

## What's the Use of Reception History?

Mary Chilton Callaway  
Fordham University

*SBL San Antonio 2004*

The past 2 years have seen the publication of the first 2 volumes in Blackwell's new series on the reception history of the Bible and now even a new section, or at least consultation, here at the SBL. The name of the program unit cannily avoids the terms *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (though they are in the fine print of the description) preferring the descriptive "use, influence and impact of the Bible." But the theoretical questions of what we are doing, and what kind of contributions we can make are already before us. In a review of the two Blackwell volumes published in the Times Literary Supplement last August, A.E. Harvey challenged the editors' claim that the series was "the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible." For the reviewer, biblical commentaries had collected and reproduced the comments of earlier interpreters since the first catena in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Contrasting the Blackwell commentaries with other contemporary critical commentaries, he writes, "These reception-history commentaries, with their deliberately wide-ranging comments and illustrations from many different centuries, may claim to be offering something that is genuinely new in terms of contemporary scholarship, even if a times they appear to be returning to an older and well-established model." That older and well-established model is the history of interpretation, and for the Times reviewer, reception history is essentially a fashionable name for that ancient way of reading. In asking about the commentaries, "Are they really something new?" the reviewer throws down the gauntlet, challenging us to distinguish Reception History from History of Interpretation.

I propose to start the investigation with a little historical background and then move to some suggestions for preliminary steps toward defining the two models as overlapping but distinct. I'll begin therefore with a brief section on the origins of the term *Wirkungsgeschichte* in philosophical discourse, then move to exploring some of the differences between Reception History and History of Interpretation in published works, and end with a brief proposal for distinguishing the two. Although I hope some answers to the paper's title may emerge throughout, I will address that question directly in the final section.

### *I. The Origins of Wirkungsgeschichte*

The term *Wirkungsgeschichte* was coined in 1960 by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his study of philosophical hermeneutics *Wahrheit und Method*. Gadamer's great insight has taken hold so firmly that to describe his contribution sounds like repeating a truism. His question was essentially, "how can a human mind from one historical period and culture really understand the product of a human mind from a very different time and place?" He was dissatisfied with Schleiermacher's conviction that we can "transpose ourselves into the author's mind" and so understand the subject that the author wrote about just as the author did. The model of the natural sciences, with their ideal of objectivity, ignored what Gadamer called "the concretion of historical consciousness." It assumed that human consciousness was always and everywhere basically the same, so that with good will and a disciplined and trained effort, one could actually share the world-view of, say, Isaiah. But Gadamer was troubled by the concept of time as a gulf that could be bridged, or leapt

over, because that would mean that history had no effect on human consciousness. Gadamer argued that temporal distance is not a yawning abyss but rather a productive condition that enables understanding. This is because the temporal distance between us and Isaiah is “filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us.” Our consciousness has been formed by the content of that gap – by all the events, ideas and changes in human existence that occurred. The historical distance between Isaiah and us is not an abyss, but the ground on which we are standing. In order to understand a text from the past, the interpreter must turn over the soil of that ground, because it constitutes the interpreter’s own “fore-understanding” or “enabling prejudice.” This “enabling prejudice” defines our hermeneutical situation – our *situatedness* in a particular time and place. Gadamer writes about these “fore-understandings”: They define the horizon of a particular present, for they represent that beyond which it is impossible to see.” Understanding comes when we transpose ourselves - with our horizon of the present - to the past, thereby bringing about a fusion of horizons.

Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics provided the foundation for what would become reader-response theory in literary criticism. In 1982 Hans Robert Jauss coined the term *Rezeptionsaesthetik* to describe his theory of reading. Playing on Gadamer’s image of the horizon of the present, he described the criteria readers use to judge a literary text as a “horizon of expectations.” The way a literary work was understood by its first readers does not establish its meaning, because later readers, with different horizons of expectation, will interpret it differently. Jauss writes, “A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is

not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue.” So for example to Shakespeare’s original audiences *The Merchant of Venice* presented a realistic, if slightly exaggerated, portrait of Jews in the character of Shylock. But the horizon of expectations for late twentieth century theatergoers, having been shaped by the ugly events of that century, read Shylock as an offensive emblem of the anti-Jewish sentiment in sixteenth century England. Some contemporary directors even read Shylock sympathetically, making him the marginalized outsider in their productions of the play. As readers’ horizons of expectation change, the meaning of the literary text is inevitably changed. The basic theoretical assumption of Reception Theory is that texts do not “have meaning;” meaning is rather produced by readers who engage texts. The “intention of the author” and the understanding of the original readers take their place alongside the interpretations of subsequent readers, not above them.

