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On Reception History, Audiences, and Disciplinary Assumptions

A Response to Ibrahim Abraham

In an essay in a new book on approaches to the reception history of the Bible, Ibrahim Abraham interacted with recent work by biblical scholars on the Bible and popular music.[1] Along with Roland Boer and Deane Galbraith, this included my work on the Bible in Manchester music between the 1970s and 1990s and its entanglements with the development of Thatcherism.[2] Abraham's basic point is that we should be moving away from

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[1] Ibrahim Abraham, "High, Low and In-between: Reception History and the Sociology of Religion and Popular Music," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. William John Lyons and Emma England, Scriptural Traces 6 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 241–53. Page numbers from Abraham's article will henceforth be provided in the main body of the text.

[2] James G. Crossley, "For EveryManc a Religion: Uses of Biblical and Religious Language in the Manchester Music Scene, 1976–1994," *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011): 151–80; Deane Galbraith, "Drawing Our Fish in the Sand: Secret Biblical Allusions in the Music of U2," *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011): 181–222; Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

close "readings" of pop music, hunting out the biblical allusions, and old politicized theories and towards a sociology of consumers who, he claims, are less likely to be aware of such allusions. Naturally, I want to carry out the inevitable task of a response: to clarify certain points. First, I want to challenge two parts of Abraham's engagement in particular: his misrepresentation of my ideological underpinnings by wrongly conflating my assumptions with Boer's (particular brand of) Marxism, and his assessment of my work in terms of his sociological background rather than (say) my own favoured background in history and historical criticism. But I hope this response will move beyond the typology of the poor, misunderstood academic to raise wider questions for reception history, particularly where it concerns the nature of audiences and disciplinary assumptions, and how these assumptions have an impact on how we understand the reception of biblical texts and the construction of the Bible. This will include a response to Abraham's claim that the core of reception history (at least the reception of popular music) should be on consumers. While discussion of consumers can indeed be part of reception history, this does not mean that such an emphasis should have an inherent priority over songwriters or texts. It may, in fact, be the case that Abraham and conventional biblical scholars have more things in common than he suggests, especially in the sense that imagining plausible audience receptions is integral to historical reconstructions. Some consideration will also be given to the transmission of biblical allusions in texts and the cultural survival of the Bible, whether consumers notice an allusion or not.

Who has the Best Disciplinary Assumptions?

Abraham criticises me (and Boer) for "trying to toe a certain political line," adding that he can "only imagine" that "this is why Crossley invokes the Marxist subcultural studies of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies." Abraham then explains that "two paradigms emerged in repudiation of the Birmingham School's class-focussed structuralism to study the very genres of popular music and culture Crossley is concerned with, club-culture theory and neo-tribal theory, both committed to the belief that the consumers of popular music are better able to understand and narrate the meanings of their own haircuts and bathroom stall encounters than Antonio Gramsci or Louis Althusser" (253). Key words here include "invoke' and "imagine." My invocation was indeed an allusion to "Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies" (never once named in my article, nor,

crucially, was the more "structuralist" Althusser for that matter), and, in the article's conclusion, I noted the similarities between my results and some of the general results of the work of Dick Hebdige on subcultures. But while Abraham may have a point in his assessment of Boer's overt political line, *my own invocation* of a Marxist tradition was a statement about how the conclusions to which I came complemented a different perspective, one which is not identical to Abraham's sociological preferences, but which should be given as much overarching methodological weight as a complementary reference to, say, Plato, Jesus, Boer, or Bultmann in the sub-genre of the conclusion. It is especially important to note that I do not actually disagree entirely with Abraham's counterargument that "consumers of popular music are better able to understand and narrate the meanings of their own haircuts and bathroom stall encounters." In fact, I was explicit on the role of agency in the very paragraph Abraham cited:

> This analysis of the Manchester music scene further confirms influential Gramscian work on subculture by, among others, Dick Hebdige. Subcultures modify, develop, and absorb images of the surrounding culture in order to construct identities and relative autonomy in the face of the fragmentation of capitalist culture. Subculture can function as both resistance to and interaction with market forces from above.[3]

Nothing discussed by Abraham makes me think that this fairly common sense approach is incorrect. And while he makes clear the tensions between structure and agency in different contexts, here Abraham has a clear emphasis on consumers which is reminiscent of a conservative move in traditional historical-critical approaches to biblical texts. By this I mean that Abraham implicitly follows the ideological position put forward by the object of analysis.[4] One approach associated with Marxism (though not inherently "Marxist") that I would retain is the idea that we all (including consumers of popular music) unconsciously transmit ideas, some of which we may later find we

[3] Crossley, "For EveryManc a Religion," 180.

