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What is reception history and does it have value in Biblical Studies?

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What is reception history and does it have value in Biblical Studies?

Biblical reception history is a recent and evolving area of study within academia. From the scholarship it has generated one can delineate what it encompasses. This demonstrates reception history's focus differs from that of traditional academic Biblical Studies. Nonetheless, its proponents argue reception history is of value in Biblical Studies.

Reception history

The reception history of the Bible is a relatively new area of scholarly interest having emerged from the margins into the mainstream of biblical scholarship.¹ As a burgeoning field with evolving methodologies, reception-historical studies has been described as 'potentially ground-breaking and eye-opening'.² Its antecedents are the histories of interpretation and exegesis of biblical texts.³ Reception history derives from an approach to literary texts including reception theory and 'literary-influenced trends in historiography and the philosophy of history'.⁴ Its theoretical foundation is Jauss's 'aesthetics of reception' which locates a text's meaning in the inter-relationship between

¹ Brennan Breed, "Biblical Reception History: A Dangerous Supplement", *The Bible and Interpretation*, University of Arizona, October 2014 <<https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/2014/10/bre388022>> [accessed 13/06/23].

² Emma England and William John Lyons, 'Explorations in the Reception of the Bible', in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible, Volume 6, ed. by Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp.3-13 (p.5).

³ Brennan Breed, "What is Reception History?", *Bible Odyssey*, Society of Biblical Literature, 2023 <<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/bible-basics/what-is-reception-history/>> [accessed 07/06/23].

⁴ Jonathan Morgan, 'Visitors, Gatekeepers and Receptionists: Reflections on the Shape of Biblical Studies and the Role of Reception History', in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible, Volume 6, ed. by Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp.61-76 (p.62).

a text and a reader's experience, 'a dynamic, historically situated *relationship* between production and reception.'⁵ Jauss was influenced by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics including *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the fusion of two horizons.⁶ *Wirkungsgeschichte* embraces the ideas of the history of influence, impact and effects and relates to the 'historical and linguistic situatedness' of human readers.⁷

Delineating reception history of the Bible

Notwithstanding limited scholarly consensus on what Biblical reception history is and potentially copious definitions,⁸ one can delineate what it encompasses from a review of scholarly literature. Biblical reception history relates to biblical texts, through the centuries, as interpreted, cited, transmitted, read, translated, revised, adapted and retold.⁹ It focuses on the historical uses and understandings of biblical texts by individuals and communities as ascertained from impact, effect and cultural appropriations.¹⁰ Its emphasis on texts' effects relates it to 'rhetorical and reader response' theories.¹¹ Reception historians are interested in the 'history of meanings'¹²

⁵ Timothy Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures', *Biblical Interpretation*, 19 (2011), 357-372 (p.361).

⁶ *ibid.*, pp.361-364.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.362.

⁸ Breed, 'A Dangerous Supplement'.

⁹ Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond', p.359 and Breed, 'What is Reception History?'.

¹⁰ Massiwa Ragies Gunda, 'Reception History of the Bible: Prospects of a New Frontier in African Bible Studies', in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible, Volume 6, ed. by Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp.125-138 (pp.127-128 & 130).

¹¹ Susan Gillingham, 'Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History', in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible, Volume 6, ed. by Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp.17-30 (p.20).

¹² Morgan, 'Visitors', p.62.

and recognise varying readings arise from the different contextual situations and reasons for reading based on a reader's historical-cultural location.¹³ Their task has been described as 'anthology with a purpose' given it involves critical scrutiny and analysis not merely cataloguing examples of biblical reception.¹⁴ Significantly, reception history differentiates itself from the histories of interpretation and exegesis by embracing the reception of the biblical texts in 'art, literature, music and popular culture...(i.e. *Rezeptionsgeschichte in sensu stricto*)'¹⁵ not excluding political and other uses. At its best, reception history 'focuses on the historically and culturally particular hermeneutical rules that shape and govern the creation of meaning from biblical texts in particular contexts.'¹⁶

Reception history in music

Prolifically represented in reception history is the binding of Isaac (the Akedah) in Genesis 22. By way of sample, in painting Titian, in sculpture Brunelleschi, in plays Shakespeare, in poetry Wilfred Owen, in contemporary novel Neil Gordon and even video games.¹⁷ In classical music Isaac has been respectively portrayed as 'a passive victim in seventeenth-century music', 'a type of Christ in eighteenth-century music' and

¹³ Gunda, 'Reception History of the Bible', p.130.