In this brief sketch I have tried to show Reception History’s origins in the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the literary theory of Hans-Georg Jauss. How, then, is Reception History different from History of Interpretation, which also assumes multiple readers in diverse circumstances? Is it essentially the same thing in a more fashionable guise? I submit that while it may provide an important complement to History of Interpretation, Reception History is a somewhat different and not always compatible enterprise. This is because its orientation is fundamentally different. Let me begin with a brief reminder of some examples in hopes that we might at least be able to set some parameters for definition. While History of Interpretation is indigenous to Jewish and Christian tradition, even having its roots in the Bible, as Michael Fishbane and others have documented, Reception History has its origins in philosophy and its methods in

cultural studies. History of Interpretation is primarily a *theological* enterprise, not limited to scholars but absorbed by the faithful from an early age. Jewish children learning to read the Torah read simple midrash immediately and soon read Rashi alongside the biblical text. Every Catholic hears Genesis 3 as the story of original sin, although the word sin doesn't occur in the biblical text. The Church and the synagogue had an interpreted Bible from the beginning right up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Reformation of course changed that for many Christians in Britain and Western Europe.

Here a digression into history will help illumine some of the current state of Reception History in biblical studies. As a result of the Reformers approach to Scripture, or the first time in history the Bible was intentionally separated from the history of its interpretation. Protestants were invited to read Scripture in the vernacular (ironically of course the translation was already a hidden interpretation) not as part of an ongoing conversation reaching back to the NT itself but as a direct and somewhat private communication between God and reader. In fact one of the *Rules to be observed in the Translation of the Bible* set down for the translators of what was to become the Authorized Version instructed that "No Marginal Notes at all to be affixed, but only for the Explanation of the *Hebrew* or *Greek* words, which cannot without some circumlocution, so briefly and fitly be expressed in the Text." (Daniell 439) Nothing was to come between the believer and the Word of God. If the Reformation began to separate the Bible from the history of its interpretation, the triumph of historical-critical scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> century completed the job by making the original historical context the touchstone of meaning.

I offer this brief synopsis of History of Interpretation's on and off relation to the Bible because I think it has some bearing on our question. As a result of the Reformation and then the rise of the historical critical method, two criteria for meaning developed: what the sacred text meant in its own day, and what it means to the individual modern reader. It is a split that looks very much like the great gulf of temporal distance that Gadamer argued against, and it is a way of reading the Bible that is characteristically modern.

It's interesting that the first modern historical-critical commentary to self-consciously include History of Interpretation with the exegesis of every pericope was written by Brevard Childs, who is a Protestant. Further, the first historical-critical commentary to include "Reception History" also comes from a Protestant, Ulrich Luz. His 1985 commentary on Matthew in the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* series has received attention because it includes a section of Reception History for each pericope. The "receivers" are divided, a bit unevenly, between Protestant and Roman Catholic. For Luz, Reception History means comparing the Catholic and Reformation interpretations of a tradition.

Luz's preface is instructive. He writes, "By 'history of interpretation,' I mean the history of the interpretations of a text in commentaries and other theological writings. Under 'history of influence' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) I understand the history, reception, and actualizing of a text in media other than the commentary, thus, e.g., in sermons, canonical law, hymnody, art, and in the actions and sufferings of the church. The history of influence and the history of interpretation are related to each other like two concentric circles so that 'history of influence' is inclusive of 'history of interpretation.'" P. 95 Luz

defines history of influence broadly so as to include all genres of interpretation. Within this wide stream of traditions he makes a place for the more specialized theological readings found in commentaries, which he calls history of interpretation. But the apparent breadth of Luz' 'history of influence' is limited to the Christian history of influence. The sections of the commentary called *History of Influence* almost exclusively treat Christian writers (with the occasional mention of a rabbinic source that clarifies a Christian reading). The criteria for selection of materials illustrating the history of influence echoes Gadamer:

1. Interpretations that determine our own preunderstanding of the texts were preferred.
2. Interpretations which had an impact on the Protestant and the Catholic churches as confessional traditions were preferred in the framework of the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar*.
3. Interpretations which came close to the original meaning of the text in a changed situation and can have corrective functions for us were preferred.

