

Introduction

The following short essay aims to define Reception History as a field of study before examining the role it can play as an approach within the discipline of Biblical Studies. As such, the strengths and limitations of Reception History within the context of Biblical Studies will be explored and presented before a conclusion is offered.

Definition of Reception History

Reception History is a scholarly approach that extends beyond Biblical Studies to investigate the impact and interpretation of texts and other mediums after their original creation.¹ Case suggests that the primary function of Reception History is to recognise that original text is not created without presupposition and bias from an author. Therefore, consideration should be given to how a reader utilises their own culture and historical context to interpret and make sense of a text². Boxall expands this by stating that Reception History is primarily concerned not with the origins of a text but rather how that text is used in a contemporary setting via ongoing interpretation and its subsequent impact³

The development of Reception History from its grounding in Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* supports the necessity for an understanding to be developed of how a text has been interpreted and understood throughout history but with an understanding that this is an ongoing process that continues every time an original text is revisited by a reader⁴. Reception History could therefore be defined as a discipline that studies how texts and other works have been received, interpreted and transformed by different audiences throughout history and how these impact understanding in contemporary context. The three main components in an approach to interpretation via Reception History can therefore be considered the text, the

¹ Jonathan Roberts, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. by Michael Lieb et al (London: Oxford University Press) 2011, p. 2.

² Mariah Case, 'A Brief Reception History of Exodus 34:29-35', *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 44. 1 (2020), p. 38.

³ Ian Boxall, 'Reception History and the Interpretation of Revelation', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. by Craig Koester (London: Oxford University Press) 2020, p. 378.

⁴ Mark Knight, 'Wirkungsgeschichte, Reception History, Reception Theory', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 33. 2 (2010), p. 138.

reader and the history of a text's interpretation⁵.

The Role of Reception History in Biblical Studies

Reception History can be highly useful to the approach of Biblical Studies. Rowland, discussing the future of New Testament scholarship, proposes that Reception History is most beneficial when incorporated into an approach to Biblical Studies that includes traditional historical-critical and literary analyses. He argues that Reception History underscores the significant impact of Scripture on culture and society, thereby ascribing value to it and justifying continued exploration.⁶ Consequently, an approach to Biblical Studies that integrates Reception History offers scholars a comprehensive avenue to examine the influence of Biblical texts on literature, art, politics, and religious practices.

Watson takes this further by presenting the idea that a historical-critical approach to the interpretation of Biblical text, which seeks to derive a definitive meaning based on the original intention of the author, should not be taken for granted⁷. Instead, there is strength in a Reception History approach that, while acknowledging the authors' intentions and original meaning, also explores the reception of a text throughout history. This approach highlights the plurality of interpretations that Biblical texts can generate, influenced by external factors and the context from which the interpretation is derived.

Case, presenting work on the reception of Exodus 34, proposes a differing approach where ambiguous original text has been interpreted definitively by ancient scholarship due to its original cultural context but maintained in contemporary settings because of cultural imagery and societal norms⁸. She concludes that the phrase קרן־עור־פניו could be correctly translated as Moses having glowing skin or developing horns after his divine encounter at Sinai. However, she asserts that the

⁵ Edmund Fong, 'The One and the Many: Pondering the Hermeneutics of the Doctrine of Atonement', *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 12. 1 (2018), p. 129.

⁶ Jonathan Rowland, 'Reception History, Theological Interpretation, and the Future of New Testament Studies', *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 13. 2 (2019) p. 159.

⁷ Nigel Watson, 'Reception theory and Biblical Exegesis', *Australian Biblical Review*, 36. (1988) p. 45

⁸ Mariah Case, 'A Brief Reception History of Exodus 34:29-35', *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 44. 1 (2020), p. 39.

concept of Moses obtaining glowing skin is attributed to the text because it compliments ancient Mediterranean culture, where radiance marks divine favour. This is further supported by Egyptian iconography, where light surrounds important figures⁹. Crucially, from the perspective of Reception History, she concludes that the translation of Moses acquiring glowing skin has been largely maintained in modernity because, even though it is an acceptable reading of the text, the alternative of Moses gaining horns is culturally strange and potentially unsettling to modern readers¹⁰.

