RECEPTION HISTORY: SIGNALLING CHANGE IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

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It is a pleasure to offer this article in recognition of Tim Meadowcroft, who has contributed so significantly to biblical scholarship and biblical scholars in this part of the world. This tribute contains three themes that reflect Tim's scholarship: his hermeneutical depth, his passion for the Old Testament and his role as a teacher and encourager of biblical scholars.

Biblical scholars have an increasingly diverse and complex set of interpretive tools with which to examine the text in the effort to understand it well. Yet this burgeoning group of newer interpretive approaches also signals a sea change in the academic discipline that is biblical studies. The ideas that underpin a number of these interpretive approaches demand a change in some of the foundational assumptions about what the Bible is and what the task of the interpreter is. These are issues that bubble under the surface of biblical studies, occasionally rising to the surface, but so far not broadly affecting the discipline. More needs to happen because the newer critical methods are growing, and the landscape is changing incrementally. Students entering the field need help to orientate and the discipline needs to handle the transition from a modernist world to a postmodern one.

RECEPTION HISTORY

Reception history is a parade example of a new critical method which is increasingly popular. It is also an approach to biblical studies which is highlighting, and to an extent magnifying, fault lines within biblical studies. The discussion which follows is largely taken from a Hebrew Bible/Old Testament perspective, but writings of New Testament scholars indicate the same issues are true in the discipline generally.

Reception History, as the title implies, focuses on the history of how the text has been understood. That is not a simply a history of scholarly interpretation but also a history of the effects of a wide variety of interpretations. The German *Wirkungsgeschichte,* sometimes translated, "history of effects", emphasises that the impact of the text is the key focus of reception history. Choon-Leong Seow comments that he prefers to call the approach "History of Consequences", which for him encapsulates all the influences of the text, from exegesis and scholarly interpretation to "application, use, influence, and impact" along with the ethical implications of interpretation and use of the text.[1] In his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of the Bible* Jonathan Roberts writes:

> The reception of the Bible comprises every single act or word of interpretation of that book (or books) over the course of three millennia. It includes everything from Jesus reading Isaiah, or Augustine reading Romans, to a Sunday School nativity play, or the appearance of '2COR4:16' as

[1] Choon-Leong Seow, *Job 1–21* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 110.

> a stock number on military gun scopes. No one and nothing is excluded. Reception *history*, however, is a different matter. That is usually - although not always – a scholarly enterprise, consisting of selecting and collating shards of that infinite wealth of reception in accordance with the particular interests of the historian concerned, and giving them a narrative frame.[2]

What I find helpful about Roberts' words is the identification of the reception history task as the selecting and collating of particular examples of reception that can be shown to cohere in some way. Reception history is a meaning making exercise, a way of storying the impact of biblical texts. Implicit in such storying is the analysis of the effects, which John Lyons indicates in his succinct definition, "Reception history aims to understand the interaction between a text, a context and an audience's response."[3] Roberts' definition above notes that reception is a very broad category but his examples are largely written texts. One of the values of reception history is that it is exploring other forms of communication such as music, drama, and art that interpret biblical texts. Reception history is revealing the great breadth of the influence of the biblical text.

There are already a growing number of examples of the production of reception histories. Along with *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of the Bible*, about half of de Gruyter's 30 volume *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* has been published.[4] Commentary series such as the *Blackwell Bible Commentary* series and the IVP's *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* have multiple published volumes. In addition, the theory and practice of reception history is being discussed and demonstrated in various journals and volumes such as the LOBOTS *Scriptural Traces* series.[5]

Reception History has its roots in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher whose book *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*), first published in 1960, has been a significant influence on the theory of interpretation.[6] In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer pointed out that objective interpretation as claimed by science, and literary theory, of the time was impossible. He argued that every person comes to a text with a mind shaped by his or her historical context. Gadamer said that a key factor in our interpretation of texts is our own awareness of our pre-judgements or prejudices. That is, that the more we understand ourselves as interpreters, the more clearly we understand our differences from the historical text, the better chance we have of understanding the otherness of the text. The result is that the interpreter is able to see the text more closely to its own historical horizon and not according to the interpreter's own conditioned presuppositions. He argued that the interpretation of texts, including ancient texts like the Bible, involves the bringing together of two horizons, that of the reader and that of the text.

