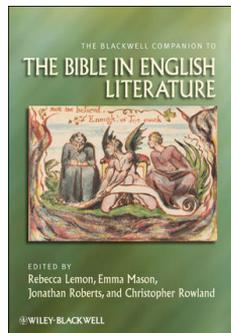


○ **REVIEW OF REBECCA M. LEMON, EMMA MASON, JONATHAN ROBERTS, AND CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND, *THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE***

(OXFORD: WILEY-BLACKWELL, 2009)

Peter D. Miscall



This is an impressive collection of 49 essays by 50 contributors including the four editors and it covers a period from the late 7th century (Cædmon) to the mid-20th century (T.S. Eliot). It is restricted to authors in the British canon (see p. 6). There are apparently no plans for Wiley-Blackwell to publish matching volumes for other English speaking countries or for literature in other languages. Most of the contributors are from British and American universities and there are two independent scholars included.

Following three essays on the Bible and literature in general the book is divided into five parts according to historical periods in English literature: Medieval, Early Modern, Eighteenth Century and Romantic, Victorian and Modernist. Each part comprises a general introduction followed by a varying number of essays on individual authors, groups or genres. The latter two comprise 15 chapters and are exemplified by titles such as 'The Medieval Religious Lyric', 'Early Modern Women', 'Sensation Fiction' (late 19th c.), 'Decadence' and 'The Great War Poets', the final essay in the collection. These chapters often discuss lesser known authors such as Mary Pope and Anna Trapnel (17th c.; pp. 175-76) and give an overview of a period.

The individuals treated are all stars in the British literary firmament. Readers will certainly question, as I have, why some writers are included and others not – for example, why a chapter on Christina Rossetti and no chapter on Keats? My concern is not with these issues of canon and who is in and not in the collection, but with the richness and diversity of the material, both the literature itself and the presentations in this volume. However, there is no mention of authors of any period who do not engage or use the Bible in any fashion in their work leaving the impres-

sion that all British authors engage the Bible in significant fashion. This impression should be addressed in a collection such as this.

There is inherent diversity in the material discussed – the different periods, groupings and genres and individual authors – and there is diversity in the way each contributor approaches their topic. There is no set format or style for each essay, but there are a number of issues and factors that are present in each essay. The essayists vary in the attention they give to each factor and how they treat the relations between them in the instance of a given author.

First are the individual authors and their specific works and these are central to all the essays; every critic discusses named authors and quotes their material to support and illustrate their presentations. There are no general overviews or impressions of a period without illustrations from specific authors; variation comes in the amount of detail and in the number and length of quotations. As to named authors, in the Old English period, 8th through 14th centuries, much of the poetry is anonymous so that Helen Barr writes of ‘The *Pearl*-Poet’ (14th c.) who composed three works that draw in detail from the Bible: *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Pearl*.

Second is the specific use of and reference to the Bible by any given author. Are particular words, phrases and passages cited in recognisable fashion? Or is the Bible drawn on for structure, themes and images as in the works of Austen and Woolf? An author can vary their engagement with the Bible within one work or across several works. For example, in *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer varies the mode and tone of his use of the Bible in the tales of different pilgrims and T.S. Eliot’s mode and tone changes and develops throughout his poetic career. What parts of the Bible are cited or drawn on: Old Testament, New Testament and Apocrypha? Individual books? All the writers discussed have their favorite books, passages, themes and such to draw on.

Third, does the author engage the Bible as an authority for Christian faith and theology as do many of the authors such as Milton, Bunyan and Christina Rossetti or does he or she cite it as an important cultural work without any such authority as do George Eliot, Yeats and Lawrence? Blake engages at length with the Bible and in a variety of ways to affirm Christianity but, at the same time, to severely criticise the present state of church and faith in Britain. Earlier both Chaucer and Langland in *Piers Plowman* criticise the hierarchy and nobility of church and state; Spenser, Mary Sidney and Swift are much more supportive of the established church. Wordsworth, with yet another variation, views the Bible positively but as a poetic, not a theological, model and integrates it into his development as a poet. Many others, in the 19th and 20th centuries, would ascribe to this poetic evaluation.