[4] According to Abraham, "the same desired outcome of peer-reviewed publication, is likely to produce an interpretation of songs thoroughly alien to the processes of interpretation engaged in by most other consumers in most other contexts" (250). If we assume for the moment that this is true (we would need far more data to show this), we might answer,"So what?" Towards the end of this article, we might answer with more nuance but nevertheless state what should be the obvious: "yes, but these reflect at least two different receptions, as might be expected."

disagree with profoundly. This is also echoing the standard tension of structure and agency which crosses disciplinary boundaries like perhaps no other subject. In this respect it is striking that Abraham focused on the "structuralism" of the Birmingham School alone. I clearly did not.

Yet, at the same time, I think the problem here is one of disciplinary background. Abraham shows his credentials as a sociologist alongside his knowledge of critiques of critical theory and Marxism. He indeed gives reference to some helpful literature and, to repeat the old cliché, it is surely to our advantage that more interdisciplinary conversations take place. However, his background is not my background and I make no pretence to be a sociologist, or indeed a Marxist. I have long identified my work in the tradition of historiography and social or ideological history (including "history from below") and historical-critical approaches in biblical studies. I have worked with literature in these traditions for as long as I have been active in the academic world. My work on Manchester music comes from this sort of historical background and the article itself is explicitly a chronological history of ideas in their historical and ideological contexts, as Abraham is aware. Note the following language I used which immediately followed the reference to Hebdige. It includes an implied critique which Abraham did not foreground in his attempted location of my methodological presuppositions:

> However, there is a tendency in certain areas of cultural studies to avoid the cultural specificities of historical change. In many ways this is a problem with reception historical approaches to biblical texts: too often we merely deal with listings or comparisons. The cliché that reception historians do not do historical criticism (and vice versa) has to be resisted. Everything is, obviously, historically situated, whether it is the social location of the gospels, or a pop song from the late twentieth century, and there does not have to be any significant methodological difference between reception history and historical criticism. Most obviously, the reception of a biblical text in the Dead Sea Scrolls or the New Testament is as historically and culturally conditioned as the reception of a biblical text in a song by Joy Division or Happy Mondays. The sooner both historical critics and reception historians realise that they can be working together the better.[5]

[5] Crossley, "For EveryManc a Religion," 179–80.

With this context in mind, would Abraham really disagree with this basic tension or negotiation between structure and agency, as well as the range of culturally specific influences, irrespective of whether we allude to Gramsci and Hebdige or Niall Ferguson and Andrew Roberts? As the rest of his article makes clear, Abraham too works with this standard way of thinking about history and society.

Part of the problem was Abraham locating and assessing my ideological and disciplinary assumptions on the basis of a single article where the methodological background was not spelled out and where Abraham's imagination did not yield the most accurate results. Indeed, my article was the preparatory work for the updated version which is now in a book (probably unavailable to Abraham at the time of his writing) on a history of the construction of the Bible in English political discourse in relation to how Thatcherism (broadly understood) became a dominant discourse, with which even opponents of Thatcher and Thatcherism played their part in constructing.[6] In this book, the emphasis is strongly (and unsurprisingly) historical, locating itself in the context of narrative histories, and typically engages with more historically inclined work, such as, histories of Thatcherism and the Church of England, histories of specifically British forms of neoliberalism and the post-war shift from Keynesianism, various biographies of politicians and historians, and a range of historically inclined political biographies. At the fore in my contextualisation were historical reconstructions of the reception of the Bible in political discourse and English parliamentary politics and the construction of the Bible as an English cultural artefact much like Shakespeare, Judi Dench, George Orwell, Jane Austin, the monarchy, Stephen Fry or a medieval castle.[7] The Bible in the context of Manchester musicians was seen as an influence alongside Penguin Modern Classics, which likewise may not have been noted by any number of consumers but which nevertheless remain an influence on the music produced by the bands. For good or ill and no doubt in part for my own parochial reasons, this book contained

[6] James G. Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos: The Bible in English Political Discourse since 1968* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

[7] A selection includes e.g. Yvonne Sherwood, "Bush's Bible as a Liberal Bible (Strange though that Might Seem)," *Postscripts* 2 (2006): 47–58; idem, "On The Genesis of The Alliance Between The Bible and Rights," in *Bible and Justice: Ancient Texts, Modern Challenges*, ed. Matthew J. M. Coomber (London: Equinox, 2011), 13–42; Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Nick Spencer, *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011).

comparatively little engagement with what might conventionally be labelled "sociology" or "social sciences," though presumably such influences will have indirectly come through the work of others.