¹⁴ Susan Gillingham, 'An Introduction to Reception History with particular reference to Psalm 1', *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 85/4 (2011), 571-599 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/rsr.1803>> [accessed 15/06/23], paragraph 4.

¹⁵ James E. Harding, 'What is Reception History, and What Happens to You if You Do It?', in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible, Volume 6, ed. by Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp.31-44 (p.35).

¹⁶ Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond', p.359.

¹⁷ For Shakespeare see Ken Jackson, *Shakespeare & Abraham* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

‘a tragic hero in twentieth-century music’.¹⁸ In the twentieth-century the Akedah has been the subject of compositions by *inter alia* Stravinsky, Britten and Pizzetti.¹⁹ Scholarly analyses of their compositions are typically musicological in nature, commenting on how the biblical story is conveyed by music and musical techniques, illustrated by instrumentation and expressive of the composers’ styles.²⁰ This is also typical of analyses of three contemporary Israeli composers’ choral and operatic renditions of the Akedah.²¹ Twentieth-century popular songs which mention the Akedah include Bob Dylan’s ‘Highway 61 Revisited’ and Leonard Cohen’s ‘Story of Isaac’. Dylan’s allusion has been deemed a ‘self-referential use of biblical language’ as Abraham is Dylan’s father’s name and Highway 61 runs through Dylan’s birthplace.²² Highway 61 has been interpreted as ‘a place where natural law and order have been turned upside down and where neither a loving God nor a loving father exists’.²³

¹⁸ Chapters in Siobhán Dowling Long, *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Reception of a Biblical Story in Music*, *The Bible in the Modern World*, 54 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Igor Stravinsky, *Abraham and Isaac* (1962-63), sacred ballad for baritone and small orchestra, composed on the Hebrew (Masoretic) text of Genesis (B’reshit), chapter XXII (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1963), Benjamin Britten, *Canticle II ‘Abraham and Isaac’* op.51 for alto, tenor and piano (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1952) and Ildebrando Pizzetti, “La sacra rappresentazione d’Abram e d’Isaac: Musica di scena in un atto con prologo e tre quadri”, Libretto (composed 1917-28, first performed 2nd October, 1937) <<https://www.flaminioonline.it/Guide/Pizzetti/Pizzetti-Abramo63-testo.html>> [accessed 11/06/23].

²⁰ Siobhán Dowling Long and John F. A. Sawyer, ‘Abraham and Isaac’ (Britten) and ‘Abraham and Isaac’ (Stravinsky) in *The Bible in Music: A Dictionary of Songs, Works, and More* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp.5-6, Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp.404-407 and Guido M. Gatti, *Ildebrando Pizzetti, Contemporary Composers* (London: Dennis Dobson Limited, 1951), pp.58-60.

²¹ Emily Sarah Isaacson, “Musical Perspectives on the Binding of Isaac Story in the 20th Century: Aharon Harlap and Menachem Zur’s *Akedat Ytzhak* and Steve Reich’s *The Cave*”, Dissertation 2015 <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/158312178.pdf>> [accessed 07/06/23].

²² Michael J. Gilmour, ‘Bob Dylan’s Bible’, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.355-368 (p.364).

²³ Siobhán Dowling Long and John F. A. Sawyer, ‘Highway 61 Revisited’ in *The Bible in Music: A Dictionary of Songs, Works, and More* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p.102.

