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## Distilling from the Infinite

### *A Review of The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*

IN OPENING his “Introduction” to this engrossing, admirable, 725-page volume, *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, edited by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts, with consultant editor Christopher Rowland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Roberts observes: “The reception of the Bible comprises every single act or word of interpretation of that book (or books) over the course of three millennia. It includes everything from Jesus reading Isaiah, or Augustine reading Romans, to a Sunday-school nativity play, or the appearance of ‘2 COR4:6’ as a stock number on military gunscopes” (1). This statement, though the examples it submits pertain exclusively to the Christian Bible, would probably resonate strongly with most people living in this country, if they paused and considered the symptoms of biblical “reception” that surround them on a daily basis. In Easton, Pennsylvania, where I live, such symptoms are ubiquitous, even aside from the fact that, thanks mainly to Moravian settlers, the towns of Nazareth and Bethlehem lie but fifteen minutes north and twenty minutes west, respectively, with Emmaus a little farther southwest. Like those and other communities in this region, Easton has an abundance of churches of

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various denominations, and my own immediate neighborhood in the city's West Ward also boasts two synagogues: one Reform, one Conservative. On the streets, not infrequently, cars are seen bearing the *ichthys*/fish symbol or a bumper sticker proclaiming "Jesus Loves You" or some similar message. My seven-minute drive to Lafayette College, where I teach, takes me past a personal training facility called Trinity Fitness, whose billboard shows a logo of several arrows intertwining to form a large triangle, inscribed with the words "Mind, Body, Spirit"—a secularized adaptation of Trinitarian doctrine, harking back, perhaps unwittingly, to the closing clause of Matt 28:19 via the Nicene Creed. From the west entrance of Pardee Hall, the building where my office is located, one can read Ps 19:1 inscribed on the wall of Colton Chapel, forty feet away: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork."

Yet, biblical *reception* is one matter; reception *history* is, as Roberts rightly adds, "a different matter." Usually, though not always, a scholarly enterprise, reception history requires "selecting and collating shards of that infinite wealth of reception material in accordance with the particular interests of the historian concerned, and giving them a narrative frame" (1). The primary practical challenge confronting any reception historian(s), therefore, is that of distilling from the potentially infinite sea of reception phenomena a finite set of significant materials to be studied, the selection of which should be justifiable on the basis of some evident goal of the investigation. In this respect, reception history is an heir not only of the Enlightenment tradition of treating religion and religion-related data in a historical-critical manner, but also of the Romantic inclination—as the piano virtuoso Alfred Brendel once put it—"to contain the illimitable" in such a way that "form will have to remain 'open' in order that the illimitable may enter." Presently I shall return to this point.

To call biblical reception history a "burgeoning field" has already become cliché in view of the growing mass of resources accruing around it. This new *Handbook* joins, to cite but several of the more prominent English-language titles that come to mind: the Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Wiley Blackwell, 2004–), a series of separate volumes devoted to each of the Bible's books, with a lively accompanying website (bbibcomm.net); *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F.A. Sawyer (hardback, 2006; paperback, 2012) and *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, ed. Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowland (2009); the projected 30-volume *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Re-*

*ception*, ed. Hermann Spieckermann et al. (a.k.a. *EBR*; De Gruyter, 2009–); and *Biblical Reception*, under the co-editorship of Cheryl Exum and David Clines, an annual launched in 2012 by Sheffield Phoenix Press. Full disclosure: I am a co-editor of *EBR*, and am on the advisory board of its spin-off *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* (De Gruyter), whose first two issues will appear next year. Of these resources, perhaps the one most closely analogous to the *Handbook* under review both in scope, and as a work contained within a single volume, is *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, though the organizational frameworks of the two works are significantly different, as we shall see.

