

MELITA THEOLOGICA  
Journal of the Faculty of Theology  
University of Malta  
68/1 (2018): 1-15

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## Reception History, Biblical Studies and the Issue of Multivalency

“**R**eception History” is a relatively new method in biblical studies, although I would argue that people have been doing this, without giving it this name, for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Basically it is an approach which is interested in the “afterlife” of a biblical text, discovering a plethora of readings by looking at the use of a text not only through the more traditional commentary and later translations, but also through its various representations in liturgy, music, art, poetry, drama and film. Given that the use of biblical texts in liturgy was beginning to develop at

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this paper was published in a different format and with different emphases as “Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History,” in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Emma England and William J. Lyons (New York and London: Bloomsbury), 17-30. I am grateful to the commissioning editors, Andrew Mein and Dominic Schafer, for permission to use this work.

This paper is a revised version of the Aquinas Lecture I gave at the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta, in April 2017, under the title “Is Reception History no more than Biblical Studies on Holiday?” I am most grateful to the Dean, Rev Dr Emmanuel Agius, and to Rev Dr Paul Sciberras, Head of the Department of Scripture, Hebrew and Greek, for their kind invitation, and also to Rev Dr Stefan Attard, Lecturer in the Department of Scripture, Hebrew and Greek, for his hospitality and invaluable help. The lecture itself contained projections of images from illuminated Psalters and other works of art, and several examples of musical compositions, both of which are impossible to reproduce in a journal. I have provided appropriate links wherever feasible, and I trust that the argument runs on without being able to “see” and “hear” the psalms.

## 2 MELITA THEOLOGICA

the same time as the different canons of Scripture were being formed, liturgical reception history is a very ancient phenomenon. Similarly, given that biblical texts - especially the Gospels and Psalter - were illuminated in manuscripts well over a millennium ago, art reception history as visual exegesis has some very early antecedents. What is new, however, is the way we have started to use reception history to aid our understanding of the impact of a text in our own cultural context: it challenges us, as we look at the multivalent trajectories of a biblical text through the centuries, to examine the hermeneutical assumptions that we, as modern readers, bring to that text.<sup>2</sup>

This challenge to our own approach to Scripture is also not new. The discipline of “the history of interpretation,” which can be traced back to Jewish and Christian exegesis as early as the fourth and fifth centuries CE, is similarly concerned with multivalent readings. The distinctive feature of reception history is that it goes beyond simply amassing a “history of interpretation”: the latter is essentially a “word-centred” approach interested in the many ways in which Scripture has been read and used, whereas reception history is concerned with more intuitive and imaginative non-verbal and pragmatic approaches as well. This therefore greatly increases the potential for multiple meanings. Reception history is about biblical studies in many dimensions, and it sometimes exposes contradictory interpretations, often demonstrating that different interpreters have used the text polemically to their own advantage. Hence reception history scholars do not usually advocate one particular reading of the text over another: they seek to expose the various hermeneutical constructs readers through the centuries have brought to biblical texts, with the key purpose of demonstrating that one text speaks with many different voices.

Before we see how this works in practice, in terms of the application of reception history to a specific text, we also need to be clear about how we now understand “biblical studies.” There have been some dramatic changes in this academic discipline over the last fifty or so years, and it is important to see how it interacts with “reception history.” In the 1960’s there was still some confidence about the assured results of what we call “historical criticism” in biblical studies, when it was assumed that we could know a good deal about the date, provenance, author, and purpose of most biblical texts. As is well documented, historical

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<sup>2</sup> See Christine E. Joynes, “Reception History,” in *Oxford Encyclopedias of the Bible*, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t998/e27>; Masiwa R. Gunda, “Reception History of the Bible: Prospects of a New Frontier in African Biblical Studies,” in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Emma England and William J. Lyons (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 127-128.

criticism underwent continuous fragmentation, so that it became less clear whether the biblical student should place primary importance on, for example, textual criticism, or source criticism, or form criticism, or redaction criticism. The historical-critical approach began to seem like some great archaeological dig, with many different levels of critical enquiry into the text, so that it was difficult to know where to start first.

