

Review of John F. Sawyer, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

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This collection of thirty essays by an international collection of authors traces some of the (Christian) Bible's interactions with culture. While never offering a concise definition, the volume handles culture broadly and topically—looking at particular times, areas, institutions, and hermeneutics—but largely from a Western and Christian perspective. Some essays offer broad overviews of the topic in question, while others are thicker descriptions of a vignette within the broader topic. The volume is divided into four parts: Revealing the Past; The Nomadic Text; The Bible and the Senses; and Reading in Practice.

Part One, which the editor also terms the journey of the Bible, sketches the interaction of the Bible and Western culture chronologically in seven essays on the biblical world (Philip Davies), the patristic period (Kate Cooper), the Middle Ages (Mary Dove), the Renaissance (Ilona Rashkow), the Reformation (Peter Matheson), the Counter-Reformation (Ewan Cameron), and modernity (John Rogerson). Despite the individual authors' awareness of the cultural imperialism inherent in this approach (see e.g. Davies), the format itself still promotes what Bruce Lincoln has called the creation myth of the West, that is, the story of the birth of the rational, logical, democratic West (in which the Greeks play the starring role) in contrast to the barbaric (or tyrannical) Orient. The story is common, appearing not only in Herodotus, but also in the recent film *300*, and in the standard narrative of the college survey of Western culture. Almost necessarily, then, the authors laud the move toward democracy—in particular, the move toward empowering the people biblically by liberating the Bible from powerful institutions. Despite the format, the authors avoid the imperial arrogance of the Western narrative by calling attention to the Bible's elusive, illusory quality. Put bluntly, in most of its Western journey, there simply is no Bible. At most, the Bible exists as construct or metaphor. The Bible's material reality is an illusion, for when it finally arrived—if it ever did (see Dove)—it was read spiritually, was de-hallowed by cheap reproductions, and, then, was critically dismembered (see Rogerson). Part one, then, is not so much about the journey of the Bible as it is about the production of various Western bibles which served various cultural moments as sacred myths. Thus Davies locates the Bible as myth by placing it in the midst of, and as an interpretation of, other ancient mythologies (pp. 22-24), and Rogerson locates the Bible by discussing its modern critical treatment as such (pp. 105-107). Appropriately, for the matter at hand, the mythic Bible is inevitably symbolic—that is, it is simultaneously there and not there.

Part Two abandons the Western perspective somewhat by assaying the Bible's place in other cultures. The first two essays leave the Christian Bible behind to discuss Judaism (Edward Kessler) and Islam (Stephen Lambden). The five other essays discuss the Christian Bible in Asia (Choan-Seng Song), Africa (Jonathan Draper), North America (Scott Langston), Latin America (Erhard Gerstenberger), and Australasia (Roland Boer and Ibrahim Abraham). After acknowledging the Christian Bible's complicity with colonialism, each essay champions the appropriation of parts of the Bible—typically, stories of God's liberation of the oppressed—by grass roots religious movements. Only Gerstenberger's essay deals with biblical scholarship in his cultural area. Part Two demonstrates more clearly than Part One that the Bible is an ideological production for use in rhetoric and politics. For Langston, the "Bible" essentially becomes a code for a particular person's particular understanding of particular biblical texts. To counteract this tendency, he, like other essayists in the section, calls for the continuance of diverse, competing interpretations, and decries the possible triumph of any single understanding (pp. 212-223). Boer and Abraham are even more uncomfortable with the dangers inherent in the (monolithic) Bible and valorize the search for wary,

critical, and mocking reappropriations. Such reappropriations resist the (monolithic) Bible by denying its identification with either the status quo or with the interpreter's own agenda (p. 232).