For Luz History of Influence differs from traditional History of Interpretation primarily in its focus on sources other than traditional theological commentaries. But in its purpose, to be part of the ongoing conversation of the faithful, its overlap with History of Interpretation is very close indeed. The function of History of Influence is to clarify for the interpreter "1) who he or she is in confrontation with the texts and (2) who he or she could be in confrontation with them" (p. 96). In explaining the idea of confrontation Luz writes: "But the history of interpretation and the history of influence also furnish correctives; they show by example what we can be on the basis of the texts. In seeking

exemplary corrections, the interpreter is interested mainly in models from the history of influence from other ecclesiastical or cultural environments. To that extent, the history of influence also aids ecumenical understanding – a by-product.” (p. 97) For Luz the difference in genre – theological commentary vs. everything else – is expressed by the term *actualizing*, which implies that the biblical text has become part of the fabric of life somewhere in the believing community. I quote: “Especially the history of influence, which goes beyond the history of interpretation, reminds us of the fact that the understanding of a biblical text happens not only through the elucidation of its statements but beyond that by practicing and suffering, by singing and poetry, by praying and hoping. It reminds us of the fact that the understanding of biblical texts is the task of the *whole* human being.” (p. 98)

In this aspect, Luz’ History of Influence sections differ from the History of Interpretation sections that made Brevard Childs’ commentary on Exodus such a bold innovation in 1974. However, the purpose of Luz’ History of Influence sections and Childs’ History of Interpretation sections in a historical-critical commentary is essentially the same. In the introductory portion called “The Format of the Commentary” Childs writes, “The history of exegesis is of special interest in illuminating the text by showing how the questions which are brought to bear by subsequent generations of interpreters influenced the answers which they received. No one comes to the text *de novo*, but consciously or unconsciously shares a tradition with his predecessors. This section therefore tries to bring some historical controls to the issue of how the present generation is influenced by the exegetical traditions in which we now stand.” (p. xv).

The role of History of Influence in Luz' model is religious. He ends the excursus on the history of influence by noting that the commentary "attempts not to exclude some perplexity on the part of the interpreter. It contains thereby an element of personal engagement and an element of subjective limitation. Such attempts are at the same time made possible and mediated by the history of influence. In my opinion they are not something which is subsequent to the understanding of the texts but they belong to the text itself." (p. 99) This opinion of Luz reflects the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the reception aesthetic of Jauss. However, what Luz calls in his commentary History of Influence is not really Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* at all, because it is limited to readers in the Church. It's worth noting that Luz' clear statement about the intention and method of the commentary is a model rarely seen in scholarly commentaries. And indeed the commentary itself is richly textured by virtue of the many voices that are brought into the conversation started by Matthew's Gospel.

In contrast to the theological works of Childs and Luz, there is a more recent crop of studies that explore how a biblical text or tradition was influential in some historical moment. These works are typically written by scholars in fields other than biblical studies, and do not hesitate to describe the dark side of the Bible's role in history. Norman Cohn's colorful history of Noah's Flood in western thought (Yale, 1996) is an example. Cohn demonstrates the mutual influence of Bible and culture on each other. His narrative describes on the one hand how the new scientific method of the 17<sup>th</sup> century provoked new interpretations of Genesis 6-9; but on the other hand how the biblical story affected the development of scientific geology in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Recent studies of the role of Genesis 19 in the construction of the idea of homosexuality provide another

example. But biblical scholars can use cultural studies too. Yvonne Sherwood's *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge, 2000) is a learned work about a quarter of which is devoted to what Sherwood calls "backwaters and underbellies," by which she means the traditions that use the story of Jonah in ways subversive to the mainstream received Christian traditions. After a bracing description of post-modern uses of Jonah that suggests "the biblical lights are going out" Sherwood points out a paradox: "What is so fascinating is that this demise, this loss of faith in the biblical, is not so much leading to an exodus of biblical images from Western culture, but *is being expressed within the framework and language of the biblical texts*. The post-modern artists she has described "are not throwing the book of Jonah overboard, but are *using the book of Jonah to talk about its own inadequacy, demise, even uselessness*. Even in poems when Jonah is dying, even when the fish is stripped down to a skeleton, when the book is being traumatized by footage from Birkenau or Auschwitz, the book is still surviving, still living on, still miraculously overliving the message of its own death." (p. 207). Sherwood makes a plea for broadening the scope of biblical studies: "so that we can pay attention to all mutations of the biblical in Culture, including those that the Mainstream may well regard as monstrous or deviant. By circumscribing the discipline and protecting it, Biblical Studies may well be closing its eyes to one of vibrant uses of the 'biblical' in Western culture: a use that, as a reflection of the paradoxical post-Christian times in which we live, animates biblical texts precisely by questioning their relevance." (p.208)

Ulrich Luz' work expands History of Interpretation by broadening it to *actualized* uses of the text and by incorporating this Reception History into traditional commentary.

Yvonne Sherwood's challenges it to include anti-biblical and post-modern elements, the 'underbellies' of the History of Interpretation. Any commentary that undertakes to engage in Reception History will need to confront the challenges posed by these two books which understand that term in quite different ways.

