

## Report from the Field

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# Changing Horizons: Reflections on a Decade at Oxford University's Centre for Reception History of the Bible

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The 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the King James Bible in 2011 catapulted discussion of biblical texts and their cultural significance into the media spotlight. Articles assessing the impact of the King James translation on language and literature were regular newspaper features, whilst lectures and debates on the subject by high-profile figures such as Melvyn Bragg<sup>1</sup> regularly appeared in University calendars. The focus on the cultural impact of the Bible is one that has been rapidly growing over recent years within the field of biblical studies, reflected in the emergence of new methodological approaches. There has been a burgeoning interest in what has become known as 'reception history of the Bible,' that is exploring the 'afterlives'<sup>2</sup> of biblical texts – not just their original contexts – to discover how texts have had an impact in different cultural situations.

Oxford's Faculty of Theology has pioneered research in this area through its *Centre for Reception History of the Bible*. Founded in 2002 by Professor Christopher Rowland and Dr. Christine Joynes, its aim has been to foster interdisciplinary discussion across the Humanities, between those who are researching the use and

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<sup>1</sup> Melvyn Bragg is a well-known British radio and television broadcaster, as well as a prolific novelist.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'afterlife' is not here used to imply that somehow the real life of the text ceased prior to its reception. I use the term in the sense adopted by J. Z. Smith in his SBL Presidential address (2009, 23 n27), where he applies it in the sense of 'continuing life.'

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influence of biblical texts across the centuries. The Centre organizes a regular seminar series (“The Bible in Art, Music and Literature”)<sup>3</sup> with participants from English, Music, History, Classics, History of Art and Theology. In addition, the Centre promotes the significance of biblical reception history by organizing international conferences and publications. Prior to discussing the Centre’s achievements over the past decade, it is necessary to summarize current debate about the meaning of ‘reception history of the Bible’ by way of contextualizing the Centre’s activities.

## 1 Defining ‘Reception History of the Bible’

The term ‘reception history of the Bible’ was relatively uncommon a decade ago when the Centre was founded. Whilst it has recently come to be widely used as synonymous with the German concept *Wirkungsgeschichte*,<sup>4</sup> it is worth pausing to explain the different origins and connotations of these two terms.

Coined by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his 1960 magnum opus *Wahrheit und Methode* [Truth and Method], the term *Wirkungsgeschichte* (often translated as ‘effective history’ or ‘history of influence’) is used to refer to the way biblical texts have shaped culture.<sup>5</sup> Underpinning Gadamer’s philosophical approach is the recognition that *all* interpretation is historically and linguistically situated. He notes:

The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history (Gadamer 2004, 296).

Another insight to emerge from Gadamer’s work is the recognition that the reader is not a passive recipient of the text but actively plays a part in constructing its meaning. For Gadamer, understanding takes place through the fusion of two horizons: the horizon of the work (located in a distant, incommensurable past) and the horizon of the interpreter (in her own subjective historical location).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> ‘Literature’ is broadly understood to include historical writing as well as English literature.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Luz 2005, 7; Sawyer 2009, ix.

<sup>5</sup> See especially Gadamer 2004, 299–306.

<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of the current article to explore more fully Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. For a fuller summary see Rowland and Boxall 2013.

The term ‘reception history’ [*Rezeptionsgeschichte*] derives from Hans Robert Jauss, Gadamer’s student. Building on his teacher’s insights, Jauss’ aesthetic of reception seeks to further define the dynamic relationship between the ‘producing subject’ and ‘consuming subject’ (Jauss 1982, 15).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most significantly, by outlining his seven theses for literary studies, Jauss transforms Gadamer’s approach and treats reception history as a *method* that can be adopted. (This can be contrasted with Gadamer’s own critique of empirical methodologies.<sup>8</sup>)

The philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Jauss were firmly placed on the map of New Testament studies with the groundbreaking work on *Wirkungsgeschichte* by Ulrich Luz. Through his Matthew Commentary in the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar* (EKK) series, he demonstrated in practice how the use and influence of the Matthean text could be compiled and analyzed, offering new interpretive possibilities. He devotes a significant amount of space to exploring the gospel’s reception history, asserting that “the history of interpretation and influence of the text is not an appendage but is an integral part of the interpretation” (Luz 2007, 65). Here Luz raises a further issue for discussion, namely the relationship between ‘history of interpretation’ and reception history.<sup>9</sup> Again the labels are frequently used interchangeably and what constitutes the distinction is by no means self-evident. Luz employs ‘history of interpretation’ to refer to exposition in theological commentaries, contrasting this with a more broadly-defined *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which includes different media such as sermons, hymnody and art.<sup>10</sup> However, he clearly notes that ‘history of interpretation’ is for him a sub-category within *Wirkungsgeschichte*.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Interestingly, Räisänen (1992, 311) distinguishes between ‘effective history’ and reception history by suggesting that the latter includes examples where the text’s reception *prevents* it from being effective. However, the basis on which this can be determined remains unclear.

8 Gadamer’s focus is rather on the process of understanding, exploring the nature of an individual’s relationship to history. He describes *Wirkungsgeschichte* as “not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (Gadamer 2004, xxvi). The difference between Gadamer and Jauss concerning method is significant. See, for example, Timothy Beal’s challenge to reception history on the basis that its Gadamerian philosophical grounding precludes it from being applied as a method at all. Beal 2011, 369.

9 Further terms that have been employed to describe reception history include ‘reception exegesis’ (Joyce and Lipton 2013, 18) and ‘reception criticism’ (Exum 2012, 473–6). Whilst acknowledging the analytical emphasis that Joyce and Lipton wish to stress by their term ‘reception exegesis,’ I understand reception history to include an analytical dimension, and not just to be a process of cataloguing material.

10 Lamb (2012, 5) rightly challenges Luz’s definition, on the grounds that early theological commentaries frequently comprised homiletic material.

11 Luz 2007, 95.

Although Luz sometimes uses the term reception history, he distinguishes this from *Wirkungsgeschichte* by emphasizing that the former “connotes primarily people who receive the text, whereas *Wirkungsgeschichte* suggests the effective power of the texts themselves” (Luz 2007, 61). But despite defining this theoretical distinction, Luz suggests that in practice the two terms can nevertheless be treated synonymously (Luz 2005, 7).

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries are often cited as another significant landmark in establishing reception history within biblical studies.<sup>12</sup> It is striking that the series editors (John Sawyer, Christopher Rowland and Judith Kovacs) also chose a commentary format when seeking to further develop the insights of *Wirkungsgeschichte* within biblical studies. The Blackwell Bible Commentaries aim to give readers a sense of the broad impact of the biblical text under consideration across the centuries, in contrast to the standard historical-critical approach. As the series editors note, the volumes are based on the premise that “how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant.”<sup>13</sup>

Recent discussions of biblical reception history clearly illustrate that its exponents have widely differing views of what it involves (cf. Nicholls 2008, 13–14; Boer 2011). Some suggest that it cannot be reconciled with historical-critical approaches, whereas others (such as Luz) seek to hold the two approaches together. Knight, on the one hand, rejoices in the evident plurality of approaches (2010, 144–145),<sup>14</sup> in contrast to those who are concerned to define terms more precisely to avoid ongoing confusion (Beal 2011; Lamb 2012, 5).

One further detail to highlight at this point is that much of the above discussion about the meaning of reception history has been framed in terms of texts and readers,<sup>15</sup> but an important contribution of biblical reception history is to expand the definition of a biblical exegete to include artists and musicians.<sup>16</sup> This further complicates terminological discussion, since seeing and hearing dimensions need to be included alongside reading.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Notably the series editors choose ‘reception history’ as their preferred term in the series preface to describe their enterprise. See further Sawyer 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Kovacs and Rowland 2004, xi.

<sup>14</sup> Knight (2010, 137) cites Gadamer’s own resistance to “an absolute definition of terms” to justify this plurality.

<sup>15</sup> This is unsurprising given the origins of the terms in literary theory, but nevertheless the broader ramifications of biblical reception history are often not sufficiently acknowledged.

<sup>16</sup> See further Joynes 2007.

<sup>17</sup> At this point Cheryl Exum’s call for a “genuine dialogue between the Bible and art” should be noted. Exum 2012, 475.

Our choice of the term ‘reception history of the Bible’ as the title for the Centre predated these subsequent conversations about the term’s meaning. We have interpreted the Centre’s remit broadly, so that all research on the use, influence and impact of biblical texts has been welcomed. Furthermore, by designating our seminar series ‘The Bible in Art, Music and Literature’ we have sought to actively encourage redefinition of what counts as biblical interpretation.