To account for the emergence of the field, Roberts, a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool, turns to Continental Europe, crediting at some length the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as the grounding of reception history generally (1–3), and Ulrich Luz as the “best-known German-language theologian working in [biblical] reception history,” an endeavor that Roberts says “until recent years . . . was principally (though by no means exclusively) a German-language phenomenon” (3). Strictly speaking, these two assessments may not be wrong. Yet it seems odd to single out these two admittedly crucial figures while ignoring some others who might share credit. For example, the roots of reception history, or *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, a term associated with Gadamer’s student Hans Robert Jauss, predate even Gadamer’s exposition of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effects or of influence), extending back to late nineteenth-century *Stoffgeschichte* (history of themes), as well as to various anticipators—such as John Ruskin, whom another of this *Handbook*’s contributors identifies as a proponent of biblical reception history *avant la lettre* (578). Another example, this one not an anticipator but rather a younger contemporary of Gadamer, is the Canadian Northrop Frye. Though he never fashioned himself a “reception historian,” Frye exerted arguably a greater influence than Gadamer upon the development of biblical reception history in North America, through his promotion of William Blake’s notion of the Bible as “the Great Code of Art” that established the “imaginative framework” or “mythological universe” in which the subsequent Western literary tradition unfolded. Unmentioned by Roberts, Frye is cited only once in passing within this whole volume, rather ignobly as “big, old, critical beast Northrop Frye” (659), in the same closing article—“Bible Reading and/after Theory”—that includes the volume’s sole, likewise passing allusions to Jauss and that other importantly formative German reception theorist, Wolfgang Iser (650).

How does *The Oxford Handbook* confront the aforementioned challenge of containing the “illimitable” within a finite “form”? Let us first consider structure. The volume has forty-four chapters (not counting Roberts’s “Introduction”), followed by two indexes, one of subjects, the other of biblical citations. The chapters are arranged in two parts of unequal size. Part 1 contains twelve chapters surveying the outline, form, and content of a dozen “key” books from the Bible, while the remaining thirty-two chapters, in Part 2, focus on the history of interpretation, comprising case studies of a wide array of specific readings, from late antiquity to modernity and postmodernity, of those and other biblical books. The idea behind this structure, notes Roberts, is to make visible “the essential movement—the dialogue between the traditional and the novel” (6).

While in accord with the conventional conviction that *Wirkungsgeschichte* or *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (the latter being the somewhat broader of the two concepts) must properly follow and be clearly distinguished from the putatively primary exegetical task of reestablishing the given text’s “original” meaning, this structure differs markedly from that of this *Handbook*’s Wiley-Blackwell counterpart, *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*. A quick comparison may be instructive. Though 170 pages shorter (at 555 pages in length) and with fourteen fewer chapters (thirty, not counting its editor’s “Introduction”), *The Blackwell Companion* divides into twice as many parts, the contents of which are determined on notably different principles. The seven chapters of Part 1, “Revealing the Past,” trace biblical reception *temporally/historically* through the Ancient World, Patristic Period, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and Modern World. The seven chapters of Part 2, “The Nomadic Text,” survey it spatially/geographically, focusing upon Judaism (in the Middle East and the European Diaspora), Islam (in Arab lands and Iran), Asia, Africa, North America, Latin America, Australasia. The eight chapters of Part 3, “The Bible and the Senses,” examine it through various aesthetic and performative media: Literature, Film, Music, Art, Architecture, Theater, Circus, and Body. And the eight chapters of Part 4, “Reading in Practice,” consider an array of modern applications and enactments of the Bible: Contextuality, Politics, Ecology, Psychology, Gender, Nationalism, Post-colonialism, Postmodernism.

A consequence of Parts 1, 2, and 3 is that *The Blackwell Companion* is more systematic, albeit not necessarily more thorough overall, than *The Oxford Handbook* in attending to the historical development and geographical spread of biblical reception, and to the wide range of art forms through which

such reception has found expression. However, as reflected by some of the terms heading the chapters of Part 2, namely “Patristic,” “Renaissance,” “Reformation,” and “Counter-Reformation,” *The Blackwell Companion’s* general orientation remains, for the most part, distinctly Christian, at least in the categories through which it construes and periodizes its subject, and thus, at least terminologically, there seems a bit of a disconnect between Part 2 and Part 3, whose first two chapters are entitled “Judaism” and “Islam.” *The Oxford Handbook* skirts any such structural discrepancy by, for better or worse, not attempting a systematic breakdown of the history of biblical reception into distinct periods.

Of the twelve scriptures considered in Part 1 of *The Oxford Handbook*, the first seven coming from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (Genesis, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Judges), and the last five, from the New Testament (Gospel of John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Revelation). One could easily quibble over the selection. For instance, why was only one book, Genesis, chosen from the Pentateuch, a.k.a. the Five Books of Moses (*Torah*), when the failure to include any of the other four, most notably Exodus, means that an account as decisively important as that of Moses’s life and exposition of the Law is excluded from full consideration (though the fact that the chapter on Genesis mentions that God will reveal his name Yahweh to Moses [12], and that Moses will come from the tribe of Levi [17], led the indexer to include a sub-entry as surprising as it is misleading: “Moses ... in Genesis” [696]). From the Writings (*Ketuvim*), Job and Psalms are essential, as are, arguably, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Judges from among the Prophets (*Nevi'im*). But could not Daniel have been set aside to make room for Exodus or, say, Song of Songs, whose unremitting sensualness distinguishes it as unique among all books of both Testaments. Ultimately, however, such quibbling would be pointless and unfair, because in any enterprise of this sort, difficult choices must be made, and the particular selection here of biblical books is certainly defensible.