Some thirty years ago, partly as a result of the questions asked by feminist interpreters, social scientists and liberation theologians, a new approach became part of biblical studies, and this had an enormous impact upon the way reception history has been integrated within it. Rhetorical studies, in various guises, became a crucial methodology for asking different questions about the meaning of biblical texts: this took the emphasis away from looking at the 'text in context' to thinking instead of the "reader in context." Rhetorical studies gave rise to a whole range of other methodological approaches, and with it came a fresh understanding of the Bible as literature - not just as ancient literature, but as literature capable of being understood by using more contemporary literary techniques. This also contributed to the issue of multivalency referred to earlier. With the multiplication and fragmentation of so many different methodological approaches to biblical studies there were many different ways of reading, and hence many different interpretations, of the same text.

Reception history, in my view, actually creates a bridge between the more traditional historically-orientated approaches to the Bible and more recent literary and theological approaches. There are two key contributions this discipline can offer, each suggested by the term itself. First, this is about reception *history*; secondly, it is about *reception* history.

## Reception *History*

This approach is closely related to the more traditional historical-critical concerns of biblical studies, in seeing the "text in context." This perspective also makes it a close relation to that other discipline referred to earlier as "the history of biblical interpretation." Reception *history*, however, is concerned with many more levels in our historical understanding of the text than simply staying with historical-critical issues about the purported date, purpose, and author of a biblical text. Because it is interested in cultural history, and in the influence of a particular text in and on many different cultures, it is as much about a "history of culture" as about a "history of the text." This is why it is very different from the history of biblical interpretation, as it is not so much a *catalogue* of cultural influences but more a concern with the *impact* of a text within different cultural

#### 4 MELITA THEOLOGICA

contexts. We shall return to the aspect of impact shortly, when we look at Psalm 137.<sup>3</sup>

Some scholars apply the historical enterprise of reception but start with the reception of text in a particular cultural setting and work *backwards* to the earlier history of the text in its biblical setting. Other scholars work from the history of the text in its biblical setting *forwards* to the reception of the text in later cultural settings. I usually do the latter, and so I start with the text itself. Applying this to my study of the psalms, I would look first at a psalm in Hebrew, then probably assess a very early stage of reception, namely its translation into Greek; I would then look at the psalm as part of the literature of the Second Temple Period (especially, where relevant, in the Dead Sea Scrolls). Staying with Jewish reception, I would then look at the ways in which a psalm has been “received” through later Jewish traditions, such as the rabbinic *Midrashim* and the Aramaic *Targums*, as well as through Jewish commentators such as Rashi and Kimhi.

But this is only the Jewish reception of a psalm, and only up to the late Middle Ages; so I would then return to a “parallel” reception history which has a Christian focus. I would examine the use of a psalm in the New Testament, in the Church Fathers, not least Origen and Augustine, and, where relevant, Jerome’s Latin translations of the psalms; I would then read the commentaries of, for example, Cassiodorus and Bede, and so turn to the Glosses. This would lead on to looking at medieval commentators such as Aquinas and Peter Lombard. In my view this is always a *historical* approach, even though it has a cultural remit. I would then look at Christian commentators from the Middle Ages onwards, through the Early Modern period, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and so up to the present day, focussing on commentators such as Erasmus, Luther and Calvin, and, more recently, on commentaries with a feminist, liberationist, psychological and social focus.