Of course, the distinction between such disciplines can be forced. One instance of overlap might be when Abraham directs us to the well-known work on secularization and points to the way the concept can be used in sociology, that is, "an emergent process through which religion loses its social force and becomes one more differentiated social sphere, in the process losing the ability to regulate other differentiated social spheres like popular music" (242). Yet there is no inherent reason why we should focus on religious affiliation in relation to the reception of biblical texts rather than (say) politicized readings. Even so, my own view is to be sceptical about Abraham's definition in the light of the work by (among others) Russell McCutcheon, William Arnal, and Craig Martin (none of whom are mentioned by Abraham), all of whom have pointed out how problematic are essentializing notions of "individualism," "religion," and thus "secular."[8] I am not convinced that more specifically English discourses about "religion" lack social or political authority and, for what it might be worth, it is clear enough that mainstream English political leaders continue to invoke the Bible as an authoritative basis for flagship policy decisions, irrespective of whether voters or the press notice.[9] Furthermore, against Abraham's problematic generalisation of the dominance of "secular" Britain or England, we might think more about how religious identification is changing, rather than disappearing,[10] something along the lines of Grace Davie's famous summary of "belief without belonging."[11] Indeed, Galbraith has pointed out something similar in an article on the religious affiliations of audiences and allusions in U2 which he extends to include those identifying as "spiritual but not religious."[12]

[8] E.g., Russell T. McCutcheon, *Religion and The Domestication of Dissent: or, How To Live in A Less Than Perfect Nation* (London: Equinox, 2005); William Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Craig Martin, *Masking Hegemony: A Genealogy of Liberalism, Religion and the Private Sphere* (London: Equinox, 2010); idem, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[9] Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos.*

[10] Cf. Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto, ed., *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[11] *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[12] Deane Galbraith, "Meeting God in the Sound: The Seductive Dimension of U2's Future Hymns," in *The Counter-Narratives of Radical Theology and Rock 'n' Roll: Songs of Fear and Trembling*, ed. Mike Grimshaw (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 119–35.

Similarly, my subsequent use of Manchester music (among other cultural and political figures over the past 40 years) was to locate it in a context similar to that mentioned by Abraham: histories of twentieth-century Christianity and the significant impact of the 1960s on changes in church authority and affiliations in relation to new ways of spending Sundays and different ways of constructing religious identifications.[13] These historically inclined works, most of which were available to Abraham, and which explain my assumption and presuppositions far better, were not mentioned by Abraham in his article. Should we castigate him for this lack of awareness and assert how terribly well read we are by contrast? I think and hope not, particularly given that each discipline has its own extensive literature which is difficult enough for the insider to master. But what we can say is that Abraham's criticism cuts both ways and there is no inherent reason why sociological literature is *the* cutting edge and should take priority over unmentioned historical literature. In fact, they are often saying similar things from different (but overlapping) perspectives.

While my interests and heart are unashamedly historical, the updated version of my article again makes passing reference to Hebdige, noting his place in the history of scholarship ("now classic") and picking up on one of his results which complements Abraham's use of more recent scholarship, namely that Hebdige's work likewise invokes the tensions between agency and structure at play in subcultures.[14] But that complementary reference is as far as Hebdige goes for my book too and, against Abraham's imagined idea about my motivations, neither Hebdige nor the Birmingham Centre plays any overt or significant part in its analytical foundations. Indeed, immediately following the sentence acknowledging this one relevant part of

[13] E.g., Callum G. Brown, "The Secularisation Decade: What the 1960s have done to the Study of Religious History," in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29–46; idem, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), 224–77; idem, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation* (2nd ed.; Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 175–233; Gerald Parsons, "How The Times They Were a-Changing: Exploring the Context of Religious Transformation in Britain in the 1960s" in *Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence*, ed. John Wolffe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 161–89; Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 985–89. See also Galbraith, "Drawing Our Fish," 189–90.