To its editors’ credit, Part 2’s thirty-two *rezeptionsgeschichtliche* case studies cover a diverse panoply of topics, displaying a wide and rich, potpourri-like sampling of the infinite possibilities of this field. After opening with several chapters that focus on some of the most basic modes of biblical interpretation, i.e., iconography (ch. 13), translations (ch. 14), and memory and the imagination (ch. 15), Part 2 considers several of the more fateful directions that biblical reception has taken over the centuries, sometimes with deadly consequences: millenarian ideologies (ch. 16), dilemmas of non-retaliation

vs. military force (ch. 17), and anti-Semitism (ch. 18), the latter of which links naturally with the consideration of “Post-Holocaust Jewish Interpretations of Job” (ch. 33). The *Handbook*, while it could have perhaps afforded to pay more attention to modern feminist concerns with the Bible, does offer valuable treatments of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *The Woman’s Bible* (ch. 21) and Harriet Powers’s biblically-inspired patchwork quilts (ch. 23). As there is no form of literature, art, or music that has not served as a medium of biblical reception, the spectrum of such media examined in the course of *The Oxford Handbook’s* second part is impressive, ranging from the most classic examples of such reception in Western poetry (ch. 19 on Dante), music (ch. 20 on Handel’s *Messiah*), and visual art, specifically engraving (ch. 31 on Blake’s *Illustrations of the Book of Job*), to examples in the modern detective-mystery novel (ch. 25’s treatment of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*), popular folk music (ch. 24 on Bob Dylan), and folk art of the American South (ch. 23 on not only Powers’s quilts but also on Howard Finster’s revelatory paintings and other biblically-inspired visual-art “creations,” such as his “outdoor garden/Bible park ‘Bible Gardens’” [347]). However, with the History Channel’s new ten-hour, five-part TV mini-series *The Bible* (2013) playing as I write, *The Oxford Handbook’s* lack of discussion of film as arguably—outside of synagogues and churches—the most widely popular and influential current media of biblical reception seems a major, inexplicable lacuna.

The selection of topics in Part 2 can give an impression of miscellaneousness and, hence, of a lack of system. The giving of such an impression, while not necessarily constituting a flaw, threatens to obscure the interesting connections that exist between some of these chapters on biblical reception and some of the exegetical chapters in Part 1—as schematized in Figure 1. As this schema shows, but as readers of *The Oxford Handbook* could easily overlook, eight of the twelve scripture-focused chapters of Part 1 are paired with at least one reception-focused chapter of Part 2—i.e., a chapter devoted to some specific aspect of the reception history of the particular biblical book upon which the corresponding chapter in Part 1 is devoted. However, four chapters in Part 1, those on Psalms, Isaiah, Judges, and 1 Corinthians, find no such counterpart chapter in Part 2.

At the present time, with the increased academic, journalistic, and popular awareness of the worldwide southward shift of Christianity, as punctuated by the recent election of the first Roman Catholic pope from the so-called Global South, a critical question in the conceptualizing, organizing, and compiling of any sort of large reference work on biblical reception is how

## Chapters in Part 1

1. Genesis
2. Job
3. Psalms
4. Isaiah
5. Ezekiel
6. Daniel
7. Judges
8. The Gospel of John
9. Romans
10. 1 Corinthians
11. Galatians
12. Revelation

## Corresponding Chapters in Part 2

26. Gnostic Interpretations of Genesis
27. Samuel Wilberforce, Thomas Huxley, and Genesis
28. Sodomy and Gendered Love: Reading Genesis 19 in the Anglican Communion
31. Elihu's Spiritual Sensation: William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job*
33. Post-Holocaust Jewish Interpretations of Job
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
32. Ezekiel 1 and the Nation of Islam
34. Seventh-day Adventists, Daniel, and Revelation
- \_\_\_\_\_
25. From John's Gospel to Dan Brown: The Magdalene Code
40. Karl Barth on Romans
41. Augustine and Pelagius on the Epistle to the Romans
- \_\_\_\_\_
42. Luther on Galatians
34. Seventh-day Adventists, Daniel, and Revelation
43. Joanna Southcott: Enacting the Woman Clothed with the Sun [Rev 21:1]