This reception history approach is best illustrated with reference to a particular psalm. I shall use Psalm 137 with the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as the English translation.<sup>4</sup>

In order to assess the importance of later translations and commentaries, both Jewish and Christian, we need to have a sense of the psalm in its original (Hebrew) language, and to be aware of important words or phrases, for the original language lies at the base, directly or indirectly, of all translations and interpretations that follow. So the first thing we might notice in Psalm 137 is that

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<sup>3</sup> See the Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> See the Appendix which offers a translation of this psalm in the NRSV, underlining the key issues in the Hebrew which follow here.

in the Hebrew the psalm has an internal coherence with its constant theme of ‘remember’ (verse 1 of verses 1-4; verse 6 of verses 5-6; and verse 7 of verses 7-9). Hence it was apparently intended to be read as a coherent whole. The second feature is that the Hebrew imitates the sound of mourning through its repeated ‘u’ sounds in verses 1-3, which eleven times use in various ways the first person plural form; a slightly different effect is created in verses 5-6 which by contrast use the first person singular form four times with an ‘i’ sound. The psalm has been carefully crafted, despite its dreadful ending, for both the ear and the eye, and this too affects the reception of the psalm in later traditions.

When we view the psalm from the perspective of its reception in Jewish cultural history, through a range of *midrashim* and commentaries, we see how repeatedly the psalm was used by Jews as a lament for a lost homeland, with Jerusalem at the heart of it. This started with the Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE; the psalm was further used during the Greek occupation of the Temple in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, and also after the fall of the Temple in 70 CE; it was then adapted through a sequence of ongoing persecutions, ending with the Holocaust and the founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948. From its earliest use to its latest reception, the psalm has been for different Jewish communities a type of “identity marker,” with Jerusalem understood as the “earthly city.”

When we look at the psalm’s reception history in Christian cultural history, the readings from the church fathers, reformation commentators and contemporary writers reveal a wide range of views, usually very different from the Jewish interpretations of the psalm. Although Psalm 137 was not used in the New Testament, it was read by the church fathers in many allegorical ways (including the ending, where for example the “little ones” are read as our evil thoughts). A key focus is on Jerusalem as a *heavenly* city. There is however an interesting correspondence with Jewish experience in sixteenth century Europe, as disenfranchisement and exile became a Christian experience too: so, following Jewish reception, the psalm was at that time read in an increasingly physical rather than allegorical and spiritual way.

Empathy for the different uses of Psalm 137 in different periods of cultural history is vital, for in doing so, we see just how and why Jewish and Christian responses diverge and sometimes merge. Thus, reception history is, in part, a *historical* project, and one which brings to the light the multivalency of the text of the psalm.

### *Reception History*

We noted earlier that there are two key issues suggested by the term “reception history.” The second issue focuses on the fact that this is *reception* history. This is where the discipline differs most from that of “the history of interpretation.” Reception history is sometimes known as *Wirkungsgeschichte*, to indicate that this is a study of the *influence* or the *impact* of a text, and the way a text is received and interpreted in a later period will probably be very different from the way it was received in its earlier context. For example, in the New Testament and in the Church Fathers many of the psalms were not only read as prayers but also as prophecies concerning Jesus Christ. This is more about the “reader in context” than the “text in context.” Another example is the way later interpreters have not taken a bland acceptance of an earlier meaning, but have offered instead a *resistance* to it, being critical of an earlier meaning in the light of its impact at a later stage in the process. The last verses of Psalm 137 are particularly relevant here, as readers have attempted to account for the vitriol in these verses in many different ways.

*Reception* history is about the ways in which readers from very different faith traditions and different social contexts have tried to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the words of the psalms so that they make sense in their own time. Admittedly this may be only a verbal process. It could be through words re-created by Hebrew poets called *piyyutim*; or through the words of Protestant Reformers composing metrical psalms, to bring out new theological insights for their own time; it could be through imitations of psalms composed by political dissidents, both Catholic and Protestant, in sixteenth and seventeenth century England and Europe. In the case of Psalm 137 in particular, it could be through contemporary writings, in different European languages, taking up the strident words of lament, as appropriated especially by Holocaust survivors.