Cohen's song is a reimagining of the Akedah.²⁴ Cohen claimed it concerned older generations sacrificing younger ones.²⁵ It has attracted rabbinical praise for giving 'voice to the Biblical Isaac far more fully than the Torah.'²⁶

The foregoing exemplifies historical reception by composers and singer-songwriters, demonstrates the broad scope of biblical reception history and raises questions reception historians must answer. These include whether every use of a biblical text is worthy of scholarly consideration and what constitutes meaning in music rather than inspiration or ideas derived from a biblical text. Stravinsky's composition sets the Hebrew text limiting analysis to how his music communicates the text. Is musical meaning determined from how music invests a text with ambience or clothes it with characterisation or is it from listeners' perception? Dylan and Cohen's lyrics could be conceived as applying the biblical text to narratives embodying personal experiences and socio-political views. Are their applications sufficiently connected to the text and is it their status in popular culture that makes them worthy of consideration? In terms of audience reception, music raises a further question. What is it that has impacted the listener? Is it music, text, or both together? If music, whilst the text may have been the source of inspiration for the composer it may be incidental to the listener. It has been suggested that for reception historians to move from 'the plenitude of reception to the

²⁴ Leonard Cohen, "The Story of Isaac", *Genius.com*, <<https://genius.com/Leonard-cohen-story-of-isaac-lyrics>> [accessed 13/06/23].

²⁵ Allan Showalter, "Leonard Cohen on the Story of Isaac: 'The song doesn't end with a plea for peace. It doesn't end with a plea for sanity between the generations.'", *AllanShowalter.com*, June 28, 2020 <<https://allanshowalter.com/2020/06/28/leonard-cohen-on-the-story-of-isaac-the-song-doesnt-end-with-a-plea-for-peace-it-doesnt-end-with-a-plea-for-sanity-between-the-generations/>> [accessed 13/06/23].

²⁶ Shana Chandler Leon, "Leonard Cohen's take on Abraham and Isaac hits the right note", *The Jewish News of Northern California*, October 25, 2018 <<https://jweekly.com/2018/10/25/leonard-cohens-take-on-abraham-and-isaac-hits-the-right-note/>> [accessed 13/06/23].

finitude of reception history' they must establish parameters.²⁷ Hermeneutical questions should include whose responses are important, how are choices to be justified and what is the goal of reception history analysis?²⁸ If the biblical text is not centre stage, focus will gravitate more to 'the reception of the interpreters' than 'the reception of the text'.²⁹

Reception history and Biblical Studies

Whilst reception history is accepted within academia, its value in Biblical Studies is disputed primarily because the historical-critical focus of traditional Biblical Studies differs from the focus of reception history.

Criticisms and counter criticisms

The focus of historical criticism is to locate original meaning in the text using historical-critical methodologies. From such perspective reception history can appear of lesser value, concerned with secondary meanings and not requiring the specialist skills of biblical-critical scholarship. Criticisms against reception history's value include it is 'biblical studies on holiday' a form of escapism,³⁰ an 'easy option', especially 'the more pop cultural aspects',³¹ it lacks 'theological underpinning', is subjective and overly descriptive.³² Reception historians retort by challenging assumptions underlying

²⁷ Jonathan Roberts, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.1-8 (p.1).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gillingham, 'Biblical Studies on Holiday?', p.21.

³⁰ Ibid., pp.17 & 19.

³¹ James G. Crossley, 'The End of Reception History, a Grand Narrative for Biblical Studies and the Neoliberal Bible' in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible, Volume 6, ed. by Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp.45-59 (p.45).

³² Gillingham, 'Biblical Studies on Holiday?', pp.22-26.

historical criticism. Criticisms include original meaning may be 'intrinsically multivalent',³³ the dividing line between the Bible and its interpretation assumes the biblical text is static 'sealed in an original context' whereas the Bible is 'a process, not a product',³⁴ and claims to being scientific and ideologically free are indefensible given historical criticism 'developed in a historically specific period well after the Bible was written' and operates with theological assumptions.³⁵

Arguments for value

Answering their critics is necessary for reception historians to justify why reception history should be part of and why it is of value in Biblical Studies. Value arguments include the following:

Core/integral argument

Several biblical scholars accept reception history as core to their task. Reasons include the 'history of culture' dialoguing with the 'history of the text' adds a 'vitally important dimension' to their work and knowledge of reception and influence is 'fundamental to understanding humanity'.³⁶ Notwithstanding it may follow historical criticism, such scholars view reception history as integral not additional to their hermeneutical and exegetical work.