## 2 Why Establish a Centre for Reception History of the Bible?

The Centre for Reception History of the Bible was established at Oxford University to meet a particular need. A number of University staff had been commissioned to write commentaries in the Blackwell Bible Commentary series (*Psalms*: Sue Gillingham; *Lamentations*: Paul Joyce; *Mark*: Christine Joynes; *Romans*: Paul Fiddes; *Revelation*: Christopher Rowland with Judith Kovacs). Research for the commentaries required engagement beyond the traditional parameters of biblical studies, including not only church history but venturing into the fields of English literature, art history and music. So Chris Rowland and I decided to create a Centre to bring together scholars from across the Humanities who were working on biblical texts. We hoped thereby to create a space in which to share our various areas of expertise.

Initially the Centre’s main focus was a regular seminar series, providing a forum where different disciplinary perspectives could interact: our first year included speakers on “Ruskin and the Bible” (Dinah Birch, English literature), “The Composer as Exegete” (Owen Rees, music), “The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come” (Frances Carey, The British Museum) and “Water into Wine. John the Evangelist at the Wedding in Cana” (Annette Volfing, German literature).

A complete archive of the Centre’s speakers is recorded on our website ([www.crhb.org](http://www.crhb.org)). We have been privileged to have had the opportunity to engage in conversation with some key proponents of reception history over the years: Ulrich Luz, Heikki Räisänen and John Sawyer, champions of this approach, have all addressed the seminar. We have also witnessed some exciting discoveries at the seminar, ranging from Jane Shaw’s research on the Panacea Society’s prophetic figure Octavia<sup>18</sup> to the more recent unearthing of a previously unknown set of Blake’s Illustrations of the Book of Job in Trinity College Library by seminar

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<sup>18</sup> Her paper “A Prophet’s Bible” was presented at the seminar on 17 November, 2003.

member Jonathan Downing.<sup>19</sup> After more than a decade, the number of academics offering to present papers is still growing, and there is a continuing enthusiasm amongst participants to explore biblical texts from an interdisciplinary perspective, given the fruitful research this has produced.

### 3 Activities to Date

In addition to meeting regularly to share research, we have also organized day conferences on a wide variety of themes. These began with a focus on particular literary figures as biblical interpreters, such as William Blake and John Ruskin. Again an interdisciplinary focus was paramount, with scholars contributing from the fields of biblical studies, art history and English literature. Out of this series of conferences emerged *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature* (eds. R. Lemon, E. Mason, J. Roberts and C. Rowland; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

More recently our day conferences have expanded in focus, whilst still retaining an interdisciplinary emphasis. Thus the Centre's contribution to the host of celebratory events marking the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the King James Bible was a day conference entitled "Texts in Transit: The Cultural Afterlife of the King James Bible." The program included contributions by the composer Andrew Gant ("While the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy": Music inspired by the words of the King James Bible") and art historian Carol Jacobi ("The re-invention of love: the King James Bible as existential evidence in Pre-Raphaelite art"); this engagement with art and music was in contrast to other celebratory events which often concentrated solely on the impact of the KJB in English literature.

Two of our speakers that day, David Norton and Gordon Campbell, both emphasize the importance of examining biblical interpretation across the centuries in the titles of their books on the subject (*The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today*; *Bible: The Story of the King James Bible 1611–2011*). Their work, like that of the Blackwell Bible Commentary series, is part of a growing tendency to trace interpretations of biblical texts through different contexts and time periods. At this point it is worth clarifying that it is possible to engage in biblical reception history without thereby committing oneself to a naïve view of there being a *single* originating text ('the Bible'). Although the Centre contributed to the King James Bible celebrations in 2011, our seminars have explored

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<sup>19</sup> This presentation, "Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job: A Treasure in Trinity," took place on 20 May, 2013.

the significance of a whole variety of different Bibles. Indeed reception history provides a valuable corrective to those who imply that there is only a single biblical text to be interpreted.