Comparing these works suggests that the difference in object is not a defining difference between History of Interpretation and Reception History. Both Luz and Sherwood look at uses of a biblical text beyond the theological commentary; both use the term actualize to define the kind of interpretation they are investigating. But their basic assumptions about the biblical text are fundamentally different, and the questions they pose are not the same, even if they sound similar. By way of sharpening the discussion, I will go out on a limb and name the difference. Readers of the Bible in Jewish and Christian tradition delighted in the "polyvalent semiosis" of the texts, and in the infinite array of meanings that it generated. But the underlying assumption was that those diverse readings were facets of a single Truth, and that the Author of the text was a participant in the readings. Two midrashic examples, though they are not explicitly about Scripture, illustrate the mindset. In one midrash, manna is described as tasting like milk to babies, like meat to young men, and like honey to old men. In another midrash, each animal on Noah's ark experiences their little portion of the boat's deck as though it were their natural habitat – the lion in the jungle, the camel in the desert, the bird in a tree. The radical diversity of creaturely experience only highlighted the oneness of the Creator. In Jewish and Christian tradition the biblical text is assumed to be polyvalent in a way uniquely different from all other texts because it is the Word of God. Other texts, like Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* or *The Aeneid*, were polyvalent, but not at all in the same way

that the Bible was. That is perhaps because interpretation of the Bible was understood to be going on in the presence of the Author. The Bible might look like a text, like *The Aeneid*, but the interests of its readers always led back to the Author, who was animating the reading. There was of course a historical component. Peter Ochs expressed it nicely: the interpreters – Justin, or Augustine or Calvin – “draw selectively from the text’s field of potentiality: not out of mere subjective whim or fancy, but in service to the specific communal-theological challenges of the day.” All theological readings are have specific cultures and ideologies embedded in them. But the underlying presupposition, that the Author is looking over the reader’s shoulder as the reader interprets, is a defining characteristic of the History of Interpretation, from Jerome to Ulrich Luz. . The basic orientation of the commentary tradition in History of Interpretation is theological. The History of Interpretation in both Jewish and Christian tradition is understood as an ongoing conversation – the rabbis saw it as a banquet to which the reader is invited to take a seat – a conversation that builds through the centuries and whose purpose is to savor the riches of the Word of God and to build up the community of the faithful. The assumption is that studying Rashi or Origen will be edifying, even if we don’t always like the lesson. It is logical then that History of Interpretation tends to come from within religious communities, basically the church and the synagogue (or the bet-midrash).

The basic orientation of Reception History, on the other hand, is historical and cultural. In its original form, *Wirkungsgeschichte* was for Gadamer the history of the effects of tradition on human consciousness. Reception History looks at the ways a text or tradition has shaped the culture of its readers. Its goal is to make readers aware of something they took for granted; to make strange what was assumed to be natural, to

make local what was unconsciously taken to be universal, and to make historical what seemed timeless. The point is not to devalue tradition but to make it visible, so that we can better understand our hermeneutical situation and that of others. This consciousness is a prerequisite for genuine dialogue. The goal of Reception History, at least in Gadamer's original project, is just as edifying as that of the History of Interpretation, but in a different way.

What's the use of reception history? It can illuminate the mutual interplay of *effects* that the Bible has had on a given culture, and that a culture sometimes manages to encode in a biblical text. It can send us back to the text with a new perspective that allows us to see something that our own horizon concealed. It can keep us alert to the limitations of our own readings, and especially to the moral consequences of absolutizing our own horizon. If it is not to be a kind of Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum of exotic and shocking uses of the bible, it will be helpful to remember its roots in Gadamer's definition of understanding as transposing ourselves, with our horizon, to the perspective of the other, in order to understand how the other's reading might be right, even if from our own perspective it is impossible.

In conclusion, the term History of Interpretation is used in general for studies that take an exegetical approach and have a theological interest. The object of study may be a work of art or a piece of music, so long as the approach is exegetical and explores the hermeneutic by which the biblical text was interpreted. The term Reception History, as its origins in *Wirkungsgeschichte* imply, should describe studies that employ a mixture of historical, sociological and anthropological approaches to illuminate the mutual interplay of *effects* that a biblical text has had on a given culture and that a culture manages to

encode in a biblical text. It may well be that the two approaches will be collapsed into a single new approach that is productive for the synagogue and the church in the postmodern world, and for a culture grappling with an identity shaped by the Bible but not versed in it. But if we do merge the two approaches, it will not hurt to bear in mind their respective, and very different, histories.

---

### **Bibliography**

Gadamer, Hans, *Truth and Method* (

Jauss, Hans Robert, "Literary History As A Challenge to Literary Theory," (translated by Timothy Bahti) in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1986). The essay was originally published in 1967.

Luz, Ulrich, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*. Translated by Wilhelm C. Linss Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989).

Selden, Raman and Widdowson, Peter, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993)