³³ Roberts, 'Introduction', p.4.

³⁴ Breed, 'A Dangerous Supplement'.

³⁵ Roland Boer, "Against 'Reception History'", *The Bible and Interpretation*, University of Arizona, May 2011 <<https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/opeds/boe358008>> [accessed 10/06/23].

³⁶ Gillingham, 'Biblical Studies on Holiday?', p.19 and Harding, 'What is Reception History', p.34.

Critique argument

Reception history asks challenging questions of both historical-critical and literary-critical approaches to Biblical Studies.³⁷ It has potential to bridge division and surmount opposition between them.³⁸ This derives from its ability to mediate between historical-critical and aesthetic approaches.³⁹

Interdisciplinary dialogue argument

Reception history creates possibilities for Biblical Studies to enter into dialogue with other academic disciplines including the arts and humanities. By virtue of its 'hermeneutical commitments' and 'historicity', reception history can critique and engage with 'modernist and postmodernist conceptions of history and approaches to interpretation.'⁴⁰ Being focused more on the making of meaning '*from* biblical texts in different cultural contexts, past and present', rather than locating meaning '*in* biblical texts', reception history has potential to bring Biblical Studies into 'significant conversation' with academic religious studies.⁴¹ Reception history's interest in how biblical texts shape cultures requires a 'vast collaborative effort' by scholars from many

³⁷ Gillingham, 'Biblical Studies on Holiday?', p.22.

³⁸ Caroline Vander Stichele, 'The Head of John and its Reception or How to Conceptualize "Reception History"', in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible, Volume 6, ed. by Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp.79-93 (p.79).

³⁹ Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond', p.364.

⁴⁰ Morgan, 'Visitors', p.76.

⁴¹ Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond', p.364.

disciplines.⁴² Biblical Studies survival within the academy may depend on forging relationships with colleagues in other academic disciplines.⁴³

Interfaith argument

Reception history has potential to bridge the divide between the academy and confessing communities.⁴⁴ A reception history study can furnish insights no other form of biblical criticism can. For example, a study of Psalm 1 disclosed a historical shift from a conflicting use of the psalm by Christianity and Judaism ‘to an increased understanding and even convergence’ since the mid-twentieth century.⁴⁵ Accordingly, reception history may foster dialogue between Jews and Christians on the use of biblical texts.⁴⁶

Real-world relevance argument

Historical criticism is an introverted discipline.⁴⁷ It can appear irrelevant to the world outside academia. Historical critics can undermine and disdain faith-based interpretations which, on their assumptions and methodologies, do not reflect their assessment of original meaning. It has been claimed that in certain real-world crises, where historical criticism is impotent, reception history can speak ‘the wisdom of the world’s pasts to its futures, where other approaches have failed.’⁴⁸

⁴² Harding, ‘What is Reception History’, p.34.

⁴³ England and Lyons, ‘Explorations’, pp.3-4.

⁴⁴ Gillingham, ‘Biblical Studies on Holiday?’, p.29.

⁴⁵ Gillingham, ‘Psalm 1’, paragraph 55.

⁴⁶ Gillingham, ‘Biblical Studies on Holiday?’, p.29.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Morgan, ‘Visitors’, p.75.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding its critics, reception history is now part of academic Biblical Studies. By embracing, within its remit, the usage of biblical texts in a broad range of areas, reception history offers insight into their influence, impact and effect in historical-cultural settings. Claims in respect of reception history's value in Biblical Studies will be judged by whether or not expectations raised are realised in practice.

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