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[2] Jonathan Roberts, "Introduction", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of the Bible,* eds. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1. Emphasis in the original.
[3] William John Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History" *JSNT* 33 no. 2 (2010): 213.
[4] Hans-Josef Klauck et.al. *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009–2018).
[5] Examples of journals include, Journal of the Bible and Its Reception, Biblical Reception and the online journal Relegere.
[6] Hans-Georg. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 2nd rev ed., trans. J, Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (London: Continuum., 2004). German original *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960).

Gadamer did not propose a method of interpretation, rather, he claimed to be describing "the conditions in which understanding takes place."[7] He was interested in explaining the philosophical and theoretical aspects of what happens to an interpreter when the that person seeks to make meaning of a text rather than in the mechanics. While Gadamer was not interested in method, his insights have influenced several hermeneutical methods. One of those is reader-response theory, which focuses on the reader as meaning maker. Another approach that has grown out of Gadamer's ideas is reception history, how the text has been understood and the impact of that understanding.

RECEPTION HISTORY VERSUS HISTORICAL CRITICISM

All new interpretive methods face challenges and reception history is no exception. Over the past decades various aspects of the approach have been critiqued and debated. One issue is whether it coheres as a hermeneutical method. Reception history is more a loosely linked set of methods than a cohesive method. Susan Gillingham following, the lead of Christopher Rowland, argues that the discipline is still in its infancy and that new hermeneutical models take time to develop.[8] She wrote that in 2015 and references Rowland's comment from 2004. While there are some bench mark works emerging, the field is too diverse to have any coherence beyond being a historical enterprise focused on reception. Although Gillingham speaks of reception history using a range of methods, she writes as if she expects an overarching hermeneutical model to arise in time. Given the great breadth of the potential receptions open to examination and the diversity of the biblical material it is unlikely one model will be found to work. Note for example, Chris Rowland's comments that the *Blackwell Bible Commentary* series did not start with a particular hermeneutical theory in mind and that experience had made clear that "one model will not suit every book."[9] Apart from the methodological issues there is probably also a worldview one here. Modernists will look for the coherence of an overarching model but postmodern scholars are unlikely to put so much store in essentialist models as the measure of a discipline or its value.

Gillingham notes that biblical studies as a discipline has undergone considerable change over her career and even defining what the discipline is or what it does is difficult now.[10] When this factor is added to the current pressure on many university departments as humanities disciplines shrink, it is not surprising that methods that further diversify the field and appear to dilute its uniqueness cause disquiet in the academy. Yet the greater tension is probably more internal than external. One might say that pressure along the fault lines of Biblical Studies as a discipline have been building for several decades and reception history has added yet more pressure to a growing strain. Whether the result is a lengthy set of tremors and with an occasional larger jolt or a seismic shift of major proportions is yet to be

[7] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295.
[8] Susan Gillingham, "Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History" in *Reception History and Biblical Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 23.
[9] Chris Rowlands, "A pragmatic approach to Wirkungsgeschicte: reflections on the Blackwell Bible Commentary series and on the writing of its commentary on the Apocalypse." n.p. [Cited 12 Sept. 2018]. Online http://bbibcomm.info/?page_id=183), 1-2.
[10] Gillingham, "Biblical Studies on Holiday?", 18.

revealed. Nevertheless, the assumed foundations of the discipline, the nature of the Bible as literature, and the goals of studying it are shifting.

These stress points seem to be underlying issues in some of the debate that goes on between the established king of historical criticism and new pretender of reception history. An example of what I mean can be seen in a debate that is known in some circles as "Hurtadogate."[11] It started with comments by prominent New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado, who identified in his blog what he saw as essential skills for a New Testament PhD in the UK.[12] It amounted to the basic historical-critical skills, with relevant languages (Greek, Hebrew, German and French) and ability to engage with text criticism. While Hurtado granted that approaches like reception history were valid endeavours he indicated that they are supplementary to the foundational skills. Others, for a variety of reasons, saw his prescription as delimiting New Testament studies too narrowly.[13] Part of the response had to do with current state of biblical studies as a discipline within the shrinking humanities curriculum in many universities noted above. Yet another, as Hurtado noted, had more to do with worldview.[14] It is about with what biblical scholars think they are about and can achieve, which is clearly changing with postmodern influence.

Historical-critical scholarship begins by trying to obtain the most accurate text, that which most closely approaches what the author originally wrote. It then seeks to identify the various historical layers, categorises the style and context of the text and examines how it is shaped. This is supported and supplemented with philology, archaeology, history and interpretive tradition. The goal is to understand *the* message of *the* text as accurately as possible. However, two key questions call this goal into question and thus the priority of the historical-critical method as the foundation upon which biblical interpretation is built. Those questions are: is there *an original text* and is there *a meaning*? Reception history is reinforcing the answer "no" to both those questions, so widening the cracks in the foundations and of historical-critical method.

