


THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO

THE BIBLE AND CULTURE



EDITED BY

John F.A. Sawyer

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John F. A. Sawyer

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19
8SQ, UK

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Notes on Contributors

Ibrahim Abraham is a research assistant and case worker in the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology at Monash University, Australia. His work explores the intersections of religion, law and culture.

Alice Bach is Archbishop Hallinan Chair of Catholic Studies at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio. 'My main scholarly interests parallel and reflect my amateur pleasures: watching the media, film, and politics hammer out startling versions of religion, while the religious hammer away at the media, filmmakers, and politicians.' She is the author of *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (1997) and *Religion, Politics, Media in the Broadband Era* (2004).

Andrew Ballantyne practised as an architect, and then moved into academic work. He has held research and teaching posts at the universities of Sheffield, Bath, and Newcastle, where he is now Professor of Architecture. Among his publications are *Architecture, Landscape and Liberty* (1997), *Architecture: A Very Short Introduction* (2002) and *Architecture Theory: A Reader in Philosophy and Culture* (2005).

Roland Boer is Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology at Monash University, Australia. Among his many publications are *Knockin' on Heaven's Door. The Bible and Popular Culture* (1999), *Last Stop Before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia* (2001) and *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (2003).

Sharon A. Bong currently lectures in the School of Arts and

Sciences at Monash University, Malaysia. Her key research interests are women and religion in a post-colonial context. She is the Executive Coordinator of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia, a forum of Asian Catholic women. She was a journalist with the *New Straits Times Press*, based in Malaysia.

Euan Cameron is Henry Luce III Professor of Reformation Church History at Union Theological Seminary, New York. He is the author of *The Reformation of the Heretics: The Waldenses of the Alps 1480–1580* (1984), *The European Reformation* (1991) and *Interpreting Christian History* (2005), and is the editor of *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History* (1999).

Jo Carruthers is AHRC Academic Fellow in ‘Performativity, Place, Space’ in the Arts Faculty at the University of Bristol. Her interests are in the intersection between biblical, literary and cultural studies. She is currently working on a cultural history of the Jewish festival Purim as well as writing a reception history of Esther for the Blackwell Bible Commentary series.

Kate Cooper is Senior Lecturer in Early Christianity and Director of the Centre for Late Antiquity at the University of Manchester. She is the author of *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (1996), and co-editor of *Studies in Church History*. She has written numerous articles on gender and religious change in the late Roman Empire, and her forthcoming publications include the monograph *Passion and Persuasion: Gender, Violence, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity*.

Philip R. Davies is Research Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield, and the author of numerous books and articles on Israelite history and archaeology,

early Judaism and biblical interpretation, including *In Search of Ancient Israel* (1992), *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (1998) and (with George Brooke and Phillip Callaway), *The Complete World of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2002).

Mary Dove is a Reader in English at the University of Sussex, and was previously at the University of Melbourne. She has published widely on medieval biblical interpretation, particularly interpretation of the Song of Songs, and is the editor of the *Glossa Ordinaria in Canticum Canticorum* (1997). She is currently completing a book on the first English Bible.

Jonathan A. Draper is Professor of New Testament at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. He is the editor of *The Didache in Modern Research* (1996), *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (2003), *Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Southern Africa* (2003) and *Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Antiquity* (2004).

Erhard S. Gerstenberger studied theology at the universities of Marburg, Tübingen and Bonn. He has taught at Yale, the Lutheran Seminary of the Igreja Evangelica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil (IECLB) and the universities of Giessen and Marburg. Among his publications are *Yahweh – the Patriarch* (1996), *Theologies in the Old Testament* (2002) and commentaries on Leviticus (1996) and Psalms (1988, 2001).

Tim Gorringe is St Luke's Professor of Theological Studies at the University of Exeter. He has taught in St Andrews, Oxford and India. His publications include *Fair Shares: Ethics and the Global Economy* (1999), *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption* (2002)

and *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (2004).

Heidi J. Hornik studied at Cornell University and Penn State University and is now Professor of Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art History at Baylor University, Texas. Her archival research is on the sixteenth-century Mannerist painter, Michele Tosini. With her husband Mikeal Parsons, she co-edited *Interpreting Christian Art* (2004) and co-authored *Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting* (2005).

Edward Kessler is Founding Director of the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations. He specializes in contemporary Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations. His publications include *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (2004), and he is co-editor of *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (2005).

Stephen N. Lambden received his PhD in 2002 from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. His research spanned the fields of Biblical and Islamic Studies, focusing upon the Isra'iliyyat phenomenon, the Islamo-biblical tradition, and the emergence of the Babi-Baha'i interpretation of the Bible. He is currently a Research Scholar at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, working on Shiism, early Shaykhism, and doctrinal dimensions of the Babi-Baha'i religions.

Scott M. Langston teaches Religion and Biblical Studies at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. He has also taught American history and is a member of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. Among his publications are articles on Jewish history and the New Testament, and the *Exodus* volume in the Blackwell Bible Commentary series (2005).

Burke O. Long is the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Religion Emeritus, and Research Professor of Religion at

Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. His recent publications include *Planting and Reaping Albright: Politics, Ideology, and Interpreting the Bible* (1997) and *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models and Fantasy Travels* (2003).

Gerard Loughlin is Professor of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham. He previously taught at Newcastle, where he developed his interests in the theology of culture, with reference to film and sexuality. He is the author of *Alien Sex: Desire and the Body in Cinema and Theology* (2004) and editor of *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (2005). He is also a founding co-editor of the journal, *Theology and Sexuality*.

Peter Matheson is a Fellow of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand. His recent books include *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (2002), and *The Rhetoric of the Reformation* (1997). He is currently writing the biography of Luther's contemporary, the woman theologian, Argula von Grumbach.

Mikeal C. Parsons is Macon Professor of Religion at Baylor University, Texas, where he has taught since 1986. He has published numerous articles and authored or co-authored eight books, including *The Departure of Jesus in Luke - Acts* (1987), *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (1992) and (with Heidi Hornik) *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (2003).

Anne Primavesi is a systematic theologian focusing on ecological issues. She is a Fellow of the Centre for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion, Birkbeck College, University of London, and the author of several books including *Sacred Gaia* (2000), *Gaia's Gift* (2003), and *Making God Laugh* (2004). She has lectured widely in the British

Isles, Europe, North America and South America.

Ilona N. Rashkow teaches at Stony Brook University, New York. Her primary interests include psychoanalytic literary theory as applied to the Hebrew Bible. Her books include *Upon the Dark Places: Sexism and Anti-Semitism in English Renaissance Biblical Translation* (1990), *The Phallacy of Genesis* (1993) and *Taboo or Not Taboo* (2000). She is currently writing a book-length study on 'forgetting' in the Hebrew Bible from a Freudian and Lacanian perspective.

John W. Rogerson is Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield. His many publications on the history, sociology and geography of ancient Israel, the history of biblical interpretation and the use of the Bible in social and moral questions include *W.M.L. de Wette: Founder of Modern Biblical Criticism* (1992), *The Bible and Criticism in Victorian Britain* (1995), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible* (2001) and *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics* (2004).

Deborah F. Sawyer is a Reader at Lancaster University. Her publications include *Women and Religion in the first Christian Centuries* (1996), *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* (co-edited with Diane Collier, 1999), and *God, Gender and the Bible* (2002). Her other publications in the area of gender and religion include her contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd edn, 2005) and articles in *Feminist Theology* and *Religion and Sexuality*.

John F. A. Sawyer is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Newcastle University and of Biblical Studies and Judaism at Lancaster University. His books include *The fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (1996) and *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts* (1999). He is co-editor of the *Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion*

(2001) and the new reception-history-based *Blackwell Bible Commentary Series* (2003-).

Choan-Seng Song is the Distinguished Professor of Theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA, and Director of the GTU project, 'Partnership for Transforming Theological Education in Asia, the Pacific and North America'. He has taught in Taiwan, Princeton, Kyoto and Harvard, and his many books include *Third-Eye Theology* (3rd edn, 1991) and *The Believing Heart* (1999).

Andrew Tate is a Lecturer in English at Lancaster University. He has published articles and book chapters on a wide range of topics, including nineteenth-century religion, Victorian visual culture and post-modern fiction and spirituality. He is currently working on a full-length study of Douglas Coupland, and a book about contemporary fiction, Christianity and re-enchantment.

Meg Twycross is Professor Emeritus of English Medieval Studies at Lancaster University. She is Editor of the journal *Medieval English Theatre*, and a Co-Director of the York Doomsday Project. Her publication, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (2001), written with Sarah Carpenter, won the David Bevington Prize. She is currently engaged in a detailed study of the York *Ordo paginarum* using virtual restoration techniques on high-resolution electronic scans.

Gerald West teaches at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, and is the Director of the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research. His publications include *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (1999) and (with Musa Dube) *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (2000).

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

Since the publication of the hardback edition of *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* in 2006, there has been a veritable explosion of academic interest in the reception history of the Bible. In addition to two new journals, *Biblical Reception* and the on-line open access *Relegere: Studies in Religion*, there are at least three reference works: my own *Concise Dictionary of the Bible and its Reception* (2009), the *Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (2011) and the projected 30-volume *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception* (2009–). Out of numerous other recent publications by biblical scholars I might mention Bernhard Lang, *Joseph in Egypt. A Cultural Icon from Grotius to Goethe* (2009), Martin O’Kane, ed., *Biblical Art from Wales* (2010), Chris Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (2011) and *After Ezekiel. Essays on the Reception of a Difficult Prophet*, edited by Paul Joyce and Andrew Mein (2011). Six more volumes in the Blackwell Bible Commentary Series have also appeared, three on Old Testament books, Esther (Carruthers), Ecclesiastes (Christianson) and Psalms I (Gillingham), and three on New Testament books, Galatians (Riches), Thessalonians (Thiselton) and the Pastoral Epistles (Twomey). Despite all this, thanks to the pioneering work of a large and very remarkable team of contributors, I think the *Blackwell Companion* is still in many respects ahead of the game, and will continue to provide a useful reference source as well as a starting point for future research in most of these rapidly expanding areas of postmodern Biblical Studies.