Following our successful day conferences, we developed several more ambitious projects, all of which culminated in 3-day international conferences. “Perspectives on the Passion” (2005), sponsored by The British Academy, explored the use, influence and impact of the passion narratives in art, music, literature and theology. Speakers included Neil MacGregor (Director of The British Museum) and our engagement with this theme incorporated a variety of media, including a concert by the chamber choir *A Capella Portuguesa*, an art exhibition by Cambridge artist Kip Gresham, and a dramatic reading (“Bad Friday”) by the writer Sara Maitland. Contributions to the project were subsequently published in the volume *Perspectives on the Passion: Encountering the Bible through the Arts* (edited by Christine E. Joynes; London: Continuum 2007).

A subsequent project organized by the Centre, and funded by The Arts and Humanities Research Council, explored the reception history of women in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (“From the Margins: Biblical Women and their Afterlives”). In collaboration with colleagues from the Luce Program in Scripture and Literary Arts at Boston University, USA, we arranged seminars and conferences on both sides of the Atlantic which again featured musical performances and dramatic readings, including the specially-commissioned poem “To cast a stone” by acclaimed Irish poet John F. Deane. This project was published by Sheffield Phoenix Press in two volumes: the first, entitled *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and their Afterlives*, edited by Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg; the second, *From the Margins 2: Women of the New Testament and their Afterlives*, edited by Christine E. Joynes and Christopher C. Rowland.

Most recently, in collaboration with Dominik Markl from Heythrop College, London, the Centre hosted a further international conference in Oxford on the reception history of the Decalogue (April 2012). Seventeen speakers from ten countries included Luciane Beduschi (Paris, music), David Clines (Sheffield, Hebrew Bible), Gerhard Lauer (Göttingen, German literature), Christopher Rowland (Oxford, New Testament) and Steven Wilf (Connecticut, law). The conference concluded with a concert by the Heythrop College Consort, performing settings to music of the Ten Commandments by Tallis, Bach, Haydn, and von Neukomm. Papers from the conference have been published in the volume *The Decalogue and its Cultural Influence*, edited by Dominik Markl (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In his preface to the volume, John Barton describes the conference as “a significant milestone in reception history” (Barton 2013, ix).

The combination of themed projects alongside open seminars with no single unified theme has allowed the Centre to provide several different functions: a constructive forum for developing innovative research and a setting where detailed interdisciplinary analysis of the afterlives of particular biblical texts can take place.

Through collaborations established as a result of the Centre's activities, the founders have been actively involved in the steering groups for several program units at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meetings ("Bible and Visual Art"; "Use, Influence and Impact of the Bible"),<sup>21</sup> and also established the "New Testament: Use and Influence" seminar group at the annual British New Testament Conference. A further forum we have organized is the Biblical Panel at the International Society for Religion, Literature and Culture, a biennial interdisciplinary conference for scholars across the Humanities. By involvement in these scholarly gatherings, our aim has been to ensure that reception history is well-represented at every available opportunity.

In addition to representation at academic conferences, the research interests of some Theology Faculty members in reception history led to the introduction of a further optional paper ("Bible: Use & Influence") in the undergraduate degree course. Beyond the Blackwell Bible Commentaries, those involved in the Centre have also contributed to broadening the definition of who counts as a 'biblical interpreter' through other publications, such as Christopher Rowland's recent monograph *Blake and the Bible* (2011) and my own recent article on Lucas Cranach's interpretation of Mk 10.13–16 (Joynes 2013).

## 4 Changing Times

The significant impact of biblical reception history over the past decade is clearly apparent. Indeed, Timothy Beal goes so far as to describe the rise of reception history as "revolutionary" (2011, 369).<sup>22</sup> Writing in 1995 Marcus Bockmuehl described the Bible's influence on culture as "very largely *terra incognita*, an unknown blank on the map of New Testament scholarship."<sup>23</sup> This is evidently no longer the case. Frequently cited examples of its flourishing include the growing

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<sup>21</sup> Both of these units were commended by Jonathan Z. Smith in his 2009 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in which he advocated the importance of reception history. See Smith 2009, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Beal (2011, 360) proceeds to describe the impact of biblical reception history as "comparable to the influence of source and form criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to the influence of rhetorical and literary criticism over the past several decades."

<sup>23</sup> Bockmuehl 1995, 60.



number of volumes in the Blackwell Bible Commentary series,<sup>24</sup> the extensive *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (EBR) published by de Gruyter,<sup>25</sup> and the launch of journals dedicated solely to this subject, such as the annual journal *Biblical Reception* published by Sheffield Phoenix Press, and now de Gruyter's new *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*.