[14] Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 153–4, 174. But compare also the discussion in Martin H. M. Steven, *Christianity and Party Politics: Keeping the Faith* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), 21–44, 139–50, where there might be more religious self-identification by voters than some assume.

Hebdige's analysis, and throughout the chapter (and book) more generally, the emphasis is on how identities could be (conscious or unconscious) reactions to and engagements with cultural contexts and shifts in presentations of capitalism since 1968, emphasising both agency and structure and how music of this period tells us something about the history of cultural change in this period. As I argued:

> The "secularisation thesis" may be controversial but we can at least follow the detailed work of those who argue that the social upheavals of the 1960s brought about significant changes in perceptions and understandings of Christianity, religion, and the Church and the decline of the social and political significance of religious institutions. While such debates often look at broader post-Enlightenment trends, the intensified ideas of individualism and consumerism emerging from the chaos of the 1960s have been seen to be pivotal in drops in church attendance (with plenty more choices for Sundays) and the declining lack of influence of the Church of England. This has not necessarily led to widespread atheism, of course, or even the end of denominational and Christian voting. Moreover, ongoing Christian or "religious" beliefs have been seen to permeate contemporary culture implicitly and result in a more privatised understanding of religion.[15]

Using conventional terminology, this is very much what might be classified as a historical explanation and not necessarily a typical sociological one, as far as such strict boundaries are meaningful. Indeed, it also has significant overlaps with some of Abraham's suggestions.

I make this point to help place my work in its more appropriate methodological context, not least because my article lacks the advantage (for the purposes of contextualisation) of being as forthright and blunt as Boer's ever-present Marxism. Such highlighting of assumptions would show the significant differences between my approach and Boer's and the problems with the statement that "with Boer and Crossley it appears to be a search for theories that are politically agreeable rather than methodologically current or appropriate" (252). Leaving Boer to one side, we have now seen that this statement is unwarranted and it is the case that it probably should not have been made

[15] Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 5–6.

on the basis of one article, which was subsequently applied with reference to historical methodologies that contradict Abraham's representations of certain biblical scholars. But highlighting such assumptions more broadly is also important for understanding how reception history of the Bible can be understood. Abraham suggests that "to conceive of popular music primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of literary content is even more problematic than to do so with scripture" and that even certain theologians have the edge over biblical scholars, being far more concerned with how popular music works in "the everyday lives of laity" (248). Abraham sees this emphasis on *consumers* as providing "some measure of empirically verifiable data" (251). Here there are echoes of the faded optimism in the old promise that the number-crunching social sciences might curb the apparent subjectivities of the historian.[16]

Yet there is no inherent reason why "literary" context should be at an advantage or disadvantage compared with popular music in the "everyday lives of laity" (as Abraham comes close to admitting): both are as much a part of their cultural context as each other. Obviously, escape from subjectivity will always be problematic but this is where historical constraints and hindsight are important and make my methodological presuppositions different from those of Boer and arguably similar to Abraham, even if we come at the issues from different perspectives. My constraints are historical and involve a narrative of how we got where we are today. What we do know with hindsight is that Thatcher and Thatcherism became a (but not the only) dominant ideological position, as the British Social Attitudes reports appear to bear out, particularly in terms of economic liberalism and attitudes to welfare.[17] None of this was inevitable and all sorts of complex factors gave rise to such a dominant cultural and political tendency. But the wonders of hindsight mean that we can now unravel the past and tell some of the story of how we got where we are today. So, we might ask, how do receptions and constructions of the Bible fit into what we now know of the past? Is it really much of a surprise that we find understandings of the Bible that fit into what we can now see as one dominant ideological pattern? No. And texts, authors, singers, and speakers, and the influences on them, are as much an inherently important or unimportant witness to historical changes as consumers of texts. Indeed, by

[16] For a summary see, e.g., Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (2nd ed.; London: Granta, 2000), 37–44.

[17] See, e.g., Alison Park et al., eds., *British Social Attitudes: The 29th Report*. London: NatCen Social Research, 2012. www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk.

citing the British Social Attitudes survey, are we not rightly problematizing the very consumer-text binary in terms of social changes?