“Seeing” and “hearing” a psalm in different ways is, however, more than looking at the reception of the words from one language medium into another. It also involves, for example, “seeing” through visual reception, and ‘hearing’ through musical reception.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Two earlier papers reproduce many of the images under discussion here. See “The Reception of Psalm 137 in Jewish and Christian Traditions,” in *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms. Conflict and Convergence*, ed. Susan E. Gillingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64-82; “The Psalms Then and Now: ‘Reception History’ as a way of Seeing and Hearing the Psalms (Annual Bedell Lecture, National Bible Society of Ireland),” *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 39 (2017): 1-16, now at <https://www.nationalbiblesocietyofireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Psalms-For-PIBA.pdf>

Psalm 137 offers us a good model of how visual exegesis reveals the impact of reception in different cultural settings. One example is a thirteenth century Italian work, called the *Parma Psalter*, a lavish and defiant manuscript made during Jewish persecution, at a time when in Jewish tradition it was really unusual to illustrate prayer books and psalms. The image (on fol. 198A) is only of verse 1, where the picture of two individuals weeping follows the Hebrew words “by the waters” (of Babylon). We see the harps hung up on the trees: this is a symbol of weeping without being able to sing to musical accompaniment, a witness to Jewish practice since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. A similar motif is found in a nineteenth century image of Jews mourning, also showing the harps in trees, but here the Jews are explicitly reflecting on the temple ruins: two inlaid images, bringing this more up to date, are of Mount Zion and the Mosque of Omar.<sup>6</sup> Images of this psalm were often placed on doors of synagogues - again as a memory of the loss of Jerusalem and the continuing exile. A very different reading of this psalm in Jewish art is in the great wall mosaic in the Knesset by Marc Chagall.<sup>7</sup> It has his characteristic image of an angel, this time with a shofar, calling the people to return to Zion; the Jewish Menorah, lit outside the walls of Jerusalem, gives the image a semblance of hope. The mosaic was completed in 1966 when Jerusalem was still under Jordanian control, and shows the visual impact of the psalm with a very recent connotation.

Christian illustrations of the psalms are found as early as the ninth century in the churches both in the West and East. One very early example is a sketchy brown line drawing in the ninth century Carolingian *Utrecht Psalter*.<sup>8</sup> Here, on fol. 77r, we see Christ instead of Chagall’s angel; he is in heaven, supported by the hand of God, which is coming out of heaven. The reading here is through those New Testament texts where Christ prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem (as in Matt 23:27; Lk 13:34, 21:20-24 and Jn 2:19-22). This is a particularly Christian reading of the psalm. Just as Edom and Babylon fell and so vindicated the Jews, the sack of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE gave Christians a different sense of vindication in their inheritance of a new, spiritual Jerusalem. The twelfth century *Eadwine Psalter* (fol. 243v), a later English representation of the *Utrecht Psalter*, probably from Canterbury Cathedral, has similar details and the interpretation

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-memorial-of-the-temple-ruins-illustration-to-psalm-137-by-the-waters-149148561.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.davidwstowe.com/song-of-exile/part-3/>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://psalter.library.uu.nl/page?p=160&res=1&x=0&y=0>

is clearer still.<sup>9</sup> From the context of the Crusades, the battles here are not just between the Jews and Edomites and Babylonians: they depict the downfall of all kingdoms, Jerusalem included, and Christ's victorious kingdom over all. This is both a political and spiritual understanding of Jerusalem as a heavenly city.

The ninth century *Khudov Psalter*, this time from Byzantium, reads the psalm in yet another way.<sup>10</sup> It portrays the Jews, under the trees, with their lyres hanging on the branches, unused; but the taunting of the soldiers in this image is in the context of the iconoclastic controversies between Christians and Jews in ninth century Constantinople, giving the psalm an anti-Semitic reading.

