

Introduction

IAN BOXALL AND BRADLEY C. GREGORY

In the predecessor to this volume, John Barton observed that the interpretation of the Bible is never finished because new readers in a new time will inevitably ask new questions.¹ Now almost a quarter century later, this is as true today as it was in 1998. Yet, it is not only that the results of the interpretive task change but that the concept and nature of interpretation itself undergoes transformation. Barton's volume already noted the significant paradigm shifts in the field that were unfolding in the 1990s, in which the dominance of historical-critical methods as nearly synonymous with the idea of "biblical scholarship" was giving way to a range of competing approaches, several of which claimed affinity with older, pre-Enlightenment approaches. However, in his own essay in that volume, he also cautioned against a tendency to dismiss historical criticism (or, as he prefers, biblical criticism) too readily, making a strong case for the ongoing importance of the specific kinds of questions it poses to the text.

Biblical studies continues to be a rapidly-changing field, in which the methodological diversity identified in the 1998 volume has continued apace. The current situation, however, is not merely one of proliferation of methods and interpretive frameworks, although this is certainly noticeable. Recent developments have also led to a certain blurring of the boundaries. This is manifest in greater interdisciplinary work and in attempts to overcome the dichotomy between "professional" and "popular" interpretations of the Bible. But it is also reflected in less rigid distinctions between author-centered, text-centered, and reader/audience-centered approaches. As such, the current situation is often not so much a competitive friction between historical critical methods and other methods or approaches but a greater appreciation that the method(s) a given interpreter will employ

¹ John Barton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.

will always be a function of why he or she is interpreting the text. Similarly, which chapters of this book readers find most compelling or beneficial will naturally be related to why they think reading and interpreting the Bible to be worthwhile. It is hoped, however, that the volume will foster appreciation for how and why others interpret the Bible as they do.

Perhaps one of the most significant developments over the past two decades has been the increased importance of reception. Although already on the horizon of scholarship in 1998 (Barton described it then as “a burgeoning and exciting field of study”),² it was largely limited to a single chapter on the Bible in literature and art. Today, in another example of the blurring of the boundaries, the impact of reception history, and the related interest in a text’s *Wirkungsgeschichte* (i.e., its history of influence or “effective history”) can be felt across the discipline and on already well-established critical approaches. Thus, for example, textual critics pay greater attention to variant readings, and the scribal habits attested by specific manuscripts, as evidence for how the text was received in specific ecclesial and cultural contexts.

These developments in the field are reflected in the organization of the present volume. While Barton’s volume had two parts, one on “lines of approach” and one covering the different sections of the biblical corpus, this volume has three parts of roughly equal length: Part I covers “Methods,” Part II covers “Frameworks/Stances,” and Part III covers “Reception.”

Part I, “Methods,” begins by situating historical criticism within intellectual history. In Chapter 1, Paul Michael Kurtz traces how issues of historical reconstruction and original meaning came to dominate biblical studies in the modern period. He shows how the standard historical-critical methods developed as intellectual products of their time and culture. In the process, Kurtz provides an assessment of both the accomplishments and limitations of historical criticism. Far from being an objective, neutral method, the practice of historical criticism was always bound up with ideological, religious, and political concerns, especially those prioritized in the European Enlightenment. An awareness of the historically contingent nature of historical-critical scholarship has naturally undermined its scholarly hegemony and led to a diversification of interpretive frameworks that self-consciously opt for various ideological priorities.

² John Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, 18.

In Chapter 2, Shively Smith builds upon this critical assessment of the historical-critical approach to the Bible, articulating its assumptions and goals. While still seeing value in a critical, historical approach to the Bible, she also shows how the dismantling of the myth of its neutrality undermines the assumption that it is the only legitimate approach to interpretation. Rather, as the field of biblical studies has diversified and globalized, the historical-critical endeavor has likewise become more interdisciplinary in nature.