Against Abraham, I would once again contrast my approach with the approach of Boer which is more interested in a fairly doctrinaire application of Marxist theory to understand (among many other things) Nick Cave. Whatever the rights or wrongs of Boer's approach, it is more in line with Abraham's *presentation* of both myself and Boer as, "a search for theories that are politically agreeable," than it is with my presentation of my own work. Abraham is no doubt right to imply that my approach is compatible with certain Marxist approaches but mine is hardly an exclusively Marxist approach and it is hardly compatible with Marxist approaches alone. Abraham additionally claims that "such work requires the reflexivity to acknowledge awareness of later liberal degradations of a discipline, even if they are being consciously avoided, much as one would expect a media studies scholar working on the Bible and citing no one after Bultmann to explain themselves" (252). This gets to the heart of Abraham's misunderstanding and does not work as an analysis of my work. I have no desire to have my ideas to be found in firm political agreement with the Western (or indeed any other) Marxist tradition. Boer might, but as we have just seen, my guiding narrative is different and I have no particular problem with "liberal degradations" in the same way Boer does. In some contexts I might likewise find some Marxist scholarship useful (particularly but hardly exclusively those relating to the emergence of postmodernity and neoliberalism) but I did not search for a politically agreeable "theory" (certainly not in the article on Manchester music). Instead, I tried to explain some of the ways in which Thatcherism became dominant since the social changes of the 1960s. The development of a dominant popular and party political Thatcherism is agreed across the political spectrum from Right to Left and is now an obvious point.

To take an extreme example in order to highlight the point: my approach is compatible with (and uses) the approach of the popular historian and soft, liberal Thatcherite, Dominic Sandbrook.[18] Sandbrook's narrative of post-War (especially post-1960s) history is one of a kind of Thatcherism from below whereby popular agencies played their role in the development of Thatcherism, a point which I agree carries some weight, even if Sandbrook

[18] E.g., Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Abacus, 2006); *State of Emergency: The Way We Were, Britain 1970–1974* (London: Penguin, 2011); *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974–1979* (London: Penguin, 2013).

overstates his case. What I try to do with ideas such as this (with the benefit of hindsight) is to show how Manchester musicians were part of this trend and the interaction between well-known political views of UK indie music and musicians. What is also significant is that Abraham's work does not guard against subjective readings any more than mine. Taken by itself, does not his alternative suggestion that "consumers of popular music are better able to understand and narrate the meanings of their own haircuts and bathroom stall encounters," placed as it is in contrast with my alleged Marxist approach, look like a familiar ideological position? We might only half-jokingly ask: is this not Thatcherism at its purest? Taken by itself, Abraham's rhetoric would imply almost free-floating individuals in complete control of their lives and haircuts apparently without any structural restraints or unconscious influences. I would be surprised if Abraham would actually downplay structure and influence in such a manner but the rhetoric of his argument in contrast to how he constructs mine comes close. After all, why did the floppy haircuts look so similar? Where did the clothes come from? Did such consumers have extensive knowledge of the economic circumstances that helped make possible the building and maintenance of toilets in which to meet? Were these consumers demystifying the production of ecstasy and cocaine which made toilet encounters less awkward? My guess is that Abraham probably thinks as I do, and as plenty of others do, namely that there is a complex interplay between unconscious influence, structure, and agency. But in this small instance has he really avoided the subjectivity any more than the charge levelled at those who focus on "readings" of lyrics?

Who has the Best Audience? Or, Does an Allusion Make a Sound If Nobody Hears It?

As someone who more comfortably identifies as a historian, I am interested in tracing ideological histories, in this instance through songs and songwriters. However, Abraham also suggests that the stress that people like me, Boer, and Galbraith put on the songs and songwriters is also susceptible to the dangers of subjectivity. Instead he suggests that we shift the focus to audiences and consumers of popular music, though we have just seen how this is no better guard against subjectivity. Abraham notes that my article and Galbraith's article do point to possibilities in the direction of a consumer-centred approach, even if we do not venture too far (242, 253). Predictably, I would again agree with Abraham, at least in the sense that audience recep-

tions are as significant as any other in reception history or humanistic study, though he effectively judges me, Galbraith, and Boer for not looking at the reception that most suits his preferred tastes as a sociologist. Even so, in the case of Manchester music, it would not be an easy task to assess consumption and a range of audience receptions between the 1970s and the 1990s due to (as far as I am aware) a lack of available evidence. We could, of course, make a number of educated guesses based on things like religious affiliations and education but, it seems to me, on the basis of the evidence we have, we are unlikely to move beyond educated guesswork. We will return to this point.