WHERE IS THE ORIGINAL TEXT?

One part of the response to the question about whether there is an original text or not intersects with the debate about where one starts the reception history task. Traditionalists argue that historical-criticism is the foundation on which new methods should build.[15] Thus reception history, like all new interpretive

[11] 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* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 69.

[12] Larry Hurtado, "Tools of the Trade." [Cited 13 Sept. 2018]. Online https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2011/09/04/tools-of-the-trade/

[13] For example, see James G. Crossley, "An Immodest Proposal for Biblical Studies" *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2, no 1. (2012): 153–77; Michael Sandford, "On the Past and Future of New Testament Studies: A Response to Larry Hurtado." *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 4, no 2. (2014): 229–40.

[14] Larry Hurtado, "On Diversity, Competence and Coherence in New Testament Studies: A Modest Response to James Crossley's `Immodest Proposal'" *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2, no 2. (2012): 253–64. See footnote 21.

[15] Hurtado appears to assume this, writing, "I think it is an asset to be able to read the Greek New Testament and draw upon scholarly investigation of its texts in tracing their subsequent reception history" ("Diversity, Competence and Coherence", 362). On the other hand, he earlier comments positively on Lyons' proposal to

methods starts after historical-criticism has finished. Yet, it is obvious that the historical-critical method is itself is a form of reception and is as equally open to analysis as any other aspect of reception. The attempt to identify the most original text to interpret results in a scholarly creation, that is, a text that is a modern scholarly reception of the manuscripts that our critical texts are drawn from. Brennan Breed sums up the situation well with his description of the standard Hebrew OT. "The *Biblica hebraica stuttgartensia*, the most commonly used critical edition of the Hebrew Bible, is a modern scholarly edition of a medieval manuscript with late antique vowels, written in an anachronistic script and surrounded by diachronous layers of paratextual symbols."[16] He goes on to argue that the hermeneutical formulation of studying what is behind the text, in the text, and in front of the text, breaks down when the "in the text" element is drawn from a text which is itself a complex mixture of things behind and in front of the text. Whether it is *BHS* or the Greek UBS/Nestle-Aland NT, the original text we draw on is a reception built on layers of reception.[17]

This line of thought needs to be taken a stage further. The western church and scholarship has made the Masoretic Text its foundation for the Old Testament, yet the Orthodox Church has persisted with the Greek Septuagint used by the early church. That means that some books, such as Daniel and Jeremiah, differ quite significantly between branches of the church. So the form of the text that is used by western scholars is a reception, as is the context in which the original language version is presented. The plurality of texts is not limited to western scholarship because the "received" nature of the biblical text is not something that begins with modern critical scholarship. Since the Dead Sea Scrolls gave us a Hebrew version of Jeremiah that is the equivalent of the Septuagint text of Jeremiah, it has been apparent that the shorter LXX form is not a result of translational editing. Rather, it is clear that some biblical books existed and were used in more than one form in overlapping time periods. The text of these books existed in different forms because they were still developing. Another example is that earlier Septuagint versions of 1 and 2 Samuel indicate that its *Vorlage* lacked some material that is now part of the Masoretic Text. Our current MT is an expansion, which leads James Harding to the following observation:

> …the layers of tradition history within 1 and 2 Samuel suggest that the process of telling and retelling the story of David and Jonathan, …. is already present *within the biblical text itself*. Indeed, it might be fairer to say that the very idea of a "biblical text itself" reflects an arbitrary and particular, though historically explicable attachment to one particular moment in the evolution of the story of David and Jonathan. This has further implications for reception history, because it

consider historical criticism a part of reception history ("Hope for a troubled Discipline?"). Some reception critics have also worked on this basis. John Sawyer comments that "the reception history of the Bible, is 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", in his series editor's preface in each of the *Blackwell Bible Commentary* series. However, his own commentary in the series on Isaiah he does not restrict himself to reception after the text reached an "original" state, but includes reception within Isaiah itself. See for example, Sawyer, *Isaiah* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 41–42.

[16] Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 6.

[17] While there are differences between the eclectic nature of the critical Greek NT and the reliance of *BHS* on the Leningrad codex, the key point that both represent receptions of the original language texts remains.