Other more recent Christian illustrations focus on the mourning of women in this psalm: it speaks of their social oppression, but the period is now the twentieth century CE. The singing of women is actually to bring about their liberation.<sup>11</sup> Or again, a black and white cartoon image of this psalm from the Great Depression in England, set in the early 1930s, and sketched by the social commentator Arthur Wragg, views the "captivity" in a more political way.<sup>12</sup> We see two tenement block windows, the top one with a withered plant on the sill and a birdcage with two birds inside, and the bottom window with another birdcage, with a white silhouette of just one bird: it is hard to know whether, being caged, the bird is unable to sing, or whether it is attempting some choked warbling. The overall impression seems to be silence. The caption under it is taken from verse 4: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" More recently an Oxford artist, Roger Wagner, has offered a different social and ecological interpretation of Psalm 137. Wagner illustrates, from the late twentieth century, the devastation of the industrial landscape by the London Docks; it is another witness to the loss of land and loss of identity expressed at the beginning of Psalm 137.<sup>13</sup>

Visual exegesis - i.e. a study of the visual reception of a psalm - can capture so many facets of the images and metaphors in this psalm which might be missed when using verbal exegesis alone. But visual exegesis is not the only way of appreciating this psalm without being dependent on words. Audio exegesis - a study of the reception of the psalm through music - is another important

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<sup>9</sup> See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eadwine\\_psalter\\_-\\_Trinity\\_College\\_Lib\\_-\\_f.243v.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eadwine_psalter_-_Trinity_College_Lib_-_f.243v.jpg)

<sup>10</sup> See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Khudov\\_rivers.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Khudov_rivers.jpg)

<sup>11</sup> See <http://liturgy.co.nz/psalm-137>

<sup>12</sup> See the Arthur Wragg's image in the Appendix at the end of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Roger Wagner's image can be seen in my paper in *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 39 (2017): 1-16, at <https://www.nationalbiblesocietyofireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Psalms-For-PIBA.pdf>



way of seeing the psalm in a new light. Again, what follows is a small selection of musical arrangements of Psalm 137, and here we may note a certain irony, given that the contents of the psalm speak of being unable to sing with musical accompaniment.

One interesting comparison is the arrangement of this psalm by Philip de Monte in his “Super flumine Babylonis,” with William Byrd’s response in his “Quomodo cantabimus” - both from Elizabethan England. De Monte was exiled on the Continent, on account of his Catholic faith; William Byrd had worked with de Monte in the court of Mary Tudor from 1554-55. De Monte’s “Super flumina Babylonis” was a motet on the first four verses of Psalm 137 and it was a covert gesture of support for colleagues such as the Catholic-inclined Byrd, who was now composing in the Protestant court of Queen Elizabeth I. De Monte’s composition, with the words “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” and the references to being *coerced* into singing a “song of Zion” were most appropriate at this time. Byrd responded with his own composition “Quomodo cantabimus” in 1584, using the next verses of the psalm and echoing de Monte’s motet.<sup>14</sup> It also was arranged in eight parts and it was incorporated an inverted three-part canon. But for Byrd, the additional emphasis was on memory: “I will remember” and “Remember O Lord.”

Byrd’s adaptation of Psalm 137 might be contrasted with a Jewish composition of some fifty years later, this time in the court of Mantua in Italy, where Salomone Rossi was court musician.<sup>15</sup> Using to his advantage the renaissance spirit of greater tolerance to Jewish culture, Rossi started to compose and publish Hebrew music for secular performances based upon music from the Jewish ghetto. By 1633 a collection of thirty-three psalms had appeared: these were polyphonic melismatic chants, with elaborations where the voices in the psalm suggested them, and were as much influenced by Monteverdi and the plainchant tradition in the church of Mantua as by the ghetto.

In Psalm 137, the chorus is unaccompanied, and is full of dissonant chords and mournful tensions, sung by low and heavy voices: not only did this accord with the ban on music in the synagogues but it also alluded to the hanging up of the harps on the trees. The music evokes each stage of the people’s suffering which is expressed in the psalm: it starts with a chromatic progression around the Hebrew word “wept,” and continues into a flowing passage in unison for

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<sup>14</sup> For a performance of de Monte’s and Byrd’s motets, sung by The Sixteen and conducted by Harry Christophers, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQlqALeladc> (de Monte) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxXYJchrly0> (Byrd).

