by his opinions in a gracious, erudite manner. As a person of faith, I will use his scholarship and cite his views. One of his concluding remarks summarizes particularly well his approach and insights: "The biblical narratives offer a warts-and-all picture of human nature that has seldom been surpassed. When the Bible is read without moralistic presuppositions, it gives a picture of human nature that is not comforting but may well be said to be revelatory" (305).

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