

Assignment Title:

**Drawing on secondary scholarship and your own reflections,
please answer the following: What is reception history and does it
have value in Biblical Studies?**

Word Count: 1502

1. Introduction

Gen. 22 depicts a scene in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (22:2).¹ God's earlier promises of descendance seem compromised (Gen. 12, 15, and 17).² Whereas Abraham pleaded emphatically with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-33), here Abraham silently complies and sets off to the place appointed for the sacrifice (v. 3). The pace of the text is such that a chasm seems to exist between verses 2 and 3, which has proven rich pickings for subsequent interpretation. One such example is the film *His Only Son*, which reflects the disgust that contemporary viewers would receive such a command fills the gaps with an exasperated outburst from Abraham: "Oh Lord, no, no!".³ A historical critical approach to the text would reject this interjection as an invention because it finds no basis in the text. Reception history, however, provides a methodology that accounts for how a text has been received, read, and reinterpreted through history, which may validate interpretations that, at first sight, may seem to deviate from the scope of the original.

2. What is reception history?

Reception history stands in contrast to the historical critical method that has dominated biblical studies in recent centuries. The historical critical method purports to seek the original meaning of texts, but reception history rejects the foundationalism of this claim.⁴ In response, reception history recognises that texts have "afterlives".⁵ This afterlife takes a variety of shapes and forms: commentaries written by church patriarchs; denominational traditions; and artistic representations in the form of paintings, statues, films, and music. However, there are two ways to relate the original text to their subsequent afterlives. Gadamer provides the philosophical underpinnings of this relationship through the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.⁶ The focus here is on the effect (*Wirkung* in German) of a text, once produced and released by its author.⁷ Gadamer envisaged the meeting of two horizons – the cultural and historical situatedness of

¹ *His Only Son* <<https://www.angel.com/watch/his-only-son>> [accessed 26 June 2023].

² Gordon John Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2017) <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/559860/3?element_originalid=cip> [accessed 27 June 2023].

³ *His Only Son*.

⁴ Christine E. Joyes, 'Changing Horizons: Reflections on a Decade at Oxford University's Centre for Reception History of the Bible', *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*, 1.1 (2014), 161–71 (p. 169) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/jbr-2014-0007>>.

⁵ Ian Boxall, 'Reception History of the Bible', in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 4: From 1750 to the Present*, ed. by John Riches, New Cambridge History of the Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), iv, 172–83 (p. 176) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9780511842870.012>>.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

⁷ Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 'Translators' Preface', in *Truth and Method*, by Hans-Georg Gadamer (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 20.

both the author and reader - which lead to the elaboration of understanding.⁸ In other words, the reader/interpreter brings their own experiences, knowledge, and context to the reading of the text. The point is that the meaning of a text is not sealed by its originator but is realised by the coming together of text and reader.⁹ The second strand focusses on reception. Whereas Gadamer emphasised the text's potential to influence, reception history focusses on the reader/interpreter and the interpretations that arise from this encounter. This dichotomy, however, seems to have largely been superseded. It must be stressed that reception history does more than merely catalogue the various interpretations (creative, pastoral or academic) that have arisen from Biblical texts. While critical of reception history, Beal states that "at its best" reception history gives an account of how the variety of interpretations have come into being.

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One of the key problems surrounding reception history is defining where the original ends and the reception begins. This case is forcefully made by Beal. He argues that there is no such thing as a finalized original.¹¹ In the case of the Bible, this is valid given the variety of sources and traditions that have shaped it. Breed shares Beal's concern and recognises the challenges of defining a starting point between original and interpretation.¹² Breed, however, is more optimistic and argues that an integral part of reception history is to define the boundaries between the original and its subsequent iterations.¹³ Another critique of reception history is the importance it affords to pre-critical sources such as early commentaries by the Church fathers.¹⁴ This attitude demonstrates the prejudice of the historical critical movement, which sees itself as scientific and impartial. In the context of reception history, these pre-critical sources are crucial for tracing the evolution of interpretations.

⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 306.

⁹ Timothy Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures', *Biblical Interpretation*, 19.4/5 (2011), 357–72 (p. 361) <<https://doi.org/10.1163/156851511X595530>>.

¹⁰ Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond', p. 359.

¹¹ Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond', pp. 367–68.

¹² Brennan W. Breed, 'INTRODUCTION: The Constitutive Divide of Reception History', in *Nomadic Text, A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 1–14 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gh7bm.5>> [accessed 9 June 2023].

¹³ Breed, 'INTRODUCTION', p. 13.

¹⁴ Boxall, 'Reception History of the Bible', IV, p. 178; Christopher Rowland, 'Reception History', in *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament*, ed. by Paula Gooder (Louisville, KY: SPCK/Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 118.

The main contribution of reception history is that it takes seriously both the originator and the reader/interpreter in the elaboration of a text's meaning. Not only does it catalogue instances of reception, but it also seeks to establish how a text is received.

