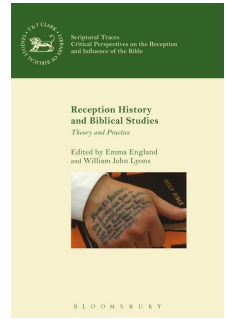
Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice, edited by Emma England and William John Lyons



Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible 6 | Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 615 | London: Bloomsbury, 2015 | x + 280 pages | ISBN: 978-0-567-66008-4 (hardback) £49.00

The scramble for review copies that met the publication of this edited volume is testament to its timely release. It is a necessary and astutely judged volume that addresses comprehensively many of the issues, appraisals, and criticisms that have arisen and been put to this emerging field in biblical studies. The enormous scope of reception history and its many possible trajectories are considered, placing them within their rightful context as invaluable contributions to the discipline as a whole. In this review I will briefly summarise the main argument of the book and describe its parts. I will then offer my own short critique of the book and evaluate it as a biblical reception resource.

Reception history as an emerging field within biblical studies is a "work in progress," the contours and boundaries of which are being sought, explored, traced, tested, and defined as increasing numbers of scholars, young and old, bring new questions and possible methods to the task. In recent times this has occasionally been conflictual—and reception history practitioners have been challenged to give an account of how and why reception history fits into biblical studies, its theoretical underpinning, methodologies, and what it offers the broader discipline. A series of books, journals, and dictionaries have appeared in the last decade and some of those responsible, among them John Sawyer, David Gunn, Christopher Rowland, and Jonathan Roberts are mentioned repeatedly in the present volume. This is the sixth volume in the Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible series. This collection of essays, by respected practitioners in the field, was enthusiastically anticipated as it offers an overview of why they engage in this work, how they approach the research and the value they believe it holds for the future of academic biblical studies. The condescension that has characterised some attitudes within the academy–Susan Gillingham overheard one unnamed scholar describing reception history snidely as "biblical studies on holiday"—requires a riposte from those

committed to scholarship and the future of biblical studies within the secular academy. This volume is that reply.

The editors of this fine volume, Emma England and William John Lyons, have brought together fourteen further scholars to make the case for biblical reception history within the academy. This book originates out of sessions jointly held by the ISBL/EABS "Biblical World and its Reception" research group at the international annual conference that took place in Amsterdam in July 2012. It offers an invitation to those scholars, both converted and curious, to "embrace expansion, diversity and change in the academic study of the Bible."

The book is organised into five parts. Following the Introduction (Part 1), the four remaining sections are as follows: Part 2, "Reception History, Historical Criticism, and Biblical Studies"; Part 3, "Conceptualising Reception History"; Part 4, "Practical Implications, Difficulties and Solutions"; Part 5, "Bible, Reception and Popular Music." The intended audience is primarily those biblical scholars already practising reception history, or those interested in understanding more about the nature of research undertaken by reception-history practitioners. A diversity of approaches and arenas of investigation are covered, meaning there is much here of interest to scholars already engaging certain methodologies and those interested in new scholarly approaches.

There is a clear and useful trajectory that progresses through the book. Part 2 serves to place reception history in context and to make a solid defence for its ongoing presence in biblical studies programmes. Susan Gillingham opens up the dialogue with an overview of the criticisms levelled at reception within the academy, most especially that it lacks "theoretical theological underpinning" (22). She offers a response to those criticisms with recourse to relevant publications. She notes that such is the breadth of material to be covered that subjective choices will need to be made in terms of setting boundaries around a particular study, either in terms of context or period. A comprehensive reception history of any one text demands considerable resources in terms of personnel and time to gather and analyse the material. This also places collaboration at the fore—another difficult yet worthwhile endeavour for those used to working in more individualistic ways.

James E. Harding delves into the tension between confessional and secular approaches in the discipline of biblical studies, making a call for a more balanced and unified approach. As with others, he suggests that an inversion of the concept of reception is necessary and makes a case for considering the

placing of all contemporary biblical scholarship within the remit of reception history because the text (if it is indeed possible to identify the "text") is itself a "reception." In other words those engaged in philological or archaeological work are themselves already, to some extent, engaged in the reception of a reception. Reception history is an aspect of the work of all biblical scholars.