Moreover, Reception History can provide valuable insights into the historical development of theological concepts and doctrines. By tracing how biblical texts have been interpreted and reinterpreted over time, scholars can uncover the historical roots and evolution of key theological ideas. A key example of this is the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Viewing this through the lens of Reception History can shed light on historical and theological processes that have informed Christian beliefs and practices¹¹. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how doctrinal concepts have evolved and been influenced by various cultural and historical contexts.

Lastly, Reception History can contribute significantly to contemporary Biblical Studies and interpretation by offering new perspectives and insights. By examining how biblical texts have been understood in different contexts, scholars can uncover forgotten or overlooked interpretations that may be relevant for contemporary readers. For example, the rise of Feminist and Liberationist readings of the Bible has drawn largely on the interpretative traditions of marginalised communities to offer fresh approaches and outcomes to certain texts. Segovia highlights the rise of diversity and differing voices in the interpretation process which includes gender, sex, race and socio-economic factors¹². Resane notes how a Feminist reading of Scripture desires to emancipate women from patriarchy, sexism and violence and this has naturally drawn scholars to theological and interpretative approaches that

⁹ Case, p. 40.

¹⁰ Case, p. 41.

¹¹ Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 27-30.

¹² Fernando Segovia, 'Postcolonial and Diasporic Criticism in Biblical Studies: Focus, Parameters, Relevance', *Studies in World Christianity*, 5. 2 (1999) p. 179.

have been previously overlooked or diminished.¹³ Reception History thus has the potential to enrich contemporary biblical scholarship and interpretation.

Limitations of Reception History

One critique of Reception History is its inherent subjectivity and potential for bias¹⁴. Since it involves interpreting how texts have been understood across different cultures and historical periods, scholars may project contemporary values and perspectives onto past interpretations. This can lead to a skewed understanding that prioritises certain interpretations over others, potentially misrepresenting historical contexts and the intentions of earlier readers and communities. Gummelt proposes a counter to this limitation whereby Reception History is adopted alongside a historical-critical approach that excludes a reception that is not in common with biblical text or removes Scripture from its primary position¹⁵.

Another limitation is the risk of fragmentation of meaning. Reception History emphasises the plurality of interpretations, which can sometimes overshadow the original context and intended meaning of the text. This multiplicity can make it difficult to establish a coherent understanding of a text, as the focus shifts from the text itself to the various ways it has been received and interpreted¹⁶. This can incorporate a neglect of the authorial intent of an original text and can lead to an overly relativistic approach where all interpretations are seen as equally valid, potentially undermining rigorous critical analysis¹⁷. One of the contributing factors to this critique is the vast scope that is proposed by Reception History, making it difficult to draw clear lines where a source is relevant, appropriate or adds value to interpretation.

¹³ Kelebogile Resane, 'Moltmann in conversation with feminist theologians', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 41. 1 (2021) p. 1

¹⁴ Susan Gillingham, 'Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History', *Society for Old Testament Studies*, (2012) p. 25

¹⁵ Eva-Maria Gummelt, 'Reception History and its Value: A German Lutheran View', *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi*, 37. 1 (2020) p. 113.

¹⁶ Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014) p. 130

¹⁷ Justin Milhoc, 'Reception History: A Paradigmatic Turn in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Orthodox Christianity*, ed. by Eugen Pentiu (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2022, p. 642

Conclusion

In conclusion, Reception History offers a dynamic and insightful approach to Biblical Studies by examining how texts have been interpreted and reinterpreted across different historical and cultural contexts. This methodology highlights the evolving nature of biblical interpretation and provides a broader understanding of how texts influence and are influenced by various societal factors. Reception History complements traditional historical-critical methods, enriching the field by acknowledging the plurality of interpretations and the continuous impact of biblical texts on literature, art, politics, and beyond.

However, the vastness and inherent subjectivity of Reception History present notable limitations. The broad scope and lack of clear parameters can lead to fragmented meanings and the potential overshadowing of the original text and authorial intent. Additionally, the risk of projecting contemporary values onto past interpretations underscores the need for caution and rigorous methodology in this field.

Despite these challenges, Reception History remains a valuable tool in uncovering overlooked interpretations and offering fresh perspectives, particularly in contemporary readings influenced by diverse voices and contexts. By navigating its limitations thoughtfully, scholars can continue to leverage Reception History to deepen our understanding of biblical texts and their enduring significance.

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