3. Case study: *His only Son*

As a case in point, we will assess the retelling of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22) as told by a recent film. The film, *His Only Son*, was released in March 2023 by Angel Studios.¹⁵ The opening scene is set at night. Abraham meets a celestial figure. Suspenseful music suggests that something ominous is about to occur. There is some artistic licence here. The text of Gen. 22 does not set the scene at night. Neither does the text intimate that God is physically present. Regardless of this, the exchange between God and Abraham is faithful to the biblical text (though the exact translation cannot be identified). However, whereas in the Bible, Abraham is silent (v. 2), in *His Only Son*, Abraham, sobbing and with increasing intensity exclaims: "Oh Lord, no, no!". The screenplay of *His Only Son* exploits the gap left between v. 2 and 3 by the biblical text.

How is this gap – Abraham's silence after God's request to sacrifice his son – explained by scholarship? For Whybray, Abraham's silence represents his distress.¹⁶ Von Rad reads this story through the lens of "temptation" where God puts the Patriarch's faith to the test (v. 1).¹⁷ Von Rad is clear: God does not intend for Isaac to be killed, but Abraham does not know this. Abraham's silence, then, may be interpreted as resigned obedience. Hamilton does not address Abraham's silence, but he describes Abraham's attitude as reticent.¹⁸ Westermann is clear about the horror of the situation, but he does not comment on Abraham's silence.¹⁹ Westermann gives the impression that Abraham is reluctantly obedient. By contrast, Moberly takes a robust historical-critical approach to the text.²⁰ He emphasises the unimportance of children in the

¹⁵ *His Only Son*.

¹⁶ R. N. Whybray, 'Genesis', in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. by John Barton (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 38–66 (p. 53).

¹⁷ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, Rev. ed (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), chap. 16 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3239330/4>> [accessed 27 June 2023].

¹⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1995), chap. K. 1 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3780197/3>> [accessed 27 June 2023].

¹⁹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. by David Green (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), p. 160 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/392743/5>> [accessed 27 June 2023].

²⁰ R. W. L. Moberly, 'A Specimen Text: Genesis 22', in *Genesis and Exodus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2001), p. 129.

ancient times and rejects any sense of immorality in God's request. As such, Abraham is simply carrying out God's will. In this case, Abraham's silence represents his acquiescence. Brueggemann and Linafelt are more ambivalent describe Abraham's silence as an instance of "ambiguity of character motivation".²¹ The implication seems to be that the reader can come to their own assessment. Reception history admits the possibility that ambiguity may have been the author's intention.²²

Even if Moberly's analysis is correct, this does not prevent Gen. 22 from being perceived as horrific and abhorrent by 21st century readers or viewers; its reception is, after all, culturally situated. Contemporary people cannot help but bring their own worldview to the text. At this stage, it is important to briefly outline the ethos of the production company behind *His Only Son*. Angel Studios came to prominence by creating the hit TV series *The Chosen*, which depicts the life of Jesus in a synoptic fashion (and with some artistic licence). While the company is not overtly Christian, it is driven by Christian values. Their mission is to shed light in the darkness, with a clear allusion to a prominent Johannine theme.²³ Furthermore, their definition of light is strongly redolent of the fruit of the Spirit, as outlined in Gal. 5:22-23. While not entirely evangelistic, a company with the aims of Angel Studios cannot alienate its audience with easily acquiesced abhorrent requests.

The film's producers were also theologically situated. Their Christian canonical reading of Genesis 22 allows a retrospective interpretation of this passage in light of subsequent New Testament writings. From this vantage point, the events of Gen. 22 may be connected to God the father's sacrifice of his son, Jesus, as told in the Gospels. Furthermore, the New Testament affirms that Jesus' sacrifice ends with the need for any further sacrifice (Heb. 10:10). With the benefit of this retrospective lens, Isaac's sacrifice seems unnecessary as a demonstration of faithfulness and the simple horror of the situation comes to the forefront of the narrative. Furthermore, title cards at the beginning quote verses from John which connect Jesus with Abraham.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Second edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 22.

²² Boxall, 'Reception History of the Bible', IV, p. 181.

²³ Neal Harmon, 'Angel's North Star' <<https://angelstudios.notion.site/Angel-s-North-Star-a9388445c842468c959c01b1db9b35d6>> [accessed 27 June 2023].

Abraham's dramatic exclamation of: "Oh Lord, no, no!" is anachronistic, but it does bear witness to both the evolution of sensibilities (and attitudes toward children) as well as a theological viewpoint that has evolved in light of Jesus' sacrificial death. The meaning of Gen. 22 has evolved to be understood differently at different times and places than its originator. Reception history allows scholars to give an account of this evolution and not to reject subsequent interpretations out of hand because they do not fit the "historical" meaning of a text, insofar as it can even be ascertained.

4. Conclusion

Reception history rejects the assumption that a text's meaning is locked as soon as it departs from its author. Thanks to Gadamer, reception history admits that the meaning of a text evolves and develops as it encounters readers and interpreters throughout the course of history.²⁴ Reception history rejects the foundational status of the historical critical method and its quest for a single original meaning.²⁵ That is not to say the historical critical tradition has no role to play. After all, Gadamer envisaged a meeting of horizons. Rather, historical criticism, instead of being an end in itself, offers a number of tools that can allow scholars to assess the validity of the variety of developments and reinterpretations that biblical texts have undergone throughout the course of history and in the various cultural contexts in which they have been read.

²⁴ Rowland, 'Reception History', p. 117.

²⁵ Boxall, 'Reception History of the Bible', IV, p. 197; Joyntes, 'Changing Horizons', p. 169.

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