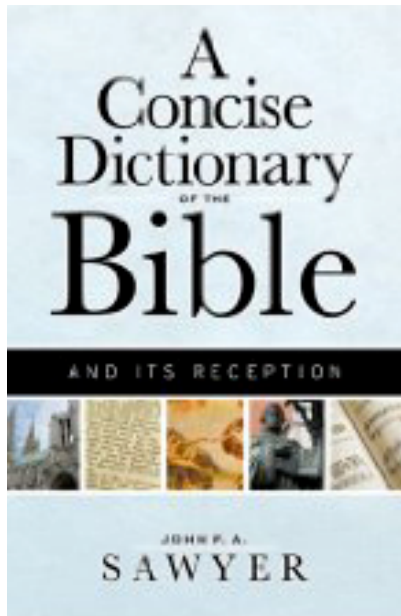


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**Sawyer, John F. A.**

*A Concise Dictionary of the Bible and Its Reception*

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009. Pp. xiii + 295. Paper. \$29.95. ISBN 0664223389.

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A number of recent and ongoing projects signal a sharp rise in interest among scholars in the afterlife of the Bible: Magne Saebø's *The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Interpretation*, the Blackwell Bible Commentaries, the Church's Bible series, the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series, and the massive *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, to name only the most important examples. Along with the "history of interpretation," scholars now commonly speak of "the history of reception" or use its German antecedent, Hans-Georg Gadamer's "Wirkungsgeschichte." This history of the Bible's consequences—both in the sense of all that comes after the Bible and the impact that it has had on those who encountered it—appears to be a new frontier in biblical research, a frontier for which there are few maps for would-be explorers. Amid this landscape, the student of the Bible encounters the often unfamiliar terrains of the histories of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, literature, music, and visual arts, not only in Western cultures but across many cultures around the world. For all who may be intimidated by the breadth that this type of exploration entails, John Sawyer, one of the editors of the Blackwell Bible Commentaries, has provided something of a survival guide through this volume, a dictionary of the most important terms, concepts, and names in this field.

The *Dictionary* is remarkable for its ambition of making available, in a single volume of less than 300 pages, accessible articles pertaining to the Bible, its background, and its consequences over more than two millennia. That Sawyer is able to manage this project alone is an undeniable tribute to the breadth of his learning. The volume is impressive in terms of the range of topics it includes: different Bibles (including “Curious Bibles”), languages and translations, key figures in the history of interpretation and reception, different interpretive traditions both major and minor, artists, musicians, and films, not to mention the contributions of “African American Interpretation,” “Asian Interpretation,” “Black Theology,” “Liberation Theology,” “Feminism,” “Womanism,” “Gay and Lesbian Interpretation,” though not “Native American Interpretation,” even though the entry on “North American Interpretation” includes a notice about the use of the book of Joshua by early American settlers to justify their treatment of Native Americans. All these have been admirably brought together by a single scholar!

Sawyer might have been better served, however, by concentrating on the “and Its Reception” part of the project. While it may indeed be “fascinating and valuable to reconstruct what the world was like in the ancient Near East,” items that are about background (e.g., “Ebla,” “Mari,” “Ugarit,” “Cuneiform,” “Hieroglyphics”) might have been left to other types of Bible dictionaries. The issue is different for entries such as “Assyria,” “Egypt,” and “Persia,” for these are mentioned in the Bible and each, in fact, has its place in the reception history of the Bible.

Conversely, one might have expected a more resolute focus on reception history at every turn. It seems insufficient, for instance, to have an entry on “Septuagint” that discusses only the background and history of the version but not the fact that it is, as any translation, an interpretive work that has its own reception history. The revisions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, too, are mentioned in this entry, though not the primary reason for their creation, namely, Jewish reaction to Christian preemption of their scriptures. By the same token, the article on Vulgate does not pay any attention to it as an interpretive work, its relation to the *Vetus Latina*, and its history of reception, beginning with the early resistance to its challenge to the Greek version that was thought to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The same is true of the entry on “Masoretic Text.” One finds here a general introduction to the topic but no discussion of the masoretes as interpreters, no notice that the vocalization of the text is itself an act of interpretation, a fact also not raised in the article on “Pointing.” There is mention of the Leningrad Codex, of course, but not Aleppo, which has long been considered the most accurate of the manuscripts. The omission is evident as well in the entry on “Manuscripts.” Here, or in a separate lemma, one might have expected as well some treatment of manuscript illuminations that are so important