But where I would disagree with Abraham is on the use (or otherwise) of songs and songwriters. These too are receptions and consumptions of biblical texts and contain constructions of the Bible. We can thus read these as evidence of reception and consumptions of the Bible as carefully as we would audience reactions to the songs. While acknowledging the complexities of authorial intention, we can make certain connections between song and songwriter, even if songs will inevitably be put to the mercy of listener, reader, and the unconscious influence of cultural contexts. We can work with some fairly obvious textual clues as evidence of reception of biblical texts. When Ian Brown sang "I am the resurrection and I am the life," do we not take it seriously as evidence of biblical reception even if we cannot find audience interpretation of this as a reception of a biblical text? For all his dislike of such approaches, Abraham tries to pull back from the suggestion that we should not. But we might go further and say that it gives us some insight into Ian Brown's reception of a biblical text, not least on the grounds that he did indeed see it as something like a biblical allusion: does not an allusion register to the producer of the allusion and the intended audience, irrespective of its subsequent consumption? But is there a degree of subjectivity and guesswork is establishing such allusions? Yes! But is it really to be *necessarily* overlooked as a self-referential allusion to John 11:25 ("I am the resurrection and the life")? Presumably *someone* would have been able to make such a connection, if only Ian Brown or a listener with some knowledge of the Bible. I see no reason why one part of the chain of reception (e.g. audience or lives of listeners) should be necessarily prioritized over another (e.g. the lyrics of a song, the songwriter and their immediate circle) and both song and listener are as much part of their cultural and historical context as each other.[19] But this is precisely where Abraham misses the point: we are working with the

[19] Abraham comes close to this line of thinking but pushes back and implies the superiority of his own particular interest in reception, e.g., "Such methodology or limited ambition is unproblematic, of course, if one is satisfied to restrict the task of reception history to the

same assumptions of reception as consumption. To reconstruct the reading of a songwriter or possible hearers is not pure subjectivity on behalf of the analyst. It is the much vaunted imagination of the historian at work. If I interpret Mark's Gospel in the first century or the Happy Mondays in the twentieth, I work with the same assumption, i.e., a plausible way in which the text could have been understood and perceived, if only by some readers. This would, in principle, be no different to trying to reconstruct the different ways in which a range of listeners might have understood Joy Division in the 1970s or Stone Roses in the 1980s—or indeed the twenty-first century.

Abraham claims the audience and consumer emphasis is going to be significant for the reception history of popular music "if it wants to move beyond its current foci, since such a question goes to the core of understanding how popular music functions, and how scripture functions in secular societies like contemporary Britain" (247). While I have no reason to dispute the approach, and leaving aside the problematic "secular societies," this claim is too big and only works if we agree with the assumption that one aspect of sociology should dominate. Instead, what Abraham's sociology is really offering is another angle on the function of popular music and how scripture functions in Britain. His approach is no more "the core" than my approach or Galbraith's approach. That all these approaches are effectively reconstructing the different perceptions and interpretations might now be seen if we return to our hypothetical consumers of Manchester music between the 1970s and 1990s and in relation to biblical allusions: we would probably have to do a lot of guesswork and historical reconstruction to establish what these interpretations might plausibly have looked like. In other words, this is precisely the general principle behind my work, and I suspect Galbraith's too.

Despite lacking extended empirical data, Abraham takes aim at an old target: the archetypal biblical scholar who is seemingly not as enlightened or as well read as the sociologist (252). And even the more aware reception historian is beset with difficulty. Abraham claims almost diplomatically that "at

question of how professional biblical scholars and clerics, a 'homogeneous group of codal experts, all of whom are giving the music their full, undivided attention,' encounter the biblical text used by a songwriter within and alongside non-biblical media. If, however, one believes that reception history should move beyond these contexts, then at the very least a high degree of methodological reflexivity is required of those producing the hitherto normative analysis of popular music within reception history. As it stands, current practice seems to mirror the probably apocryphal story of Theodor Adorno—the 'pessimist aristocrat' whose influence over the study of popular music has thankfully long subsided—whose preferred method of consuming music was alleged to have been sitting alone in his office and reading the sheet music" (250–1).