The binary categories of historical criticism and reception history are also resisted by James G. Crossley, who calls for "a more rounded narrative for the field." His is a plea for an enthusiastic expansion of biblical studies, as well as a warm embrace of reception history as a natural development and necessarily constitutive dimension of biblical studies. He writes, "If we want to justify Biblical Studies by the contemporary relevance of the Bible then it might reasonably be expected that we explain *why* it is still relevant in the ways that it is."

Jonathan Morgan attempts, in his contribution, to open up a "dialectical middle" through recourse to William John Lyons's oft-cited "Hope for a Troubled Discipline?" He brings Lyons's thought to bear on a fairly thorough (given the length of the chapter) critical overview of arguments made by George Aichele, Peter Miscall and Richard Walsh, John Van Seters, Larry Hurtado, and Eryl Davies, in the recent past, in different contexts. He opts for a "third way," through a mutual recognition of what both historical critic and postmodern interpreter can bring to an invigorated discipline. These four different chapters make a very valuable and forceful defence for valuing innovation in the field and supporting the new directions being opened up in reception history.

Part 3 delves into conceptualising reception history. Caroline Vander Stichele brings three theorists, Jonathan Culler (intertexuality), Mieke Bal (pre-posterous history), and Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guattari (rhizomorphous systems) into a dialogue of sorts, in her exploration of Giovanni di Paolo's series of paintings on John the Baptist, most specifically *The Beheading of John the Baptist*. Her recognition that the artist's work is informed by more than the biblical text is demonstrated through bringing these different (intertextual, multidirectional, rhizomorphous) approaches to an investigation into the cultural impact of a biblical figure such as John the Baptist. Her wonderfully expansive outlook reveals that the possibilities are excitingly endless and there is much to be learnt and gained.

The influence of Gilles Deleuze continues in the following chapter as he provides the inspiration for Brennan Breed's exploration of ethology, an understanding of animal behaviour, transposed provocatively to the "nomadic

text" that is the Bible. Breed makes a convincing case for the role ethology could play precisely because it shifts the focus away from issues of canonicity and textual history and coherence towards the workings of a particular text in a certain "problematic field" or context. The emphasis in ethology is on what the text *can do*.

With recourse to Jacques Berlinerblau and Timothy Beal, Samuel Tongue considers the prevailing confessional/non-confessional, conservative/radical dualism. The poetic rewriting of Jacob and the Angel by Yehuda Amichai is the locus for his appeal for a broadening of perspectives that allows the diverse voices that have received the text to enter the debate, "risking an aesthetic response that is difficult to define as 'religious' or 'secular,' but is a performance in which we all become players."

The different receptions of the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) in Zimbabwe, is brought to life by Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, as he deftly recounts the oral transmission of the story, from colonial-era missionaries to Christian families, in song format, with a didactic emphasis on the lack of obedience of Lot's wife. Another focus entirely sees its influence extend to the homophobic anti-sodomy laws in the Penal Code, which have been extended and elaborated in even more oppressive ways in recent times.

A variety of different approaches are considered in Part 4, "Practical Implications, Difficulties and Solutions," witnessing to the creativity and ingenuity that characterises reception history and why it holds so much promise for an invigoration of biblical studies in general. Roland Boer brings us on a fascinating and personal journey through his inspirations, his erudition and intellectual affairs with various partners (Lenin, Calvin, and Cave), and the places (metaphorical and real) these wanderings (wonderings) have brought him. One can't help but feel, reading him, that illuminated capitals really should be reinstated: Calvin, with a cat peeping out of a bag, curled in a capital C. This is an invitation to become fellow ramblers—unashamedly succumbing to our passions—and chasing the "allure of other disciplines, approaches and subject matters."

The travel metaphor is picked up by Ian Boxall who transports us to Patmos (Rev 1:9), the geographical and metaphorical island. He brings us humbly through his method for setting out from his own academic comfort zone into a reception of Patmos in biblical history. Much of the charm of this chapter is Boxall's personal style and willingness to expose a certain scholarly vulnerability in venturing along this trial and error "anything goes" approach to his project. This level of intellectual reflexivity is rare but most welcome

and a liberating antidote to dogmatic proclamations about "method" and "meaning."