<sup>15</sup> For a performance of this psalm, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XcjQLW1a98>

the Hebrew word “river” (*nāhār*). The reference to the hanging up of harps is achieved first by lowering the key by a semitone, with an unexpected F sharp in the soprano part at the end of the phrase. Rossi viewed the complete psalm as a poetic drama, from the Jews’ first exile in Babylon, their sufferings in the land under Seleucid rule, the Fall of their Temple, their suffering under the Romans in the first century of the Christian Era, the ensuing Jewish Diaspora, and now the people’s continual suffering all over Europe. Rossi is one of the few composers to include the ending of the psalm: the Edomites’ taunting towards the end of the psalm (“Destroy it! Destroy it!”) repeatedly uses harsh, grinding chords.

This could not be more different from the arrangement by Giuseppe Verdi in his third Act of *Nabucco*.<sup>16</sup> The “Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves” remembers the time in exile in Babylon: however, this arrangement also has a more contemporary social and theological comment, influenced by the play from which it came, published in 1836 by Bourgeois and Cornue.

The Rastafarians offer a more recent interpretation of Psalm 137. Theirs is more akin to the Jewish “narrative” account of the psalm. Here, “Babylon” is initially the people of the West who sold the people of African ancestry into slavery in the Americas, and the “exiles” become the persecuted black Jamaican masses. What is striking is the way the genre of the psalm is completely reversed: what was a complex Hebrew lament is now a protest song, not full of self-pity, but defiantly “chanting down,” in reggae rhythms, “Babylon’s” might: the actual process of singing becomes the agent of social change. It also uses the ending of the psalm. So the dreadful “jihad” in verse 9, against Babylonian domination, becomes the revolutionary call for liberation and justice. The song is for “King Alpha” - Haile Selassie - and the chorus after verse 2 makes it a freedom song quite unlike any other. A less vitriolic version was popularized by the Melodians in 1969.<sup>17</sup> There are also several videos of this psalm, each focused on the call for justice for the oppressed, including one by Boney Em.<sup>18</sup>

Learning through art and music, we can “listen,” “hear,” and “understand” at many different and often unexpected levels compared with the ways we might respond when using textual exegesis. This is *reception* history expressed through an interest in the *impact* of the text.

Nevertheless, it is clear that reception history is a fairly new discipline and it is important to be critical about it as well. One obvious issue is that, given its multivalency, there is a tendency to take the attitude that “anything goes”: a

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<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY79yY247Eo>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BOa-tLeS3o>

<sup>18</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go7aIG\\_vB\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go7aIG_vB_o)

corrective to this sort of cacophonous approach is to focus more on the theoretical theological underpinning of the discipline. The terminology of “Reception History” is linked to *Rezeptionsaesthetik* used in the Konstanz School of literary studies in the 1960s, and developed by Hans Robert Jaus in his work on the relationship between the aesthetics of reception and *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Jaus’ work on the multiple meanings resonant in the one text has correspondences with Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in this Class?*<sup>19</sup> From these roots several important works have already been produced in English - mostly over the last decade or so - which discuss the theory of reception history. One example is the *Oxford Handbook of Reception History*, edited by Jonathan Roberts and others.<sup>20</sup> Another is John F.A. Sawyer’s *A Concise Dictionary of the Bible and its Reception*. Two other notable studies are *Reception History and Biblical Studies*, edited by Emma England and William John Lyons, and *Authoritative Texts and Reception History: Aspects and Approaches*, edited by Dan Batovici and Kristin de Troyer.<sup>21</sup> *Biblical Reception*, edited by Cheryl Exum and David Clines from Sheffield Phoenix Press as from 2012, is a notable journal in this field, as also is the journal *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, edited by Amy Blair and James Machor, from Penn State University Press, begun in 2008.<sup>22</sup> Works like these provide a methodological rigor to this discipline.

