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reads
The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature
(Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)
edited by Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowland

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THE RECENT PUBLICATION of underground comics artist R. Crumb's *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* provides a striking reminder of the varied ways that the Bible has been taken up, repackaged, and reproduced in each generation. Crumb's sometimes explicit and always provocative illustrations invoke something of the startling character of the Bible's vast corpus, to wit, the poignant examples of raw emotion, violence, and human sexuality that fill the pages of a sacred text. A blurb on the front cover indicates the inherent danger in any effort to produce the Bible in a visual format: "ADULT SUPERVISION RECOMMENDED FOR MINORS."

After years of reading English literature, one might too quickly forget that British authors have frequently surprised readers with their varied, dramatic uses of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. From controversial politico-theological readings that challenge the status quo of establishment orthodoxy to familiar appropriations of religious verse for amorous ends, English literati have quoted, invoked, parodied, and rephrased biblical texts in every generation. As with Crumb's controversial use of the comic strip medium, British authors including Coleridge and other Romantics have not only alluded to the Bible but even retold its stories through dramas, memoirs, novels, notes, and poetry.

The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature captures key aspects of this vast history of literary engagement with the Bible in a surprisingly uniform and readable way. I must admit that when I first picked up this weighty tome of just over 700 pages, I fully expected to encounter a work that would best be read as an encyclopedia of sorts—picking and choosing key entries for perusal and then setting the text aside. On the contrary, I found myself engrossed in what turns out to be a fascinating story of literary engagement with the Bible—a readable and even continuous narrative for a "companion" volume involving six parts and forty-nine essays on the wide range of poetry, prose, and even hymnody of diverse figures such as the Middle English mystics, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Tennyson, Rossetti, Woolf, and the Great War Poets.

The "Introduction" is arguably the weakest section of the book (if not for David Jasper's essay on "Biblical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory," which places Augustine and Coleridge at the heart of modern British engagement with the Bible, I would recommend skipping it entirely). But the "Introduction" does indicate something of the "elephant in the room" for any reader who wishes to grapple with the relationship between the Bible and the history of English literature: how can modern readers narrow the gap between

modern critical assumptions about the Bible and the ways that the Bible has been read over the course of many earlier centuries? Christopher Rowland's essay on "The Literature of the Bible" falls precisely into this dilemma when he explains to readers that the Bible comprises a variety of genres, including narrative, law, wisdom literature, and so forth. But Rowland's description of these genres invokes and privileges decidedly *modern* assumptions about the text. For example, he explains that the first three Gospel accounts of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) rely on Mark's work and a source known as Q (German, *Quelle*) (12). Later he identifies the Exodus from Egypt with the concerns of a people returning from Babylonian captivity (15). Existing scholarship on these issues is sometimes a bit less neat and tidy than he implies, but my point here is not to argue with Rowland's scholarship.[1] Rather, the problem is that most readers in English history would not have understood the Bible according to these modern, historical constructions and even his warning against approaching these British writers as "literal minded" Protestants betrays the anxiety of oversimplification (14). Students of English literature and readers of the *Blackwell Companion* face a similar challenge: how do we overcome the temptation to look down upon the assumptions of prior ages as naïve? The best antidote to modern judgments is to read the history and witness the way that British authors used the Bible for alternately devotional, dogmatic, and frequently radical purposes that undermine our own modern confidence in either wooden, literalist readings or the imperious "scientific" assumptions of higher criticism.

The *Blackwell Companion* then develops a chronological series of five periods of English literature: Medieval, Early Modern, Eighteenth Century and Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist. Each major part of the text begins with an excellent introductory essay that sets up the period, major writings, and the themes that characterize the age. Throughout the Medieval period, one cannot help but see that the Bible is a fundamental part of the social fabric of the culture. William Langland's concordance-like knowledge of the Scriptures reminds us that the Latin Mass was part of a shared social currency. Other essayists develop a unique thesis in their survey of a writer's works, such as Christiania Whitehead's study of Geoffrey Chaucer when she explains that

> In this engagement with the Bible, Chaucer uses techniques of irony and biblical distortion for comic effect. He packs narratives such as the *Miller's Tale* with a biblical underlay to give additional texture and richness to this irrepressible tour de force. He makes various of his characters misquote or misapply Scripture to expose the blindspots in their vision of themselves—biblical awareness becomes a kind of touchstone for the evaluation of self-knowledge. But Chaucer also uses irony and misapplication in fiercer, more socially concerned ways. He channels his attacks upon corrupt and extortive clerics via their abuse of

[1] Consider, for example, Mark Goodacre, Nicholas Perrin, N. T. Wright (eds.), *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

> Scripture. That is, their misrepresentations of Scripture come to *stand for* their betrayals of vocation. If smooth-tongued clerics, those professionals of explication, can abuse Scripture so readily as a tool of predation, to whom can we turn for a *true* exposition of the Bible? (147-48)

Such a reading indicates the way that the Bible's appearance in the vernacular language could function both pedagogically for Christians seeking spiritual insight as well as socio-politically through incisive ecclesiastical critique.