Emma England has bravely gone wading into the technological minefield of setting up a cross-referencing database of occurrences of a selected text (Noah and the Flood narrative in this instance) in children's Bibles, over a specific time period. She details her process and the hitches and complexities involved in a thoroughly understandable way—even for non-techie readers. This is an aspect of reception history that has received little scholarly attention and yet cries out for greater uptake. England has pried open the lid of this neglected dimension of the digital humanities and successfully demonstrated its vast potential for reception history.

Another Southern African perspective is offered by Gerald O. West in his study of the reception of Jephthah's Daughter (Judg 11) among the AmaNazaretha. Resisting missionary interpretations of the Bible as a whole, Isaiah Shembe, the founder of this community, developed an elaborate appropriation of this text. The etic response of Carole Muller and, in turn, Nkosinathi Sithole's fascinating emic response to Shembe, West and Muller unfolds the complexity of this textual afterlife, most especially in relation to the role of adolescent women, in the early foundation of this nascent faith community and its continued self-understanding.

The final Part brings all the previous theoretical deliberations to a natural culmination as four scholars demonstrate reception in action, as it were, in the particular context of popular music. Helen R. Jacobus opens with a fascinating investigation into Leonard Cohen's song "Who by Fire." She traces the lyrics of Cohen's song back through 1000 years of history to the Cairo Genizah. Along the way she uncovers a "hirtherto untranslated version of *Unetaneh toqef* and a likely connection to astrological texts." Again, collaboration has played a vital role and new avenues of exploration are opened from many new departure points into liturgy and prayer.

Revelation makes another appearance in William John Lyons's study of the Depeche Mode version of "John the Revelator." A thorough consideration of the band members' religious practice as youths, worldviews and relationships, revealed in other musical ventures, biographies and interview transcripts are brought into dialogue with scholarly commentary on Revelation questioning especially John of Patmos's use of Ezekiel. Lyons sets out some possible motivating agendas that may shed light (in the absence of direct commentary) on why songwriter Gore presents John as he does.

In his contribution, Michael J. Gilmour uses Harold Bloom's theory of

an "anxiety of influence" to delve in to the affect of John Lennon on U2's Bono and Larry Norman, a Christian songwriter. Bloom posits an Oedipal relationship at the heart of the musical influence and legacy—that characterises the conflicted respect and desire to acknowledge and emulate the artistic predecessor—among descendant songwriters (poets) all the while seeking their own autonomy and originality. Gilmour traces this development through Lennon's song "God," Bono's nuanced "God Part II" and Larry Norman's openly confessional statement in "God Part III."

Ibrahim Abraham brings this compelling volume to a close with yet another well-presented chapter full of observations and challenges to particular scholars (and at least in one instance this has already been responded to at length) and reception historians, planning these types of studies, in general. He raises three main areas for consideration in the area of popular music: the privileging of production over consumption; the privileging of subjective readings over engagement with real listeners; and a focus on the "text" (lyrics) rather than a thorough engagement with the music that is integral to the song. His critique from the vantage point of another discipline, social science, is well-argued and offers much food for thought.

There is a issue to be addressed by those researching and publishing the reception of biblical texts in artworks of various sorts, be they paintings or poetry, and their reproduction alongside the scholarly text. Sometimes copyright, royalty fees and printers costs make reproduction difficult or prohibitively expensive, but it does create a disconnect and distraction for the reader not to be able to easily see the painting or poem that is the focus of the reception-historical work. It renders the artwork essentially silent and invisible, which seems contradictory and strangely disrespectful, as though it is an aside or an added extra rather than a primary focus. The problem goes beyond the present volume, and probably must be addressed collectively within the academy, so as to achieve better terms for the reproduction of art in academic publications.

England and Lyons are to be commended for drawing together a great spectrum of scholars to advance convincingly the case for biblical reception history in the academy. There is a discernible arc tracing the emergence and development of reception history, critiques and challenges, theoretical and conceptual underpinnings, its role in the secular academy, its relation to other disciplines, explorations "off-grid," and creative impulses, motivated by a genuine desire to understand the role and impact of the Bible in the world. Any part of this book can be read separately, but I suggest it will reward a

sequential reading. This is without doubt a significant work in the field. It may even be perceived as a manifesto of sorts, if you will. It sets out the stall, unashamedly raises the reception history banner and announces "We are here to stay!"

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