In the light of this, scholars are now actively seeking to avoid being overly descriptive in their accounts of reception history. But it is a real challenge, when drawing together a vast amount of data, often over a long period of time, and collating together multiple responses to one single text, to keep focussed on a

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<sup>19</sup> See John Sawyer in <http://bbibcomm.net/files/sawyer2004.pdf>, pp. 1-2, referring to Hans Robert Jaus’s *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), and the seminal work by Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> See Jonathan Roberts, Michael Lieb and Emma Mason eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Roberts points to the “multiplicity and diversity” of the papers: “...the material is hermeneutically stimulating precisely because it will not coalesce. The more history of reception of the Bible one reads, the clearer it becomes that the human importance of the Bible does *not* lie in a single foundational meaning that, by dint of scholarly effort, may finally be revealed.” (p. 8).

<sup>21</sup> John F.A. Sawyer, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bible and its Reception* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Emma England and William J. Lyons eds., *Reception History and Biblical Studies* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); and D. Batovici and K. de Troyer eds., *Authoritative Texts and Reception History: Aspects and Approaches* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. <https://www.sheffieldphoenix.com/showbook.asp?bkid=192>; also [http://www.psupress.org/Journals/jnls\\_Reception.html](http://www.psupress.org/Journals/jnls_Reception.html)

clear hermeneutical key. There are many examples in print of what might be termed “anthology without a purpose.” Usually one wants to ask after reading or hearing such papers, “So What?” I would argue that if the exercise is little other than the assembling of information, one should probably avoid publishing it.

Publications which have risen above this issue are often in the area of the reception of the Bible in literature, music, art and film. Works by Cheryl Exum and Chris Rowland were among the earliest and are the best known.<sup>23</sup> Here a creative dialogue is established between the text and visual, musical or dramatic modes of reception; in my view, the problem of being over-descriptive only takes over when that dialogue dries up, for then all one hears is a description of the reception.

Another area which requires further attention is learning how to deal positively with the inevitable issue of subjectivity. Every interpreter is “frozen” in a particular time, place and culture, but here exposure to more unfamiliar Christian and Jewish examples of reception, not only in the West but also in the East, adds both breadth and depth to the interpretative process. The problem of being “subjective” is inescapable in any area of biblical studies, and reception history is no different in being constrained by culture, gender, race, and personal history, but it does have the advantage of constantly seeking a wider perspective on the biblical text.

Another important point, noted earlier, is that reception history is not a sub-discipline of ‘the history of interpretation.’ The latter approach is found more substantially in, for example, Magno Saebø’s lengthy edited volumes, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, and, more concisely, in the one volume *Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, edited by John Barton.<sup>24</sup> Reception history is of course related to this, but its interest is much broader than the commentary tradition (important as it is), especially when it is concerned with visual and musical reception and the social and political impact of texts. One ambitious project of this nature, begun in 2009, is the proposed thirty volumes on all aspects of reception history, initiated by de Gruyter in Göttingen, which aims to publish some three volumes a year. It is clearly going

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<sup>23</sup> Cheryl Exum, *The Bible in Film, and Bible and Film* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishing, 2006); Chris Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> John Barton ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Magno Saebø ed., *Hebrew Bible Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation*, I/1: *Antiquity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); I/2: *The Middle Ages* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); II: *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); III/1: *The Nineteenth Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); III/2: *The Twentieth Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

to be an exceptionally thorough job, with over thirty editors working in five different divisions.<sup>25</sup> Another example is the Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentary Series, where writers are contracted into writing on just one biblical book. Being a one-authored work, the depth and breadth that can be achieved are limited, but the benefit is that this provides cohesion and continuity.<sup>26</sup> I tried to do this with my 2008 book on *Psalms through the Centuries*.<sup>27</sup> Two further volumes of *Psalms through the Centuries* look at the reception history, Jewish and Christian, of Psalms 1-72 and then of Psalms 73-150.<sup>28</sup>