Complementing the analyses of Kurtz and Smith, Craig Bartholomew shows in Chapter 3 how the post-Enlightenment concerns with history and understanding and its privileging of scientific method led to the emergence of modern philosophical hermeneutics. Beginning with Hans-Georg Gadamer, the field of hermeneutics began to situate interpretation in the dialogue that happens as interpreters, with their assumptions and pre-judgments, interface with the work. Concomitant with this shift in focus, the study of reception history took on a new importance. The historical and cultural location as well as the agenda of a given interpreter were increasingly seen to be just as consequential as that of the work being interpreted. Bartholomew shows how deconstruction and reader-response approaches developed in this post-Gadamer environment. An important issue in philosophical hermeneutics then became how to adjudicate between better and worse, or even legitimate and illegitimate, readings. In tracing these developments, Bartholomew argues for a “courteous hermeneutic” that gives the work a certain precedence over the interpreter. Taken together, the chapters of Kurtz, Smith, and Bartholomew provide much of the conceptual groundwork for the rest of Part I as well as providing an account of how and why there has been a proliferation of approaches (Part II) and a recognition of the importance of reception (Part III).

Renewed attention to the importance of text-centered interpretation is evident in the next three chapters. In Chapter 4, Francisco Lozada Jr. explores the state of literary criticism, which focuses on the intrinsic features of the text itself as the locus of interpretation, even as it is aware of the need to account for the particularity and ideological framework of interpreters. After outlining the development of literary criticism as a method within biblical studies, Lozada delineates the main assumptions and principles of the method. He observes how these have allowed literary criticism to be employed in tandem with other methods as well as a diverse range of interpretive frameworks. This has positioned literary criticism well for use within a biblical studies field that has become increasingly diverse and globalized.

Next, in Chapter 5, Greg Carey discusses rhetorical criticism, which seeks to understand how texts were intended to influence their audiences. He suggests that there are four main lines of rhetorical criticism: those approaches that utilize the categories of ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric, those interdisciplinary approaches that may be identified as sociorhetorical interpretation (SRI), those that draw on modern rhetoric and literary theories, and those that focus on the act of interpretation as a rhetorical exercise. He then shows the usefulness of rhetorical criticism through an analysis of Paul's letter to Philemon.

In Chapter 6, Stefan Alkier shows how attention to the interrelationships of texts can help to illuminate their meanings. Beginning with the work of Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin, Alkier explains the theoretical aspects of intertextuality and then provides a taxonomy of different intertextual approaches. He proposes three basic kinds: a production-oriented perspective, a reception-oriented perspective, and an experimental performance-oriented perspective. He concludes with a helpful methodological guide for practitioners and highlights the consequences of interpreting a text within a canonical context.

The final chapter in Part I concerns "Social-Scientific Criticism." Already in 1998, Barton identified an awareness of the social embeddedness of literature as an important feature alongside literary approaches of the then current developments in biblical interpretation.³ In Chapter 7, Philip F. Esler traces the story of social-scientific approaches from their origins to the present. Such approaches stress that the social, political, and religious contexts of biblical texts are essential for their proper understanding. Thus, they often draw on the fields of cultural anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. Social-scientific criticism recognizes that texts always exist in a complex web of social phenomena and its application can help interpreters to minimize the importation of anachronistic assumptions from their own contexts. Esler also notes how in the past few decades there has been a rising interest in the understanding of ethnic and social identity.

Part II turns from "Methods" to "Frameworks/Stances." It is here that the diversification and globalization of biblical interpretation is most clearly evident. While several of the main frameworks found in biblical scholarship today are treated in Part II, the sheer flourishing of different frameworks in the past quarter century made it impossible to

³ Barton, *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, 1. The volume included a chapter by Keith W. Whitelam on "The Social World of the Bible" (35–49).

include a chapter on every framework worthy of consideration in a volume of this length. Therefore, contributors (see especially Chapters 4, 10, 11, and 12) have touched on some of these other frameworks where possible. Some of the most prominent of these frameworks/stances include womanist interpretation,⁴ African and African-American interpretation,⁵ *mujerista* interpretation,⁶ Asian and Asian-American interpretation,⁷ Caribbean interpretation,⁸ and Pacific Islander and Oceanic interpretation.⁹ We expect all of these approaches will have increasing importance in the future of biblical studies.