The other thing I want to refer to that happened in the years following the publication of the hardback edition, is

the untimely death of Paul Fletcher in September 2008 at the age of 43. The original conception and overall structure of the volume owes almost everything to his scholarship and the breadth of his vision, and I would like to dedicate this paperback edition to his memory, with affection, nostalgia and great respect.

John F. A. Sawyer
Perugia

Introduction

John F. A. Sawyer

If we exclude those parts of the world where the Bible was entirely unknown before the advent of Christian missionaries, there are few aspects of culture, ancient, mediaeval and modern, European and non-European, religious and secular, that have not interacted in some way with the Bible. Outside the United Nations building in New York the representatives of at least 191 countries are daily confronted by a bronze statue, 3 metres high, entitled 'Let us beat our swords into ploughshares' (cf. Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3). According to the latest statistics provided by the United Bible Societies, there are 2,377 languages in which the Bible or parts of it can be read, while another, probably rather less reliable, calculation sets at more than six billion the number of copies of 'the world's best-seller' sold since the invention of printing. The title of this *Companion* reflects the scale of the subject and sets no boundaries on the areas to be explored, chronological, geographical or thematic. The only limits are arbitrary and practical, namely the size of the volume and its date of publication. As the authors faced with the challenge of contributing to it have frequently pointed out over the past few years, they could not possibly give adequate coverage to every aspect of their topic and have had to be selective. The same is true of the editor. There are many topics that would have been relevant and interesting and which some readers will be disappointed to find missing. What no-one can say, however, is that this project was too narrowly defined, or that the vast range of material covered is not broadly representative of the extraordinary phenomenon implied by the title.

The word 'Bible' in the title is itself comprehensive and includes both Jewish and Muslim definitions, although it must be said that, apart from the two chapters specifically devoted to Judaism and Islam, the authors are working by and large with the Christian Bible in the sense that the texts discussed are in the vernacular (mostly English) rather than the original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, and include the New Testament. The interaction between the Christian Bible and culture, however, goes well beyond Church history, and well beyond a survey of Christian interpretations of the Bible. The title of the volume deliberately presents a relationship between two terms that can be described as both tension-filled and mutually generative. The focus throughout is the interaction between the text, the specific context of the Bible's readers, and the weight of the historical past and tradition(s) that impact upon the readers' present. The aim is to provide a series of assessments of the ways in which the various 'practices' of culture – aesthetic, political, religious – inform and are informed by scripture. It offers a coherent challenge to assumptions that the Bible is a static and univocal phenomenon. Just as the text and its readers have challenged dominant cultural assumptions in every age or period, so too changing cultural forms constantly question the validity of the biblical text and its interpretations.

Only a minority of the authors – and the editor – would describe themselves as having had a conventional training in biblical studies. Most come from other disciplines, and the variety of fields of study and topics selected is matched by the variety of scholarly approaches adopted. A few are concerned to show how the meaning of certain biblical texts can be or has been illuminated by the application of insights from aspects of contemporary culture such as, for example, architecture and psychology. Others, less interested in the niceties of biblical interpretation, explore the impact of the

Bible – or particular biblical texts – on the Reformation, politics in general, ecology, and the like, or on specific peoples and communities, especially in Asia, South Africa and Latin America. Another group, the largest group, focuses on types of interaction between the ‘Bible’ and ‘Culture’ which illuminate both, as for example in the chapters on Literature, Film, Music, Art, the Theatre, the Body, Gender, Nationalism and Postmodernism.

A recurrent theme in these essays, designed to make students of the Bible and other disciplines more aware of what kind of a text they are working with, is the multifaceted nature of the Bible and its after-lives. Christopher Hill, whose book *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* is also a recurring motif in *BCBC*, argues that ‘the polysemy of Scripture undermined its political power’ (1993: 428). If the text can mean more or less whatever anyone wants it to mean, then how can it be used as an authority on which social policies, ecclesiastical dogmas, ethical codes or the like are based? The evidence of this volume is that, far from undermining the political power of the Bible, its many meanings seem to have provided its readers with all the inspiration and authority they need, whether to justify a theological doctrine or to create a work of art or to rebel against an oppressive regime.

It is no postmodern discovery that a text can and often does have many meanings. As the rabbis of the second century CE put it, ‘Just as a hammer striking a rock makes several sparks, so too every scriptural verse yields several meanings’ (Talmud Sanhedrin 34a). The same is true of most patristic exegesis, where, for example, allegorizing was one of the main methods used to interpret scripture, and for mediaeval Christian writers and artists, for whom the literal sense of the Bible was of little consequence in comparison to what they considered to be deeper, more