In all these projects there is an obvious need for scholarly support and advice (and e-mail communication and the accessibility of so much internet access helps enormously to this end). My recent commentary on Psalms 1-72 works through each psalm, taking in reception through compilation, then translation, then Jewish and Christian commentary; it then looks at the reception of each psalm through their performance, for example in liturgy, art and music. There is no way, however, that I can presume competence in every medium and certainly not through every historical period. I am constantly grateful to colleagues who are experts in patristic exegesis, or in rabbinic midrash, or who are liturgical experts, or art historians, or musicologists; they are in the UK, the Irish Republic, and in America, South Africa, Israel, France, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, - and of course in Malta too. Sometimes it seems like a great jigsaw puzzle, with individuals helping to place the pieces on a very large table, and my job is to try to assemble it into a coherent, albeit multi-faceted whole.

As a discipline, reception is also wide open for creating collaboration through colloquia and conferences, where several papers are presented on the reception of just one biblical text, or one biblical character, or one theological theme, through a multiple number of media, over a defined period of history.

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<sup>25</sup> See [www.degruyter.com.ebr](http://www.degruyter.com.ebr) for details of the extent of this project.

<sup>26</sup> The details of the series can be found on <http://bbibcomm.net> and <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/seriesbyseries.asp?ref=BC>. Works on the Old Testament include publications by David G. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); and Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> See Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries, Volume One* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); I also wrote a book for Oxford University Press in 2013 which covered just the first two psalms in the Psalter in some 150,000 words: see Susan Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> See for example Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries, Volume Two: A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1-72*, Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford and New York: Wiley Blackwell Publishing, 2018). Volume Three, on Psalms 73-150, is forthcoming.

These can be turned around into a publication of conference papers within, say eighteen months, so even more dissemination can take place. One example is an international conference I hosted in Oxford on Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms in 2010.<sup>29</sup>

Reception History also offers a model of collaboration between the academic community and confessing faith communities, both Jewish and Christian. To the outsider, biblical studies in the academy can sometimes seem to be an introverted discipline, and if it is to be respected in the outside world it needs to find as many ways as possible of crossing the divide between the church and synagogue as well. If Reception History is about the *impact* and the *performance* of biblical texts in all aspects of cultural history, then a faith-orientated element must also be a vital part of the collaborative process. To my mind, collaboration within and outside the discipline is one of the ways reception history brings biblical studies to life.<sup>30</sup>

So this new discipline illustrates that we cannot presume a privileged control of text, because it is open to so many different readings. Reception history invites us to use our imagination as well as critical analysis in our approach to Scripture, if we are to include in its remit liturgy, music, art, poetry, drama and film as well. It challenges us to see how the text might be relevant for our own culture, just as it has had an enormous impact on different cultures over the centuries. In short, reception history should be unashamed in its pursuit of multivalent meanings: in fact, this is perhaps its greatest contribution to biblical studies.

## Appendix

### Psalm 137 and the theme of “remembering”

<sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down  
and there we wept when we *remembered* Zion.

<sup>2</sup> On the willows there we hung up our harps.

<sup>3</sup> For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Gillingham ed. *Conflict and Convergence: Proceedings of the Oxford Conference on Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Taking a much wider framework of reference, it is also important to note the work which has been done comparing First World and Third World receptions of biblical texts: one seminal example would be *The Global Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel M. Patte (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004). This is a model of reception history “in the present tense,” showing how the diverse social and economic contexts of readers can expose both the oppressive and liberating dynamics of biblical texts, and thus illustrate how reception history must also be an active process as well as a receptive one, offering a *critical* analysis of biblical texts rather than a bland acceptance of them.

“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

<sup>4</sup> How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

<sup>6</sup> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,

if I do not *remember* you,

if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

<sup>7</sup> *Remember*, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall,

how they said,

“Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!”

<sup>8</sup> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

<sup>9</sup> Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

### Arthur Wragg: How shall we sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?



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