its current early stage of development the reception history of popular music is a collection of studies by biblical scholars using the theories and methodologies designed for or applied to the analysis of sacred literature, seeking to understand and analyse cultural products and processes that are neither sacred nor literary" (252). Indeed this could be the case for some but it does not have to be the case for all. Leaving aside the problematic notion of "literary," texts (and methods) are only "sacred" if we think they are and I have already shown that Abraham has misunderstood historical approaches to reception history. But I would go one step further: while there are no doubt biblical scholars who have a basic view of authorial (and textual) intention, I do not think Abraham is being entirely fair to some of the more traditional work of historical criticism in biblical studies, which complements the role of the historical imagination I outlined above and is increasingly influenced by a range of historiographical, philosophical and literary-critical work. Indeed, the implicit study of the audience and ever-present reception is a major point made clearly by reception historians.[20] To take one example: a number of recent works in historical Jesus studies (and beyond) have stressed the importance of memory and perception.[21] Rather than drilling down to the

[20] E.g., William John Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2010): 207–20; idem, "Some Thoughts on Defining Reception History and the Future of Biblical Studies," *Bible and Interpretation* (forthcoming, 2015); Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

[21] For a selection see e.g. Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (London: SPCK, 2010), 1–30; Rafael Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (London: T&T Clark, 2010); Anthony Le Donne, "Theological Memory Distortion in the Jesus Tradition," in *Memory and Remembrance in the Bible and Antiquity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, Loren T. Stuckenbruck, and Benjamin G. Wold (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 163–78; idem, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology and the Son of David* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009); idem, *Historical Jesus: What Can We Know and How Can We Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Jens Schröter, "Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus und der Charakter historischer Erkenntnis," in *The Sayings Source Q and the Historical Jesus*, ed. Andreas Lindemann (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 228–33; idem, "Von der Historizität der Evangelien: Ein Beitrag zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion um den historischen Jesus," in *Der historische Jesus: Tendenzen und Perspektiven der gegenwärtigen Forschung*, ed. Jens Schröter and Ralph Brucker (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 163–212; idem, *Jesus von Nazaret: Jude aus Galiläa-Retter der Welt* (2nd ed.; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009); Alan Kirk, "Memory Theory and Jesus Research," in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus: Volume 1*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 809–42; Chris Keith, "Memory and Authenticity: Jesus Tradition and What Really Happened," *ZNW* 102 (2011): 155–77.

pure historical Jesus and pure fact, these works stress that we are relentlessly dealing with perceptions and receptions, and claim that the task of the historian is to see what sorts of perceptions and receptions might reasonably be reconstructed. Or again, we might think more precisely about Peter Oakes's creative reconstruction of how Romans might have been read in a specific context in Pompeii.[22] Or, once more, we might think of the prominent work on Paul's scriptural allusions and how there might have been a range of readers with a wide variety of understandings of allusions, not to mention what we might do with the masses of allusions to texts ("sacred" or otherwise) in Paul's letters, irrespective of whether people recognised them or not.[23] No doubt Abraham's sociological approaches about various consumers have the potential to tell us much. But historical approaches relating to different audiences and different receptions should not be ignored or overlooked, and neither types of approaches have an inherently superior place at the table. Indeed, reading Abraham's summary of the consumption of Springsteen's songs (251–2), I am not convinced that there is much difference in the abstract from a traditional biblical scholar who is, for example, trying to work out how the story of the death of John the Baptist might be understood differently among those familiar with stories about Esther, those more familiar with Hellenistic court tales and/or those interested in allegory.

But I would go further still. For the sake of argument, let us bracket out the singer/songwriter and their circle and make the (not necessarily accurate) assumption that a wide range of consumers of Manchester music (or U2 for that matter) were not likely to pick up on biblical allusions. Put another way, all we have are references to "I am the resurrection" with no-one but the later critic noticing them. Even for Abraham's argument, he needs to recognise that there is a biblical allusion in order to contrast with a hypothetical "secular"audience who do not notice it. But it remains an allusion to the Bible and it is transmitted in a text. This too should not be regarded as a devastating put down for the reception historian focused on the text. Instead, we might

[22] Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009). See comments in Lyons, "Some Thoughts," on viewing Oakes's work as reception history.