**FIGURE 1**



the work attends to the fact that its subject is, indeed, now more than ever, a truly global phenomenon. In the early planning phase of *EBR*, I asked the editors working with me in the “reception” domain to assist in drawing up a list of titles for a set of “regional” entries that, together, would ensure the extension of *EBR*’s reception coverage around the entire globe. The categories upon which we decided, with the agreement also of the editors in *EBR*’s other four domains (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, New Testament, Judaism, and Christianity), include: African Diaspora, Asian Diaspora, Asia Minor, East Asia, Europe and Russia, Latin America, Middle Asia (= Central Asia), Native Americans (*sic*), North Africa, North America, Oceania, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa (I. Eastern Africa II. Southern Africa III. Western Africa), and Western Asia (I. Muslim Nations: Arab States, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan; II. Israel [Land and State]). (These entries appear one by one alphabetically, according to the first letters of their titles, as our successive volumes gradually come out in alphabetical order.) As far as *EBR*’s effort to take a genuinely worldwide account of biblical reception, these large entries, each of which surveys the ways the Bible has been received through the Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and, in some cases, other religious traditions in the particular region in question, as well as in the region’s literature, art, music, film, and, in some cases, dance, are complemented throughout the encyclopedia by any number of much shorter, separate articles devoted not only to individual exegetes and theologians, but also to individual writers, poets, artists, composers, film-makers, choreographers, etc. from all those regions.

A single-volume *Handbook* obviously cannot pursue the same strategy as a 30-volume *Encyclopedia* to ensure its readers a perspective on its subject that is not confined within Eurocentric, Western parameters. Yet how does *The Oxford Handbook* deal with the worldwide, geographical diffusion of the Bible and its reception? Collectively the authors represent a fairly broad international spread, judging by the locations of the institutions with which they are affiliated: 25 in Britain; eleven in the United States; and one each in Brazil, Canada, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, and Russia. In contrast to *The Blackwell Companion*, whose seven chapters focusing on non-Occidental continents and regions were mentioned earlier, *The Oxford Handbook* proffers no systematic guided tour of international biblical reception beyond Europe and North America. Instead, several of the *Handbook*’s chapters zero in on very specific aspects of such reception in particular non-Western regions: “[Kanzo] Uchimura and the Bible in Japan”

(ch. 22), “Exodus in Latin America” (ch. 30), and “Gandhi’s Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount” (ch. 37). Surprisingly, especially for a volume that appears more than ten years after 9/11, only one chapter is devoted to Islam—in this case, a branch of Islam far from the Sunni, Shi’ite, or even Sufi “mainstreams”: “Ezekiel 1 and the Nation of Islam” (ch. 32). There is nothing wrong with this chapter’s subject; on the contrary, it is fascinating and certainly worthy of study. But it is unfortunate that, throughout the entire *Handbook*, whereas Elijah Muhammad and his teachings garner the better part of eight pages of scrutiny (478–85), the prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an themselves are mentioned, respectively, only once (248) and four times (477, 482, 485, 546)—each time only in passing, and not once in their capacity as the most seminal vehicles of indirect reception, adaptation, and transmission of the Bible in Islam. The volume’s only other substantial, albeit brief, discussion of another branch of Islam is found in chapter 16, “The Origins, Scope, and Spread of the Millenarian Idea,” which considers Mahdism (247–48) amid a host of other non-Western religious movements involving millenarian views: Tonghak/Ch’ondogyo (241–42), Won Buddhism (242–43), T’ongil-Gyo or Unification Church (244), Rasta or the Rastafari movement (244–47; inappropriately referred to here as “Rastafarianism,” a term many Rastas deem insulting), and Marxism (248–49).

Aside from the front of the volume’s glossy dust jacket, which sports U.S. photographer Sam Fentress’s marvelous color photograph of a sign in Lampe, Missouri announcing in brightly lit neon letters, “JESUS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD,” *The Oxford Handbook* contains seventeen black-and-white reproductions of biblically related images. These are a nice asset, though the selection seems imbalanced, with only one image by a non-Christian artist (Nathan Rapaport’s *Job* statue at Yad Vashem [499]), and only one of non-European provenance (Cândido Portinari’s painting *Os Retirantes* [458]).

In sum, *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* makes an important, valuable contribution to its subject. Yet, with our changing times, one senses that its next edition, or perhaps some sequel, a decade or two from now, will almost be almost inevitably compelled to cast its net of coverage even more widely among “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3) and “all nations” (Matt 28:19).