For some, however, reception history is not revolutionary enough. Some argue that it remains beholden in some way to the historical-critical method.<sup>26</sup> One move to avoid this has been to emphasize that historical-critical study of the Bible is itself “a relatively recent phase in the long story of its reception, rather than ... a kind of foundation on which reception history might be built as a second-stage superstructure” (Joyce and Lipton 2013, 11).

There is of course some irony in the labelling of reception history as a *-geschichte* (implying that it can be set alongside other similar historical-critical categories such as *Formgeschichte*, *Redaktionsgeschichte*), despite its revolutionary implications.<sup>27</sup> However, this might also be viewed as a welcome opportunity, providing the chance to overcome seemingly entrenched battle lines between historical-critical and literary-critical approaches to biblical interpretation. Indeed, it could be argued that Luz's greatest achievement is to hold *Wirkungsgeschichte* and historical criticism together as a symbiotic whole in one volume.

The Centre has not attempted to establish a consensus view on the relationship between reception history and historical criticism, and indeed has deliberately invited speakers from all sides of the debate to participate in its seminars. This is not to ignore the significant differences of opinion that exist, but rather to suggest that mutual understanding is best achieved through dialogue and discussion.

## 5 Future Directions

As is apparent from the brief survey of our key activities during the last ten years, the Centre has continually highlighted the importance of musicians, artists and writers as biblical interpreters, thereby challenging traditional disciplinary boundaries. Dialogue with colleagues in other fields has been particularly fruitful in enlarging understanding of the biblical text, and revealing sometimes surprising interpretative trends. We have not only invited scholars to analyze biblical reception in

<sup>24</sup> Beal 2011, 360.

<sup>25</sup> *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (ed. Hans-Josef Klauck, Bernard McGinn, Choong-Leong Seow, Eric Ziolkowski, et al; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009-), vols. 1–30.

<sup>26</sup> Knight 2010, 142.

<sup>27</sup> There is further irony here, given Gadamer's critique of empirical methodologies. See above note 7.

their respective areas, we have also commissioned new work, asking performing artists to make their own distinctive contributions to the subject. Looking to the future, there are many exciting opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration to be pursued. For example, one forthcoming project will examine visualizations of particular biblical texts and offers the possibility to collaborate with colleagues at museums, art galleries and academic institutions across the globe.

In addition, the ethics of biblical reception history remains a significant issue ripe for further discussion. Reception history has brought attention to the use of biblical texts through the centuries, but there is a risk that Gadamer's philosophical approach may ultimately lead to an abdication of responsibility on the part of the interpreter when it comes to adjudicating between different interpretations.<sup>28</sup> The importance of addressing this ethical dimension was vividly illustrated by Kenneth Newport at his contribution to our British New Testament Conference seminar when he clarified the interpretive process adopted by the Branch Davidians at Waco. He concluded the seminar by stressing that people sometimes die as a result of their understanding of the Bible. (A similar point can be made in relation to snake-handling Pentecostals who have received fatal injuries as a result of their interpretation of Mark 16.)

These indicative future themes illustrate that the Centre's *raison d'être* has evolved from its initial connection to the Blackwell Bible Commentaries (many of which have now been completed or are well on their way to being finished). Rather, as a result of the interdisciplinary approaches that involvement in the commentaries generated, new areas of biblical reception history have gathered momentum and continue to go from strength to strength.

The horizons within biblical studies have indeed changed significantly over the past decade. The Centre for Reception History of the Bible, through its speakers, participants and sponsors, have all had a part to play in that change.

## 6 Acknowledgments

Finally, in summing up the Centre's contributions over the past decade it is important to conclude by acknowledging the help and support we have received along the way: from the Fellows and Staff at Trinity College, Oxford who have provided such wonderful hospitality; from the Faculty of Theology and the Humanities Division, the Hussey Trustees and the John Fell Fund at Oxford University

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<sup>28</sup> Whilst recognising that epistemology and ethics need to be differentiated – a subject beyond the scope of the present essay – my point here is simply that reception history vividly highlights significant ethical challenges.

for their financial support; and from The Bible Society, The Arts and Humanities Research Council and The British Academy, who have also given their financial support to our various activities. We are immensely grateful.

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