

Beyond creationist and primitivist readings of Genesis 1-11

C. John Collins *Reading Genesis Well. Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1-11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018. \$36.99. pp. 336. ISBN 978-0-310-59857-2).

This book's contents fall, roughly speaking, into three sections (though it is not labelled as such): how to read biblical texts well (chs. 1-4); how, accordingly, to read Genesis 1-11 well (chs. 5-7); and how others read these chapters in antiquity, with consideration of certain questions that have been posed in modernity, and a closing chapter on the theological 'vision' of Genesis 1-11 (chs. 8-11). The key issue is outlined in the introduction: the problem, for Collins, is 19th century literalism. This is typified by Benjamin Jowett ('On the Interpretation of Scripture' in *Essays and Reviews* 1860: to read the Bible 'like any other book' its most influential phrase) and James Barr, taken to be 'Jowett's heir'; specifically, how the recovery of the original (i.e. historically first) plain sense led to misreadings of Genesis 1-11 as merely primitive. With C. S. Lewis as his guide and muse, Collins argues, rather, for a rigorous 'linguistic-rhetorical-literary approach', while making use of 'the conventional tools of exegesis... lexicography, syntax, and history'. Before getting to Genesis 1-11, Collins presents numerous examples, across both testaments, of what constitutes 'Good-Faith Communication'.

It is, thus, only by p. 107 that the chapters are discussed in any detail. Collins describes their literary cohesion within Genesis and the Pentateuch (structure, verbal echo, themes, etc.) and their 'implied audience': ancient Israelite agriculturalists. Chapter 7 contains Collins' actual exposition, in which Genesis 1-11 are explained in terms of the analogous experience of Israelites in their ancient Near Eastern setting (day, week, work, rest, sacrifice, building, etc.). The next chapter on ancient interpretations focuses on the 'big story', *creatio ex nihilo*, the fall, the flood, and interactions with Hellenistic science. Collins then proceeds to distinguish the biblical 'world picture' (e.g. three-decker cosmology) and biblical 'worldview' (i.e. theological message). Here Collins' standpoint emerges pointedly: 'some have tried to vindicate the Bible by showing how its statements anticipate modern scientific findings... these vindications rest upon the same mistake about language as the dismissal-as-primitive positions do' (p. 260; cf. 'Skeptics and "Bible-science defenders"' p. 261); that is, creationist and primitivist readings alike. This leads into a discussion of how still, nevertheless, to conceive of divine action in the world; and finally, returning to Genesis 1-11, what Collins describes as their 'humane moral vision for Israel and the world', seen ultimately in Christianity.

Collins seemingly has various audiences in view: his students at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, since much of the book is about learning to interpret; readers of Genesis generally, especially Evangelicals, for whom biblical interpretation in scientific modernity has raised questions about the authority of Scripture; and perhaps Collins himself, in that the book is about Genesis in relation to science, given his own education in science (MIT) then theology (Liverpool). Interestingly, Collins, who proposes no definite date for the 'implied audience' of Genesis 1-11, sits ill-at-ease with a spectrum of five views he lays out (from 'Deistic/Naturalistic evolutionist' through to 'YEC' [= Young Earth Creationist], p. 283). It comes down to this: biblical texts do not yield scientific data. This enables Collins to shield Scripture from rationalistic interpretations – creationist and primitivist – that miss their ancient locution (form of words), illocution (intended effect), and perlocution (actual effect) – as illustrated by Collins' historical reading of sorts. This book is clearly written, with an eirenic tone, and it is fully referenced and well-produced. This book will likely find its place within the evidently broad stream of Evangelical discussion of Genesis 1-11.

Hywel Clifford
Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford