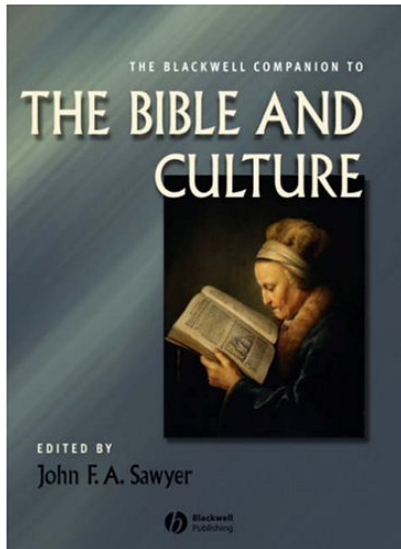


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The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture

Blackwell Companions to Religion Series

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In the past decade or so, scholarly work on the intersection of the Bible and culture has blossomed from being a curious niche to an accepted, vital, and even lauded pursuit within the academy. As such, it is only fitting that Blackwell Publishing, which has already brought us the Blackwell Bible Commentaries series that focuses specifically on reception history, presents us with this new volume that offers a sweeping and magnanimous overview of “the ways in which the various ‘practices’ of culture— aesthetic, political, religious—inform and are informed by scripture” (2).

These “practices’ of culture” are organized thematically into four large sections. The first section, “Revealing the Past,” presents a historical overview of the way(s) in which the Bible has been viewed, received, and interpreted in various historical epochs and moments. The entries here include Philip R. Davies, “The Ancient World” (11–27); Kate Cooper, “The Patristic Period” (28–38); Mary Dove, “The Middle Ages” (39–53); Ilona N. Rashkow, “The Renaissance” (54–68); Peter Matheson, “The Reformation” (69–84); Euan Cameron, “The Counter-Reformation” (85–103); and John W. Rogerson, “The Modern World” (104–16). Obviously, most of these pieces focus on European, mainly English, and Christian interactions with the Bible. However, the individual entries reveal times and worlds quite different than one might expect in terms of the impact of the Bible. For example, Kate Cooper notes that even though most scholars assume the importance of

the Bible for early lay Christians, the low rate of literacy and the growing gap in reading trends between ascetic and nonascetic laity should give us pause when making blanket assumptions concerning the Bible during this period. Similarly, Mary Dove's claim that during the Middle Ages in England the Bible "was a closed book to most men and almost all women," (40) and Ilona N. Rashkow's focus on "the politics of biblical translation" (54) in Renaissance England allow the reader both a more accurate and thorough lens through which to interrogate the influence of the Bible during these times.

Part 2, "The Nomadic Text," includes entries that discuss how the Bible has been received in various religious, cultural, and geographic milieu and what impact it has had on the formation of certain strains of identity therein. Included in this section are the following articles: Edward Kessler, "Judaism" (119–34); Stephen M. Lambden, "Islam" (135–57); Choan-Seng Song, "Asia" (158–75); Jonathan A. Draper, "Africa" (176–97); Scott M. Langston, "North America" (198–216); Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "Latin America" (217–31); and Roland Boer and Ibrahim Abraham, "Australasia" (232–49). While often insightful and revealing, this section of the book is problematic for two main reasons. First, the chapter titles are misleadingly broad, as it would be impossible for any short entry adequately to describe the impact of the Bible on such broad environments. Perhaps subtitles would have been in order, to highlight the specific focus of the entries? For example, Draper's entry on Africa focuses almost exclusively on the effects of Christianity on Zulu culture. Even though he acknowledges this (176–77), the chapter title is still ambiguous in its breadth. His focus also points to a second weakness of this section: the entries overwhelmingly focus on Christianity. Aside from the entries by Kessler, Lambden, and, to some extent, Boer and Abraham, all the entries examine the effect(s) of Christianity and its scriptures on certain populations, and Song's chapter on Asia focuses much more on Christian theology than the Bible. In many ways, then, this section is the weakest from a conceptual standpoint.

In Part 3, "The Senses," are chapters that examine the impact of biblical literature on different humanistic genres, as well as a more specific focus on "a few of the Bible's bodies, and ... their effects on later cultures" (382). The chapters in part 3 include "Literature," by Jo Carruthers (253–67); "Film," by Alice Bach (268–85); "Music," by John W. Rogerson (286–98); "Art," by Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal Parsons (299–322); "Architecture," by Andrew Ballantyne (323–37); "The Theatre," by Meg Twycross (338–64); "The Circus," by Burke O. Long (365–80); and "The Body," by Gerard Loughlin (381–95). For many readers, this section of the book will be the most attractive, as more and more scholars are investigating the reciprocal relationship between the Bible and various forms of aesthetic expression. Here too, though, the reader is misled by titles that do not offer a specific enough indication of the subject(s) of the individual chapters. For example, Bach's intriguing chapter does not focus on the films one might expect but

instead examines some of Pier Paolo Pasolini's films. Similarly, Rogerson's entry discusses eight operas and oratorios from the Western classical tradition. This is not to say that these entries, and the rest of the chapters in the section, are not well-written and interesting; rather, the general reader's expectations might be frustrated by the titles.

The final section of the book, part 4, contains a medley of discourses and approaches in which the Bible has played various roles. Chapters in this section include Gerald West, "Contextuality" (399–413); Tim Gorringer, "Politics" (414–31); Anne Primavesi, "Ecology" (432–46); Ilona N. Rashkow, "Psychology" (447–63); Deborah F. Sawyer, "Gender" (464–79); Jo Carruthers, "Nationalism" (480–96); Sharon A. Bong, "Post-colonialism" (497–514); and Andrew Tate, "Postmodernism" (515–33). These final entries are particularly interesting and relevant, as they enumerate the biblical interaction(s) with more current political and ideological components of identity. Even though my main criticism regarding the breadth of chapter titles is still applicable here, I found these chapters, especially those of Primavesi and Sawyer, to be astute and insightful.

Given the length of the book, as well as the variety (and staggering backgrounds) of the authors, it would be impossible (not to mention space-prohibitive) to provide a summary of every entry in the work. However, one can assess this work in light of what Hornik and Parsons claim is the "general thesis of this volume": "The biblical text and its interpretations both reflect and challenge the larger cultural assumptions of each historical period and in each specific place" (321). Given this claim, it is safe to say that this *Companion* admirably achieves its goal with wit, aplomb, and a disciplinary breadth that is all too rare in biblical studies today. Because of this, it is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of literature on the important relationship(s) between the Bible and culture.