> suggests that reception history does not begin when there is a fixed text, but is already in process. In other words, the fixing of the text itself is a particular moment within its own history of reception.[18]

What is true for 1 and 2 Samuel and for Jeremiah is also apparent in other Old Testament books. These observations have forced text critics to abandon old ideas of recreating original autographs and to find other ways of defining what they are doing. In most cases, that seems to be to recreate an early version of the MT that the scholar understands to be authoritative in some form.[19] While I have focused on the Old Testament a similar set of issues also pertain to the New Testament. For example, Gospel studies is now so much more aware of the development trajectory that gives rise to four different versions of the same traditions. What we have in our Bibles are (re)created versions of texts taken at various stages in their development.

There are two conclusions worth noting here. First, as Harding notes, relegating reception history to the study of a finalised text is arbitrary when, "[t]ext and reception are inseparable". [20] As Breed notes "the phrase 'the original text' actually means 'the text I have chosen to study for various contingent reasons.'"[21] John Lyons' argument that historical-critical methodologies need to relabel with the terminology of reception history is audacious but it rests on a valid premise.[22] When it comes to the foundations of the biblical text, it is reception history all the way down.[23] This is not a statement in support of some kind of hegemony of reception history over historical-critical hermeneutics. It is simply an admission of the nature of the text. Second, given the fluidity of the text, the endeavour of producing the most accurate original text is relativized. What we are left with is developing traditions which means drawing a boundary line as to when those texts became "the original" is a matter of reception. These are not particularly new issues, they have been simmering for some decades but reception history is highlighting them. Ironically, it is frequently the findings from historical criticism that reception history is using as the means to prise open the cracks in historical criticism's founding assumptions.

There have been attempts to create some debate around these issues but they are not common conversations.[24] Most scholars are teachers, so continuing to push these issues to the background is not going to help our students or the discipline. For one, our students are increasingly postmodern in their presuppositions so they don't see the problems those of us with modernist assumptions do. Secondly, they will increasingly encounter scholarly work that assumes a more fluid text and need to have some

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[18] James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 136. Emphasis in the original.
[19] See for example, Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (3rd. ed.: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 161–169.
[20] Harding, "What is Reception History and What Happens to You if You Do It?" in *Reception History and Biblical Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 38.
[21] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 13.
[22] Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline?" 210.
[23] Brennan Breed, "What Can a Text Do? Reception History as an Ethology of the Biblical Text," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 97.
[24] Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline?" is aimed at provoking debate which he argues needs to happen. He was prompted by the lack of response to G. Aichele, P. Miscall and R. Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible" *JBL* 128 (2009): 383–404.

ideas about how to negotiate their reading. As someone who teaches hermeneutics I find myself reflecting on the shape of my teaching programme.

FINDING MEANING

The related question to that about the text is the question about meaning. Reception history changes the dynamic in the interpretive process. The historical-critical method largely separated interpretation from the traditions of the past. It aimed to jump over all previous interpretation and go back to the text in its ancient context. What did the original author mean, or what did the text mean to its earliest readers? There were always exceptions but if previous interpretations were noted it was usually to support the modern interpreter's understanding. Further, the focus is on one meaning. If options present themselves scholars grapple with those options in order to choose the best alternative.[25] While multivalence may be recognised, it is usually accommodated into the wider themes of the text.

The focus of reception history is not one meaning but the many receptions. As Breed states, it is about tracing the "history of a text's unfolding capacities."[26] It confronts us with the history of interpretation in all its variety, but particularly as it is presented in the tradition of the Church and Synagogue. That which historical criticism jumped over, reception history requires us to reconsider. One of the key things it highlights is Gadamer's argument that all interpretation is bound to the interpreter's context. Whether a scholar is aiming to get as close to the meaning of the original context or not, every interpretation is influenced by the interpreter's own context. What we might want to pass judgement on as "misinterpretations" can become explicable in context.

