

Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR)

Introduction

Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR) pursues the twofold task of comprehensively rendering the current state of knowledge on the origins and development of the Bible according to its different canonic forms in Judaism and Christianity, and documenting the history of the Bible's reception not only in the Christian churches and the Jewish Diaspora but also in literature, art, music, and film, as well as Islam and other religious traditions and current religious movements. With this broad program of reception history, *EBR* moves into new terrain, seeking to do justice to the fact that the biblical texts have not only their own particular genetic background and setting but also been received and interpreted, and exerted their influence, in countless religious, theological, and aesthetic settings. What follows is a brief account of both the historical background and the future plans of this project.

Bible studies, having emerged mainly under the auspices of European Protestantism during the ages of Humanism, Reformation, and Enlightenment, underwent a global upsurge in the twentieth century. Anglo-American research, which closely followed European initiatives up through the mid-twentieth century, has gained ever more autonomy 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 further enriched by the religions and denominations whose members now entered it. While Protestant exegetical research has continued to prosper, invaluable contributions have been made by Jewish biblical studies, the center of which shifted from Germany to North America in the wake of the Shoah, and by biblical studies in the Catholic Church, where exegetical disciplines evolved rapidly in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

The foundation of the modern state of Israel led to great advances in biblical archeology, as the numerous excavations and surveys, and the increased technological precision of methods, made possible countless new insights. The same is true throughout the rest of the Mediterranean and the Near East. "Material culture," iconography, epigraphy, and the discovery of new archives and libraries changed our understanding of the Ancient Near East and classical antiquity as essentially as it transformed our view of the background and formation of the Bible.

The rapid expansion of knowledge in biblical studies is exhilarating but creates complex difficulties, especially those associated with the splitting of the field into

ever-multiplying areas of specialization. No biblical scholar today, regardless of the part or aspect of the Bible he or she may specialize in, can master the pertinent current research without confining his or her knowledge to a single biblical writing, a very limited area, or a particular approach. The view of the “whole” is ever remoter. Furthermore, the proliferation of languages in scholarly literature has heightened the challenge of communication. In the twentieth 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, and Korean. The advancement of English as the foremost language of communication since the 1970s, while largely beneficial, has had the unfortunate side effect that scholarly literature written in other languages can expect to 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 an English-language encyclopedia 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 occurred in most disciplines of the humanities during the last two decades of the twentieth century and the initial years of the twenty-first to an orientation informed by what has come to be called “cultural studies.”

Biblical studies have participated in this interdisciplinary exchange and have been further enriched by a burgeoning interest in reception history, a scholarly enterprise whose literary-historical roots extend back to late nineteenth-century *Stoffgeschichte* (the study of themes) and its expansion into twentieth-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 twentieth 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 Bible studies, *Auslegungsgeschichte* (exegesis history) continues to influence modern debates upon the theological sense and purpose of church history. Moreover a growing number of research projects have examined the interpretation 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. A result has been the illumination of how biblical traditions transcended the realms of church and synagogue and entered the cultural consciousness of both Western and non-Western societies.

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 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.

EBR is edited by an international team of scholars representing a wide variety of religious, denominational, and disciplinary perspectives, none privileged above the others. The work is produced in English to facilitate global compilation and reception, and scholars from around the world are being invited to contribute.

Designed to be primarily a user-friendly resource for scholars in biblical studies and related fields but also accessible to general readers interested in the Bible, *EBR* will consist of thirty volumes, of approximately 600 pages each, appearing over a projected ten-year period (2008–2018) and accompanied by a parallel online version.

The Editors

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