The very notion of an "English Bible" was a controversial concept during the late Middle Ages and early Modern period. The public accessibility of the text can be difficult to grasp from our perspective, but Julie Maxwell provides an instructive comparison at the commencement of her essay on "Early Modern Religious Prose":

> Imagine the following dystopia. A student of literature, you are allowed access to literary criticism, but not to primary texts. Only university professors have copies of *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, and *War and Peace*—all in original language editions that few English students can read. A handful of underground manuscript translations circulate, but you can't afford to buy one. Your knowledge of literary masterpieces is restricted to the parts the professors happen to quote or describe in lectures and critical studies. . . Before the early modern period, reading or hearing religious prose could be just like this. It summarized, interpreted, elaborated, and generally put itself in the place of a text that was known directly only to a few: the Bible. (184)

Maxwell's description begins to take us into the mind of both the authors and their original audiences. The Bible was quite simply *the* main text of concern for all (church attendance was typically mandatory), but fewer individuals had direct access to the biblical text. The literature of the day, then, served as a vital point of access. English cycles of mystery plays thrived into the sixteenth century, but gradually declined around the same time that the influential vernacular translations of the Tyndale, Geneva, and, eventually, Authorized "King James" versions of the Bible gained pre-eminence over the Latin Vulgate. Henry VIII, it should be remembered, prohibited the reading of Scripture to a range of classes, including women, artificers, yeoman, and serving men (169). Although the Parliamentary Committee on Religion extended such rights to women and others after 1645, the emergence of women writers and commentators was slow as Elizabeth Clarke's essay on "Early Modern Women" helpfully explains. Most of Part III, as with the *Companion* as a whole, focuses on widely anthologized figures and it is neither a surprise nor a flaw that standard canonical figures loom large in this period: excellent essays on Spencer, Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, and Bunyan, among others, each contain helpful readings of major poetry and prose works.

The fourth part, on "Eighteenth Century and Romantic" literature, turns to

the period most directly relevant to *The Coleridge Bulletin*. In addition to selections on "Eighteenth-Century Hymn Writers" and fiction writers such as Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and Jane Austen, the section features essays on several Romantic poets, including William Blake (by Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland), Women Romantic Poets (by Penny Bradshaw), William Wordsworth (by Deeanne Westbrook), George Gordon Byron (by Wolf Z. Hirst), P. B. Shelley (by Bernard Beatty), and S. T. Coleridge (by Graham Davidson). I was disappointed not to find an essay on Robert Southey in this part—perhaps an indicator of the undue influence of the *Norton Anthology* on the largely canonical selection of the *Companion*.

If the earlier age engaged Scripture from the context of an increasingly available English vernacular translation, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed new ways of reading the English Bible through the lens of modern, critical scholarship—a model of reading that was increasingly skeptical of traditional Christian readings of the text. Stephen Prickett's "Introduction" to the period, for example, speaks of the ways that the writings of this period evince the rise of a biblical "literature" frequently cut off from the concerns of dogma: "Not least among the many ironies of critical history is the way in which, just as a literal historical interpretation of the Bible was becoming increasingly impossible for an educated readership, it was to regain much of its old status in a secularized form, as 'literature'" (326). The thesis is problematic, if only because it creates hard-and-fast divisions between faith and doubt, sacred and secular. Abundantly clear, however, is the fact that the Bible did not disappear during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Prickett reminds us: "The best figures we have available at the moment suggest that whereas there were some five hundred books published during the period, there were over fifty thousand sermons. Present estimates suggest that for every page of secular fiction published in the eighteenth century there were about fifteen pages of sermons or other explicitly religious material" (313). Hymn writers such as Cowper, Watts, and Charles Wesley each pressed biblical narrative into accessible language that captured the imagination of the full spectrum of the British reading public. Blake, while critiquing and even militating against "false religion," nonetheless exposits and reinterprets religion from a Christian perspective embracing the powers of imagination. Deeanne Westbrook extends her earlier study of Wordsworth,[2] with a reading of "Lines Written with a Slate-Pencil upon a Stone." For Westbrook, linking Wordsworth to the towering eighteenth-century biblical exegete Robert Lowth, the "Lines" exhibit Wordsworth's parabolic style, fusing literal and figurative meanings in which the latter as "hidden" and "incommensurate" cannot fully be resolved in the poem. Bryon and Shelley, too, each rely heavily on biblical narratives such as the fall of Adam and Eve, the rejection of Cain, and the troubles of Job.