in the history of the Bible's reception. Similarly, the entry on "Poetry, Hebrew" looks very much like a lemma in any standard dictionary of the Bible. It touches on possible antecedents in the ancient Near East, techniques, and structures, but not on the reception of poetry as poetry, the various attempts to render poetry (including the layout of poetry in the manuscripts), or the later Hebrew *piyyutim*. The discussion of "Acrostics" includes only biblical examples, but not the reception of acrostics in early and medieval Judaism. The entry on Bible discusses the history of the Jewish and Christian Bibles but not the *idea* of a *Holy Bible* or the Bible as cultural icon. Surprisingly, too, entries on "Covenant" and "Decalogue" cover only the biblical material, but not the reception of them in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, literature, and film.

The volume properly includes reception of the Bible in all three Abrahamic faiths, but it is somewhat more thorough in the treatment of Christian receptions than Jewish or Muslim ones. The article on "Exegesis," for instance, is entirely about Christian exegesis. Similarly, "Medieval Interpretation" is almost all about Christian interpretation, which is unfortunate, since the medieval period in the history of Jewish exegesis is its richest. Muslim exegetical methods, too, receive no attention, even though they had significant impact on the methods of Jewish exegetes and the Islamic *tafsir* provided the model for the first Jewish commentaries beginning in the tenth century. Indeed, Sawyer includes only two entries on Islamic reception ("Qur'an" and "Muslim Interpretation") in the volume; one looks in vain for articles on *Qisas al-Anbiya* ("Stories of the Prophets"), *Israiyat*, or Ibn al-Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam* ("Bezels of Wisdom"), all important sources for Islamic engagement of the biblical traditions. Even on Christian interpreters, one finds only a partial representation of views. Thus, there is an entry of "Patristic Interpretation" but no comments on the heterodox interpreters. Indeed, apart from "Marcion" and "Pelagius," there is nothing on heterodox exegetes such as Nestorius, Julian the Arian, and Julian of Eclanum. Similarly, we have one general article on the Karaites but no mention of Japhet ben Ali, the first Jewish exegete to comment on all the books of the Hebrew Bible, or of Aaron ben Elijah. The entry on Jesus does briefly mention the Qur'an, but nothing is said of Islamic polemics that surely belong to the history of his reception, as do Jewish polemics such as the medieval *Liber Nizzahon Vetus* ("Old Book of Polemics") and the *Capenter-Heretic*, a Sinhalese Buddhist anti-Christian polemical work.

As with any dictionary, there will be questions about what is included and what is not. One wonders, for example, why there is an entry on "Mesopotamian Literature" but not "Egyptian Literature" or "Greco-Roman Literature," "Elephantine Papyri" but not "Masada," "Jehovah's Witnesses" and "Christian Science" but not "Mormons" or "Seventh-Day Adventists." Why is there something on "Eighth-Century Prophets" or "Word Pairs," for which there is no reception history, but not "Cherubim (and

Seraphim),” “Delilah,” “Gehenna,” “Goliath,” “Noah’s Ark,” “Paraclete,” “Evil,” “Heaven,” “Hell,” “Holy Spirit,” “Shepherd,” “Good Shepherd,” or “Virgin Birth,” all of which have important reception histories? Why are “Gottwald, Norman K.,” “Gutiérrez, Gustavo,” and “Wiesel, Elie” the only active biblical interpreters included in this work? One might wish, too, for articles on the use of the Bible during the Crusades (both by Christians to justify them and by Jews who found comfort in scriptures when under attack by the Crusaders), the Jewish-Christian disputations of the Middle Ages, the Inquisition, and apartheid.

There are also some details in the entries that one might dispute, such as the linkage of Exod 15 and Judg 4 with the book of Ruth as examples of archaisms (see “Archaism”), the claim in the entries on “Atheism” and “Monotheism” that Deut 4:35 and 32:39 are texts where “the existence of other gods apart from YHWH” is denied (is their “existence” really at issue or worship of them?), the limitation of “Exile” to the experience of 586 B.C.E. (what about 722 or 597?), the claim that the Syriac and Arabic scripts are “a cursive development from the Hebrew alphabet” (see “Syriac”), or that the Testament of Job is an expansion of the book of Job rather than a variant of the tradition.

Despite these critical observations and questions, however, it must be recognized that Sawyer has rendered a great service to biblical studies by giving us this handy and reliable reference work. It is an indispensable guide for anyone interested in the Bible and its consequences.