Reception history opens us up to the richness of the text and its capacity to speak to myriad contexts. In a brief study of Daniel 7, Breed first notes how the vision of the four beast/kingdoms is itself a "redeployment of earlier symbolic patterns."[27] He then notes that even when interpreters are agreed on the identification of the kingdoms, the implications of that identification vary.[28] There is a long history of interpreting the fourth kingdom as Rome. Both Jews and Christians experienced Rome as the oppressor and saw the link to the fourth beast. For communities after the demise of the Roman Empire, from medieval Jews to twentieth century Korean Christians the fourth beast has symbolised their oppressors. Yet the same text has also been seen as a justification for the fifth kingdom. Read in conjunction with the emphasis on converting the monarch in Daniel 1-6, the fifth kingdom has been understood as a transformation of the fourth, rather than its destruction. Constantine's recognition of Christianity set in motion a wave of interpretations which saw the Roman Empire, or its putative

[25] Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 164, notes that the inability to decide between variant readings does not mean one is not original, an evaluation must be made. The problem is the evaluation is made in terms of the critic's conception of the nature and context of the original which is rarely acknowledged.
[26] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 142.
[27] Breed, "What Can a Text Do?", 106.
[28] Ibid., 106–109.

successors, as a transformed fourth kingdom. Agreed identification of the fourth beast is understood in opposite ways according to context.

This reinforces the idea that texts do not have one meaning, historically context has heavily influenced how the text is understood. Even if we aim for some original meaning, the context of the later interpreter in dialectic with the meaning observed in the text produces meaning that is shaped to the interpreter's context. This is evident in the way that Daniel 7 is appropriated by 4 Ezra, Revelation and subsequent Jewish and Christian tradition. This is not an argument against attempting to understand the text as clearly as we can in the best context we can set it in, but is a reminder that all interpretations are contextual and contingent. Reception history presents us with other interpretations of a text which are valuable and which relativize our claims about the meaning of the text.

Reception history demonstrates that a text in different contexts is interpreted differently. This again is nothing new, neither is it something that the historical-critical method ensures against. As with the discussion of the nature of the text above, historical criticism provides tools that reception history is using to challenge the base assumption of one meaning to a text.

In another study, Breed again provides a helpful example. He discusses Job 19:25–27, a passage notable for its various interpretative options.[29] At the base level it is very difficult to set the book of Job in a historical context. It might, in its present form, reflect either an exilic or Hellenistic context. It seems to be based in a folk tale and likely developed over time. If anything, Job is multi-contextual rather than the product of one context. Breed sets his interpretive approach within a Persian era Israelite context. The chapter 19 speech by Job in response to accusations by Bildad is also difficult to set in a literary context. It can be read in the context of the second cycle of speeches and with some intertexts as drawing on the trope of death, like a number of laments. In the last verses of the speech Job presents himself as wrongly in Sheol with a potential way out. In this case Job and his friends are debating who enters Sheol and why. Yet the text could also be read, in keeping with other texts in Job, in a forensic way, as Job's legal defence. In this case Job imagines a court scene. In 19:24 Job writes his legal testimony before declaring his kinsman-redeemer will rise up to vindicate him in 19:25. These interpretive options are the result of historical-critical analysis of the passage.

Whereas historical criticism chooses an option, reception history lets alternative readings stand side by side. It is open to the semantic potentialities of the text. What is biblical scholarship about and what should we be teaching and modelling to students? Do we say the text only has one meaning, in a similar way to Jülicher's insistence that parables only had one primary point of comparison, or do we say the text is contingent and capable of being multi-vocal?

[29] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 143–148.

CONCLUSION

Two underpinning assumptions of the historical-critical method, that of an original text and that of an original meaning in the text, have been background questions in biblical studies for several decades. Reception history adds weight to those questions by repeatedly highlighting the fluidity of the biblical text and the contingent nature of all interpretations. What is more, reception history is actively appropriating historical criticism to present its case. Biblical studies as a discipline cannot continue to overlook the widening cracks in the foundations of the historical-critical method. The answer is not a rejection of either method, nor the drawing of artificial borders between them, nor the hegemony of one over the other, but the acknowledgement that they are complementary and that reception history offers a means to deal with the fault lines in the foundations of historical criticism.

As someone who was educated in a modernist setting and who has looked to the historical-critical method to make sense of the biblical text, the trends in biblical studies can cause some disquiet. Yet the evidence from reception history is compelling, not least because it draws so strongly on existing historical criticism and reinforces problems already acknowledged by that method. The world of biblical studies is changing, the strains in the fault lines have been growing for some time and the discipline as a whole needs to acknowledge that more fully. The received nature of the text we study needs to be acknowledged and choices justified rather than making vague claims about originality. Issues of meaning need to be more widely acknowledged as contextual and the possibilities that individual texts may speak more than one message in any context more readily accepted. The discipline needs the clarity and future scholars in the discipline need to start out with a better understanding of the nature of the biblical text and its interpretation.