

Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception

Introduction

The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR) pursues the twofold task of 1) comprehensively recording – and, indeed, advancing – the current knowledge of the origins and development of the Bible in its Jewish and Christian canonical forms and 2) documenting the history of the Bible’s reception in Judaism and Christianity as evident in exegetical literature, theological and philosophical writings of various genres, literature, liturgy, music, the visual arts, dance, and film, as well as in Islam and other religious traditions and contemporary movements. With this broad program of reception history, *EBR* moves into new terrain in recognition of the fact that biblical texts not only have their own particular backgrounds and settings but have also been received and interpreted, and have exerted influence or otherwise have had impact in countless religious, theological, and aesthetic settings. What follows is a brief account of the historical background and future plans of this project.

New Circumstances in Biblical Studies

Biblical studies as a discrete discipline, having developed mainly under the auspices of European Protestantism during the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment, underwent a global upsurge in the 20th century. Anglo-American research, which closely followed European initiatives up through the mid-20th century, has become increasingly more autonomous since the 1970s. New exegetical approaches were developed, often with a more contextual focus, especially in the areas of social and literary history. This growth and the increasing diversification of interpretive methods were not confined to North America. Parallel trends occurred in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Moreover, at the same time that this process was de-Europeanizing and globalizing biblical studies, the field was being further enriched by the perspectives of other religious traditions and denominations. While Protestant exegetical research has continued to prosper, invaluable contributions have been made by North American Jewish scholars, and by Catholic biblical scholars operating in the much more open environment following the Second Vatican Council, which itself was heir to a spirit of renewal of Catholic biblical scholarship encouraged by the papal encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* of 1943. Alongside these developments, the return of a substantial Jewish population to Israel and the founding of the State of Israel resulted in the growth of biblical studies in the universities and other institutions of higher learning in that country.

The foundation of the modern state of Israel also led to great advances in archaeology in the biblical lands, as numerous excavations and surveys, as well as the increased technological precision of research methods, made possible countless new discoveries which have led to a deeper understanding of the history and material culture of the biblical period. The same is true throughout the rest of the Mediterranean and the Near East. “Material culture,” iconography, epigraphy, and the discovery of new archives have changed our understanding of the ancient Near East and classical antiquity as essentially as they have transformed our view of the background and formation of the Bible.

The rapid expansion of knowledge in biblical studies is exhilarating but also creates complex difficulties, especially those associated with the splitting of the field into ever-multiplying areas of specialization. No biblical scholar today, whatever part or aspect of

the Bible he or she may specialize in, can master the pertinent current research without confining his or her interests to a single biblical writing, a very limited period, or a particular approach. Clearly, the view of the “whole” is ever more remote. Furthermore, the proliferation of languages in scholarly literature has heightened the challenge of communication. In the 20th century, the leading means of communication, hitherto German, English, and French, were augmented by numerous other languages, including Hebrew, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, the Scandinavian languages, Russian, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. The emergence of English as the foremost language of communication since the 1970s, while largely beneficial, has also had the unfortunate side effect that scholarly literature written in other languages will be considered by a significant number of scholars only if translated into English or made accessible through reference works published in English.

The state of biblical studies sketched above demonstrates the need for a comprehensive English-language reference work with a broad, international scope. There currently exists no encyclopedia that summarizes and synthesizes the vast current knowledge of biblical studies and allied disciplines while creating links, identifying problematic areas and lacunae in scholarship, and stimulating new research. Nor has any encyclopedic effort been made to take stock of the major shift that has occurred in most disciplines of the humanities during the last two decades of the 20th century and the initial years of the 21st to an orientation informed by what has come to be called “cultural studies.”

New Exploration of the History of Reception

Biblical studies have participated in this interdisciplinary exchange and have been further enhanced by a burgeoning interest in reception history, a scholarly enterprise whose literary-historical roots extend back to late 19th-century *Stoffgeschichte* (the study of themes) and its expansion into 20th-century *Wirkungsgeschichte* (the study of effects), and whose development was abetted by the popularity of reader-response theory in literary studies during the closing decades of the 20th century. Today, aside from the classic historical questions about the conditions and circumstances of the Bible’s origins, inquiries into the reception and culture-forming influence of the Bible draw considerable attention. As a now well-established branch of biblical studies, *Auslegungsgeschichte* (history of exegesis) continues to contribute to the debate about the meanings of the biblical texts as they have been expounded in the histories of Judaism and Christianity. In addition, there is increasing attention among scholars to the reception and adaptation of biblical themes, motifs, and characters in music, art, literature, and film, as well as in Islam and various non-monotheistic religious traditions and new religious movements. Such studies have shown how biblical traditions have transcended the realms of church and synagogue and entered the cultural consciousness not only of Western societies but of other cultures as well.

Interdisciplinary and International

EBR’s two major foci—the Bible and its reception—are reflected in the five main domains under *EBR*’s purview, each of which is overseen by its own “main editor” and comprises five or six specific areas managed in turn by their own “area editors.” One domain each is dedicated to the formation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament, including the contextual and archaeological history of surrounding events, society, religion, culture, and economy. Two more domains cover the influence

of the Bible in the Judaic and Christian traditions respectively, while the fifth domain encompasses biblical reception and influence in literature, art, music, and film, as well as in Islam and in other religions that do not ascribe exclusive authority to the Bible but in some way draw upon its traditions. While not omitting anything that may shed light upon biblical traditions, *EBR* aspires to completeness only in its coverage of the scriptures themselves and their formation. Inasmuch as a complete accounting of the global history of their reception and influence over two millennia is impossible, *EBR* documents that history in ways that pragmatically account for the major themes and issues and provides the necessary guidance for further research.

For further information please visit: <http://www.degruyter.com/ebr>

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