Part II begins with two chapters that consider the way the Bible has been interpreted in Judaism and Christianity. In Chapter 8, Karin

⁴ See Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection between Women of Today and Women in the Bible*, rev. ed. (New York: Warner Books, 2005); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015); Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, eds., *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, SemeiaSt 85 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

⁵ The literature here is growing rapidly. Important works include Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Brian K. Blount, Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery, eds., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora R. Mbuwayesango, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, GPBS 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012); Elizabeth W. Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Carlisle: Langham, 2019); Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2020).

⁶ See, for example, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "A *Mujerista* Hermeneutics of Justice and Human Flourishing," in *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andiñach (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 181–95; Fernando F. Segovia, "Mujerista Theology: Biblical Interpretation and Political Theology," *Feminist Theology* 20 (2011): 21–27.

⁷ Mark F. Foskett and Jeffrey K. Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2006); Young-mi Lee and Yoon Jong Yoo, eds., *Mapping and Engaging the Bible in Asian Cultures: Congress of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies 2008 Seoul Conference* (Korea: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 2009); Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang, eds., *The T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

⁸ Oral A. W. Thomas, *Biblical Resistance Hermeneutics within a Caribbean Context* (London: Equinox, 2010); Margaret P. Aymer, Jione Havea, and Steed V. Davidson, eds., *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible: RumInations*, SemeiaSt 77 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

⁹ Recent work includes Jione Havea, David J. Neville, and Elaine Mary Wainwright, eds., *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*, SemeiaSt 75 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); Jione Havea, ed., *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific*, SemeiaSt 90 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018).

Hedner Zetterholm discusses Jewish interpretation. She shows how biblical interpretation has been central to the Jewish tradition from antiquity to the present day and how it is interconnected with Jewish practices, theology, and ethics. Jewish interpretation aims to understand what God's will is for the present through attentiveness to both the prior Jewish tradition and changing circumstances. Since antiquity, Jewish interpreters have shown an awareness of how the task of interpretation can transform the biblical text. She highlights how the exegetical principles in each time period reflect both continuity and innovation as the Bible was drawn upon to speak to new issues.

In Chapter 9, Stephen Fowl considers the framework of Christian theological interpretation, especially as a contemporary scholarly approach to the Bible. He shows how conceptions of God and of scripture are always interconnected, noting that many Christian interpreters see an analogy between the deity and humanity of Christ and the divine and human aspects of scripture. The key question for this approach to interpretation is how to move from an analysis of its human, historical character to an understanding of the Bible as the Word of God. Fowl goes on to lay out the principles and ends of Christian theological interpretation, showing how the formation of the reader toward deeper love of God and neighbor is central to the task.

Part II continues with five chapters devoted to confronting power disparities surrounding the broad categories of socio-political realities, gender and sexuality, and ecology. In his chapter on "Liberationist Interpretation" (Chapter 10), Gerald O. West considers how this approach encompasses many different kinds of biblical interpretation that seek to address the needs of marginalized and oppressed people through the call for justice. The injustices that are addressed through interpretation of the Bible may be economic, political, racial, gendered, or ecological, among others. Liberationist interpretation is therefore inherently globalized and often serves as an effective check on the often hegemonic dominance of European and North American scholarship on the Bible. As such, West's chapter dovetails nicely with other approaches in Part II, but its emphasis on how communities receive and utilize the Bible also dovetails with Part III.

In Chapter 11, Jin Young Choi provides an overview of postcolonialist studies and the application of these insights to biblical studies. She highlights how power dynamics, particularly those of empires, have shaped both the biblical texts themselves and their reception and interpretation. She demonstrates how exposing and confronting the assumptions and practices at the root of much biblical scholarship, including

the melding of power and religion for purposes of domination, can help to create a space where previously colonized and marginalized people can engage the Bible in order to bring about social and political change.