[23] For a brief selection, see e.g. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Christopher D. Stanley, *Arguing with Scripture: The Rhetoric of Quotations in the Letters of Paul* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Brian J. Abasciano, "Diamonds in the Rough: A Reply to Christopher Stanley concerning the Reader Competency of Paul's Original Audiences," *Novum Testamentum* 49 (2007): 153–83.

try to account for how biblical texts survive. Among other reasons, uses (often comical or ironic) of the language of the King James Bible have helped it survive in postmodernity, particularly by removing or downplaying anything perceived to be too "religious."[24] As David Crystal put it, KJV idioms have "permeated genres of modern spoken or written English," such as, for instance, marketing, journalism, sport, theatre, punk music, computing, and so on. For him, KJV idioms are not to be categorised as direct quotations but rather "everyday expressions used by speakers and writers of modern English, most of whom will have no religious motivation for their use."[25]

Similarly, another example of the survival of a biblical allusion in one song to be taken or transformed by a new consumer was discussed in the same volume as Abraham's essay. One way to explain this sort of approach is to point to Tarantino's draining of the radical politics from Italian Westerns in his relentless allusions in the context of postmodern cinematic cool. Likewise, World Wrestling Entertainment drained the evangelical theology from Johnny Cash's song "Ain't No Grave" in its presentation of one of its most popular and darker wrestlers (The Undertaker) and gave it a certain subcultural capital. This reapplication might be explained in light of WWE's perceived target audience, as the WWE are not necessarily going to be deemed the coolest if they foreground ideas about The Rapture.[26] The idea that the Bible is transmitted (sometimes unconsciously or unobserved) in a wide range of cultural contexts almost demands an explanation for how the Bible continues to survive in cultural contexts and comes to terms with discourses relating to secularism, nationalism, and global capitalism—whether we use extended interviews or provide economic explanations for survival of texts. There may be no awareness on the part of consumers that a quotation is from the Bible but it somehow survives in spite of this. Asking why this Bible survives in "texts," perhaps even unobserved, is just as legitimate a question as asking how such quotations are consumed, even if such a binary is not easy to sustain. Presumably this sort of "readings" approach should not be abandoned because some sociologists have a penchant for a certain kind of consumer.

[24] David Crystal, *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[25] Ibid., 257.

[26] James G. Crossley, "The End of Reception History, A Grand Narrative for Biblical Studies and The Neoliberal Bible," in Lyons and England, *Reception History and Biblical Studies*, 45–59.

Concluding Remarks

Much of this misunderstanding was due to Abraham placing far too much weight on the use of a complementary reference to Hebdige in a conclusion in one article; this was a misleading way to locate my ideological assumptions. This is, of course, not to deny my work as having assumptions of its own. Rudolf Bultmann's now classic work was no doubt right in pointing out that we all have presuppositions and in this case it is a question of locating what those presuppositions may be.[27] And yet mentioning Bultmann in a complementary way in a conclusion would not be much of a guide to locating my exegetical and ideological influences in terms of the Marburg school (on the contrary), or indeed all that has happened in biblical studies since Bultmann. But mentioning Bultmann shows how ideological weight should not be placed on my complementary reference to Hebdige in another conclusion to a different article. If Abraham were to meet me in the toilets of the hypothetical club, or indeed anywhere else, I suspect we would find that, one or two issues aside, there might not too much difference between us. I think the misunderstanding and problematic classification owes much to different disciplinary backgrounds, personal tastes, and the (sometimes) unwritten assumptions that are at play. Abraham, no doubt rightly, bemoans the lack of the latest sociological literature that might be expected from a trained sociologist and we would no doubt learn much at his feet. But Abraham could also take turn to sit and listen to those historians and (and as much as he might hate it) those biblical scholars he did not mention in his essay.[28] This does not mean that related assumptions are necessarily lacking in seemingly different fields, and this does not mean that seemingly different fields will inevitably study the reception of the Bible in mutually exclusive ways. In my case, I come with the assumptions of (something like) a social or ideological historian who, in the abstract at least, says similar things to some of the sociologists Abraham mentions. Some of the misunderstanding may reflect the ongoing power of the old and hardly accurate cliché that sociology is about the unchanging, the typical, and groups whereas history is about change, the untypical, and individuals. Additionally, my historical critical assumptions are not really the same assumptions of Boer and I think the inaccurate ideo-

[27] Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Living Age Books, 1960), 289–96.

[28] At this point we might note that my position seems somewhat "liberal" rather than "Marxist," at least of the variety of Boer. This, however, is no admission of political affiliation.

logical position attributed to me by Abraham is again due to not recognising the different set of assumptions between me and Boer. I doubt, ultimately, that I differ sharply from Abraham on issues of agency and structure, and perhaps not even on some of the issues surrounding the subjectivity of interpretation (which seems clearer to me when Abraham moves away from discussing me and Galbraith), especially if we uncouple my approach from that of Boer's Marxism and locate disciplinary assumptions and influences accordingly.