Graham Davidson's treatment of S. T. Coleridge is among the most

[2] *Wordsworth's Biblical Ghosts* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

theoretical essays in the *Companion*. Davidson opens the essay with mention of the debt Coleridge owed to the Bible in so many of his poetic achievements: "His early work was suffused with the belief that the good life was that which imitated Christ, an ambition discernable in short poems such as *Pity* and *The Eolian Harp*, and long and once major works such as *Religious Musings* and *The Destiny of Nations*" (413). Given the predominantly expository style of most of the essays in the *Companion*, Davidson's attention, however, turns away too quickly from Coleridge's debt to the Bible in familiar poems such as *The Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, and *Kubla Khan*. Instead, Davidson engages Coleridge's substantial philosophical and theological work on method and the function of Scripture as a vehicle or resource for divine ideas: "The dogmatic assertions we find in these poems soon give way to a working out of the processes by which this mode of consciousness, and its corollaries, can be achieved" (413). While I wish he had developed lines of literary analysis in a complete section of the essay, Davidson provides a polished exposition of very complex philosophical shifts in Coleridge's thought that few readers might otherwise encounter. Coleridge's early emphasis on the power of nature gradually gave way, claims Davidson, to the role of the reasoning subject (under the influence of Kant, in particular). Nature is not the source of ideas, but rather the material stuff worked on by the individual mind: "Bit by bit he had rejected the view that nature is mind-making, until he asserted something that is harder for us to understand, that Nature is mind-made. Wordsworth believed that Nature could teach us about good and evil; Coleridge, finally, rejected such a view outright" (415). How does the Bible relate to nature? Davidson claims that *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* elucidates Coleridge's rethinking of biblical authority. Scripture is not an object to be worshiped ("bibliolatry"), but, as with nature, the material stuff for Reason to engage: "simultaneously he is testing what he finds there against the ideas of Reason, and allowing the Bible to bring those ideas to life in him; and though he realizes that not every event in the Bible will be established as fact, a religion without a factual history is no religion" (418). When Coleridge reads Genesis in the later 1820s, for instance, he finds not an exclusively literal history but symbols of ideas about "moral and spiritual conditions." The reader thereby becomes a key component in the dynamic of revealed knowledge. Davidson's final section takes up Coleridge's reading *practice*. Although Coleridge read the Bible with the skills of a master literary critic, a deep spirituality persists throughout his mature prose writings. He approached the biblical text in an attitude of prayer and charity because the reader ought not engage the Bible through the lens of skeptical rationalism. Though Coleridge is rightly recognized for introducing so many in Britain and America to the frequently challenging claims of higher criticism in England and Germany, his work on method led him to read the text as a spiritual act of faith.

Coleridge's influence persisted through the Victorian period, the subject of Part V, most famously through his work in *Confessions* and the "literary-critical"

idea that the Bible should be read "as any other work." The debt to Coleridge is not always recognized, but Coleridge's influence is highlighted in essays on the Brontës, Tennyson, and Rossetti. Coleridge's influence lies behind the writings of other Victorians, too, even if mediated by leading Anglican lights such as F. D. Maurice, Julius Hare, and the controversial authors of *Essays and Reviews* (1860). Certainly, the literary approach to the Bible takes center stage in the Victorian era, but here the risk is ever to read the period as one of skepticism and doubt. Although some discussion is found in the essay on Rossetti, no entries in this section were devoted to John Henry Newman or the Oxford Movement. An essay on Oxford's poet John Keble, for example, would certainly shape the portrait of Victorian engagement with the Bible. Keble's devotional *The Christian Year* (1827) was a massive publishing success that could be found in homes across Britain throughout the Victorian era. Such engagement with these well-known Christian voices will be essential if scholarship will move beyond the now discredited secularization theories that persist in Victorian studies.[3]

The final part of the stimulating *Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature* covers the Modernist period. Here, essays on Yeats, Woolf, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, and the Great War Poets all convey a vital fact: though the authority of the Bible had shifted during the nineteenth century, its thematic and narrative power continued to capture the imagination of British authors. As with prior ages, the figures of Adam, Eve, and Christ all continued to evoke fresh pathways into existential questions of human society and existence. In D. H. Lawrence, the biblical motif of paradise lost through the shameful nakedness of the Fall is regained in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. But while Lawrence elsewhere reinterprets Christ's resurrection as a declaration of freedom from sexual constraint, the same image provides a stark reminder of the inconsolable horrors of death for Great War poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature makes an important contribution to the study of the Bible in English literature. Unlike many edited volumes, the quality remains very strong throughout the text, most essays are written by expert specialists, and several essayists argue unique theses that contribute to the ongoing conversation in fresh ways. The *Companion* is certainly not the last word on these subjects, but by bringing these original essays together in a single volume, the editors have provided an entrée that opens new avenues of engagement even as it fills the appetite of those who wish to understand more fully British literature through the ages.

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[3] By contrast, see Timothy Larsen's forthcoming study *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).