Fourth, what is the impact of the biblical material on the work in which it is included? This can vary, even within the works of one author such as Shakespeare, from the near ornamental to the integral. Most fall towards the latter end of this spectrum and with great variation in how the biblical matter is integrated into their work. A poet such as Milton incorporates much biblical material into his work and in effect rewrites the Bible.

Fifth are the times in which an author lived and wrote including major political, social (including language and literature) and religious developments and controversies. The essayists vary widely in how much attention they give to these factors. With Shakespeare little is said of Elizabethan England while the treatment of Dryden (17th c.) requires detail on contemporary royal history because his writings comment on this history. In large part the variation in the essays is

due to how and to what degree a given author addresses these issues, especially religious and church issues.

Significant parts of the religious scene of any period are the questions, usually contentious, of scriptural translation or paraphrase, of the ways of interpreting the Bible and who can legitimately read and interpret scripture. Even in the Old English period vernacular translations of significant parts of the Bible in its Latin version were available and there was a solid tradition of paraphrases in English of biblical texts. There were spirited debates as to whether the truth of the Bible lay in its Latin or vernacular version. Only after the production of the Geneva Bible in the 16th century and of the King James Bible in the early 17th century can we begin to speak of an English Bible.

Interpretation debates extend from the traditional clashes between allegorical and literal modes to those deriving from the beginnings of science, the exploration of the New World and developments in philosophy and history. There are hints of these in the 16th-17th centuries. For example, Milton refers to Galileo among others, but the broader impact appears from the 18th century on. Many begin to question the literal truth of the Bible in historical and scientific assertions and some, such as Spinoza, extend this to religious and theological matters. Dryden, Coleridge and Shelley are all aware of these developments but differ in their assessment of and reaction to them.

German Higher Criticism, which mounted a far more explicit critique of biblical truth and authority, had a significant impact in Britain only from the mid-19th century. The publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 presented the Criticism to a much wider audience and fueled the debate that still continues. Robert Browning (pp. 488-95) does not just cite the Bible but engages and argues against the new criticism in his poetry. One of the issues debated from this period on was the status and value of the King James Bible; for some to question this translation was to question the Bible itself.

Who can interpret the Bible: clergy or laity; professional or amateur; and man or woman? Julian of Norwich (14th c.) already had to wrestle with the cultural assumptions that a woman shouldn't be writing, especially in a teaching style, let alone claiming to interpret scripture over against men, particularly male clergy. Marian Evans (last half 19th c.) took the pseudonym George Eliot to help offset reaction against a female novelist; she contributed to the firestorm surrounding the new criticism by translating some German works, including Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* in 1846. T.S. Eliot, on the other hand, felt that the church was the ultimate arbiter of interpretation of the Bible (p. 672).

Sixth is the impact of biblical style and not just content. From Old English on, authors have sought in varying degrees to incorporate aspects of biblical poetry in their work, particularly parallelism. In the 1530s Tyndale produced not only an English translation of the Bible but also works that imitated the plain and sparing style of biblical prose. Tyndale in effect began writing 'biblical English' (p. 186) so that he and others could write like the Bible even when not citing or discussing it. Subsequent writers in the 16th and early 17th centuries such as Southwell (pp. 186-89) and Donne (pp. 189-95) developed the prose style implying that it was one proof of the divine authorship of the Bible.

Seventh, and my final factor, are the many pointers in individual essays to the variety of interpretations of a given author such as Milton, Wordsworth and Eliot; the diversity of the collec-

tion includes notice of critical debate. The contributors do not claim the final word or the only word on an author or on his/her engagement with the Bible. William Franke, in fact, acknowledges that his reading of James Joyce is an extension of Thomas Altizer's reading of *Finnegans Wake* and apocalyptic (pp. 642-44) and that it stands over against other interpretations.

In the words of the editors, the collection shows 'the Bible and literature to be an infinitely complex topic' (p. 8). The complexity comprises different periods, different authors, different literary styles and genres, different forms of belief and unbelief and different critical evaluations of all the former. I strongly recommend the book since it impressively shows how many ways there are, in addition to scholarly, critical work, to read and engage with the Bible whether as God's word or as ancient poetry and narrative. These many ways have a centuries-long pedigree reaching back to the beginnings of English as a language and continuing today.