Part Three turns to what most readers might expect from a volume entitled *The Bible and Culture*, that is, to eight essays considering the Bible's interaction within the (largely Western) arts: literature (Jo Carruthers), film (Alice Bach), music (John Rogerson), art (Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons), architecture (Andrew Ballantyne), theater (Meg Twycross), circus (Burke Long), and body (Gerard Loughlin). All of the essays offer helpful insights about items within their general topic—like Handel's *Messiah* or Rembrandt's *The Prodigal Son*—as culturally specific interpretations of the Bible. In keeping with the volume's tenor, however, the most important reflections deal with what Long, citing Exum and Moore, refers to as the "unceasing mutual redefinition" of Bible and culture (p. 369). This focus leads some essayists to reflect insightfully on (some version of) the Bible's primeval place in what Bultmann might have called the pre-understanding of artists or of critical interpreters (Carruthers, Twycross, Loughlin). Bach takes a more radical tack. Even as she makes her own observations about the Bible and film, she denies the possibility of any meaningful connections between the Bible and film. In her words, she wants "to block that metaphor," that is, to block the comparative criticism—and implicit authorizing union—of the Bible and later cultural products (p. 276). Either her essay does not belong in the volume (and, in fact, undercuts any value the volume might have), or her essay is a particularly radical statement of the volume's thesis that the Bible is always an ideological product (p. 277). If so, her essay challenges interpreters—even savvy ones like the authors of the other essays in this volume—who unconsciously (?) justify the status quo or their own agendas with their biblio-cultural interpretations (e.g. by reading films that make the governor of California a Christ-figure [p. 284]).

While the essays in Part Three reflect largely on the Western Christian Bible (though Carruthers and Twycross make other observations), Part Four de-centers the West again (compare Part Two's effect on Part One) by focusing, among other things, on contextual and post-colonial interpretations of the Bible. Part Four includes eight essays on the Bible "in practice": contextuality (Gerald West), politics (Tim Gorringer), ecology (Anne Primavesi), psychology (Ilona Rashkow), gender (Deborah Sawyer), nationalism (Jo Carruthers), post-colonialism (Sharon Bong), and postmodernism (Andrew Tate). The overall impression of Part Four is of a concern for the ethical, political effects of the malleable Bible. In other words, while the volume denies that the Bible is a static, univocal phenomenon (p. 2), neither essayists nor editor are willing to allow just *any* interpretation (pp. 4-5). Instead, they demand ethical interpretations, which by sheer repetition seems to mean interpretations (or Bibles) that stand for democracy, for liberation, and for the oppressed. If Parts One and Two do not make that point sufficiently, the essayists in Part Four make the chorus quite clear (but see Carruthers). In short, the Bible that this volume produces is post-colonial—even if it is still largely Western and certainly Christian.

Given the history of the Western Bible's use by oppressive status quos and their retainers, I hesitate to demur. Nonetheless, I found myself eventually wishing for more wary, mocking reappropriations (Boer and Abraham) or for the continuing competition of genuinely disparate interpretations (Langston). Perhaps the structure of the volume, which might be read (as it is here) as pitting the Western Christian Bible (Parts One and Three) against a nomadic, post-colonial Bible (Parts Two and Four), speaks to this same desire. The disjoint between mocking reappropriations (Boer and Abraham) and the (surprisingly?) theological take on postmodernism in the final essay (Tate) might function similarly.

At first, the volume left me thinking that there is no Bible, Virginia. But that is not the thesis of the volume, for which the matter is more Durkheimian. The Bible is a religious idea (or myth) created by a particular culture to provide both a model of and a model for that culture. The ritual in which that occurs is not quite so clear. Quoting Terry Eagleton (2000, 2), Tate observes that "culture itself in the modern age comes to substitute itself for a fading sense of divinity and transcendence" (p.

527). For me, this volume requires a slight rewriting of that sentence: “interpreters in the modern age come to substitute the Bible for a fading sense of divinity and transcendence.” If I understand correctly, it is that to which some essayists object (e.g. Boer and Abraham, Langston, and Bach).

REFERENCES

Eagleton, T. 2000. *After theory*. London: Allen Lane.



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