In Chapter 12, Mary Ann Beavis traces the origins of feminist interpretation. By confronting the patriarchy, androcentrism, sexism, and misogyny in society and the academy, feminist interpretation draws on critical methodologies in order to promote the full humanity, dignity, and equality of women. Highlighting the fact that feminist interpretation is both approach and art, Beavis discusses the six main areas of biblical studies where feminist interpreters have made important contributions and suggests trajectories for future work. Through its engagement with other categories of marginalization and oppression, feminist interpretation has diversified into a range of interpretive frameworks such as womanist, *mujerista*, Asian, and Indigenous stances, among others.

In Chapter 13, Ken Stone discusses LGBTI/Queer interpretation, which is an area of biblical scholarship that has grown dramatically since the publication of Barton's volume in 1998. Like other approaches in Part II, LGBTI/Queer interpretation is not defined by a particular methodology, but draws on a diversity of them, in order to apply insights from scholarship related to gender, sexuality, and kinship. Central to the application of Queer theory is that the meanings and practices of gender and sexuality in history and culture have always been varied and lacking stability. Therefore, within this framework, assumptions of normativity regarding boundaries related to gender and sex are frequently challenged.

Part II concludes with a discussion by Deryn Guest of another framework that has become far more prominent (and urgent with the current climate change crisis) since Barton's 1998 volume, ecological hermeneutics. This approach both critiques the role that the Bible and its interpreters have played in ecological harm and draws resources from biblical literature for the promotion of ecological responsibility. It has some notable similarities to feminist and postcolonial interpretation in critiquing the power disparity between humans and the world. Guest outlines several core convictions of this approach and discusses Judges 15 as an illustrative example: seeing the intrinsic worth in Earthforms, appreciating the interconnectedness of the natural world and the importance of mutual custodianship, honoring the imagined "voice" of Earthforms and recognizing their resistance to exploitation, and acknowledging that all Earthforms have their own destinies.

In these frameworks and related ones, a common feature is interdisciplinarity. By bringing biblical scholarship into dialogue with other disciplines, fresh insights have been generated to speak to perennial human issues. One area that was virtually unexplored at the time of Barton's volume but has gained much momentum in recent years is the application of insights from disability studies to the frequent references to disabilities, illness, and various forms of embodiment in the biblical literature. Disability studies critiques the ideology of constructing "normate"¹⁰ and disabled bodies, proposing alternative models that focus on the body's relation to its social context. Since a session on the topic was convened at the 2004 Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting, an increasing number of publications have explored the possibilities of this interdisciplinary approach and continued to refine its methodology.¹¹ Recently, Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong have edited a full treatment of disability and each section of the Bible.¹² These publications share more than focus on disability in biblical texts. They all demonstrate both the wealth of insight to be gained from attention to disability and also its deep, multiple connections to long-established topics of scholarly attention. It is likely that such interdisciplinary approaches to the Bible will continue to flourish in the future.

¹⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8. See also Lennard Davis, "Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 1st ed., ed. Lennard Davis (London: Routledge, 1997), 9–28.

¹¹ See the recent helpful reviews of the literature in Hector Avalos, "Disability Studies and Biblical Studies: Retrospectives and Prospects," *Int* 73 (2019): 343–54; Sarah J. Melcher, "Disability and the Hebrew Bible," *CurBR* 18 (2019): 7–31. Key collections of essays on disability studies and the Bible include Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper, eds., *This Able Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, SemeiaSt 55 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007); Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, eds., *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Other important books are, in chronological order, Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story*, LHBOTS 441 (London: T&T Clark, 2006); Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature*, LHBOTS 445 (London: T&T Clark, 2008); Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant*, Biblical Refigurations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Our thanks to Rebecca Raphael for her assistance regarding these recent developments in disability studies and biblical scholarship.

¹² Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Amos Yong, eds., *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017).

An awareness of the dialogic nature between text and interpreter (or community) in the task of interpretation underscores the relevance of the history of reception. Part III provides discussions of five aspects of reception history. In Chapter 15, Bradley C. Gregory examines how textual criticism and biblical interpretation have always been interconnected, especially before the invention of the printing press. He suggests four ways that textual criticism is relevant for biblical interpretation. First, inner-biblical interpretation was part of the compositional history of biblical texts themselves. Second, the choice of which version of a biblical book to use is bound up with the nature of a person's interpretive community. Third, in mapping the emergence of variants, textual criticism contributes to our knowledge of a book's reception history. And finally, text-critical decisions are always a function of assumptions about what a text means (or should mean).

Then, in his discussion of "Premodern Interpretation" in Chapter 16, Richard S. Briggs shows how the development of hermeneutics since Gadamer, discussed in Part I of this volume, has opened up a fresh appreciation for the importance of reception history for contemporary interpretation. Briggs argues for a "both/and" rather than "either/or" approach to the results of historical criticism and premodern exegesis since even premodern readers were concerned with what they considered the literal sense. The latter, however, was more concerned about the proper ends of reading than about choosing one specific method for interpretation. According to Briggs, one way premodern interpretation can benefit contemporary reading of the Bible is in its emphasis on the active, dialogic nature of both the reader and the text. He illustrates how premodern and modern exegesis can create fruitful dialogue through discussions of the parable of the Good Samaritan and of Psalm 137.

In Chapter 17, Alison Jack shows how reading literature and reading the Bible can be mutually enriching. Dovetailing with the engaged, performative dimension of biblical interpretation described in Chapter 16, Jack entertains the metaphor of the Bible as a city in which one lives. Engaging with the way works of literature evoke biblical texts may open up the reader to fresh ways of living within that imaginative world. Jack then draws upon Emily Dickinson's image of texts as bearers of the human soul to develop an approach to reading both the Bible and literature in ways that resonate with the discussions of literary criticism in Chapter 4 and intertextuality in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 18, Ben Quash draws upon John of Damascus' defense of icons to articulate the benefits of visual interpretations of the Bible.

John saw the use of visual media as helpful in expositing meaning, in leading from superficial observation to deeper insight, and in evoking wonder and zeal. These three serve as a helpful heuristic for understanding different approaches to visual exegesis in contemporary scholarship. One approach assesses how well works of art represent features of the text; another approach sees in visual exegesis a way to appreciate the pluriformity of possible interpretations; and the third views visual representations of biblical texts as assisting in unlocking new meanings for the present.

In Chapter 19, Ian Boxall outlines different ways the Bible has been received and used within various communities of faith. As such, this chapter rounds out a consistent theme of biblical interpretation after Gadamer, which is apparent across this whole volume – namely, that the location and assumptions of the interpreter will necessarily color how interpretation happens. He highlights that this reality is even a function of what is considered “the Bible,” both in a canonical and material sense. He considers the role of the Bible for private use as well as in public settings like lectionary readings and worship. These factors often shape not only how one reads the Bible but even which parts of the Bible are viewed as most important. These, of course, naturally affect how different people develop a religious praxis on the basis of scripture. What is clear is that understanding how other people, across different eras, cultures, and locations, have received and used the Bible can make interpreters more self-aware of their own contingency and foster understanding between reading communities. As such, in this final chapter Boxall helps to draw all three parts of the volume to a conclusion.

It becomes clear across the whole volume that there are intersections, overlaps, and symmetries between chapters and even across the three parts of the book. Therefore, each chapter will be enriched by reading it alongside others. As with all works, including the Bible, this volume is affected by its materiality.¹³ In the print version, the chapters will necessarily be presented linearly. While we have tried to explain the rationale behind the order of the chapters as presented, in many cases a different order would have been possible as well and might have given readers a different sense of connections or tensions between the chapters. An alternate medium of presentation, such as the digital version of the book could arrange the chapters to present them as more

¹³ For a recent treatment of this see Bradford A. Anderson, ed., *From Scrolls to Scrolling: Sacred Texts, Materiality, and Dynamic Media Cultures* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020).