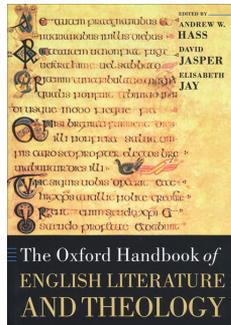


○ **REVIEW OF ANDREW W. HASS, DAVID JASPER AND ELISABETH JAY (EDS), *THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY***

(OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007)

*Duc Dau, The University of Western Australia*  
Correspondence to Duc Dau: [duc.dau@uwa.edu.au](mailto:duc.dau@uwa.edu.au)



*The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* is a significant collection of fifty essays from international scholars working in the field of literature and theology in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Edited by scholars affiliated with the journal *Literature and Theology*, the collection focuses on the intersection of theology and the Bible with literature and literary criticism.

The handbook, while largely chronological in approach, is not intended to be a history. Nor is it designed to be a comprehensive work of reference. Rather, as the editors announce in the Preface, the contributors were encouraged to ‘address key moments and developments in the mutual engagement of theology and literature’ (p. xv). Authors were afforded considerable freedom in their approach to their contribution. Essays are grouped into themes. Suggestions for further reading are provided with each essay. The final result attests to the depth of this interdisciplinary field.

Part One: Introductory Essays, contains chapters by Elisabeth Jay and David Jasper surveying the field of English literature and theology. Jay focuses on the historical aspects, while Jasper looks at the hermeneutical issues involved in considering the relationship between literature and theology. Jay poses the question, if theology can be translated as ‘discourse about God’, what kind of – and, indeed, whose – ‘God-talk’ is permitted or implied (p. 4)? This question is posed and answered in the following chapters.

Part Two: The Formation of the Tradition, offers concise chapters of the history of Christianity, from the early centuries to postmodernity, in the context of political change, religious reform, and linguistic and literary innovation. This section is vital reading for anyone interested in understanding the context behind the uses and interpretations of the Bible across time, and in the marriage between books and the Book and between words and the biblical Word. Michael Fox

begins the section by discussing the intersection between the Bible and early English texts such as *Beowulf*, among others. Lynne Long follows with her chapter on vernacular Bibles and prayer books. Long argues that translations of the Bible and the liturgy reflected changes in the English language and thus provides us with examples of the vocabulary and syntax of the period from which they emerged. Yet at the same time, '[a]s the Bible provided subject matter, a source of reference and analogy, and a model for narrative and poetic language, its influence on literature was naturally strong' and helped shaped the English canon (pp. 54–55). Remaining chapters look at the Protestant and Catholic Reformations (Brian Cummings), the Enlightenment (Rhodri Lewis), Romanticism (Scott Masson), the Influence of German Criticism (David E. Klemm), the Victorians (T. R. Wright), Modernism (Cleo McNelly Kearns) and Postmodernism (Kevin Hart).

Parts Three to Five concentrate on the links between literature, the Bible and its interpretations, and theological writings. The chief importance of these chapters, while manifold, lies in their expansion of the possibilities of reading the literary in the biblical and the biblical in the literary. Biblical writers may have written with content first and foremost in their minds, but their ability to deliver messages with 'pleasing words' and themes of resonance ensured their enduring influence on literature and literary studies. As Peter S. Hawkins notes in the opening chapter to Part Three: *Literary Ways of Reading the Bible*, Erich Auerbach – whose *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) is taken to mark the beginning of contemporary forays into the 'Bible as Literature' – was a specialist in Romance literature, not a biblical scholar (p. 207, p. 208).

Given that most readers of the Bible do not understand the ancient languages, how might we approach the Bible in a literary manner? In many ways, Part Three deals with this question. Some sections of the Bible are easily understood as being 'literary'. For instance, J. Cheryl Exum holds that the Song of Songs is 'arguably the most lyrical poetry in the Bible' (p. 259). Yet how does a reader uncover the literary qualities of the Pentateuch, which Tod Linafelt describes as being among the most 'unliterary' (p. 214) of writings? The Pentateuch contains, among other things, a limited vocabulary. It avoids metaphorical description, whether metaphorical or otherwise, and it lacks what we recognise as characterisation. Yet, this economy of style lends the Pentateuch 'its distinctive complexity as literature' (p. 215), as Linafelt makes clear through his close readings of its poetry, parallelisms and characterisation. What we might dismiss as an 'absence of characterization' is in his words 'a *certain mode of characterization*' (p. 219). Finally, he reminds us that the literariness of the Pentateuch is unmistakable in the debt that Western literature owes to many of its foundational tales such as the creation, fall and flood. Other chapters in the section address the Book of Judges (Timothy K. Beal), Psalms (Alastair Hunter), Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job (Kirsten Nielsen), Prophetic Literature (Yvonne Sherwood), the Synoptic Gospels (George Aichele), the Gospel of John (Adele Reinhartz) and Apocalyptic Literature (Christopher Rowland).

Section Four: *Theological Ways of Reading Literature*, surveys authors and poets in relation to biography, historical and religious settings, and theological elements in their selected works. Contributors also discuss the complexities involved in the endeavour of reading theology in literature. For example, Thomas Healy notes in his chapter on Shakespeare and Marlowe, 'Renaissance drama is designed as performed language. This makes these playwrights something of an anomaly in this section called "theological ways of *reading* literature"' (p. 385). The unfixed nature of performance and staging – not to mention different versions of the same play – render fixed interpretations of theological values in these texts problematic. Other chapters in this section look

at Langland and Chaucer (Nicholas Watson), Herbert and Donne (Helen Wilcox), Milton (Michael Lieb), the Eighteenth-Century Novel (Scott Robertson), Blake (Christopher Burdon), Wordsworth and Coleridge (Simon Bainbridge), George Eliot and Hardy (Norman Vance), James Joyce (Valentine Cunningham), T. S. Eliot, David Jones, and Auden (Stephen Medcalf), and Feminist Revisioning (Heather Walton looking at the work of Alicia Ostriker and Michèle Roberts).

Section Five: Theology as Literature, focuses on the literary qualities of theological writings. Theological writings have a perceived purpose. As Kirstie Blair states in her chapter on Keble's *The Christian Year*, the curative and consoling effects of the poems meant that for contemporaries they 'were fundamentally perceived as *useful*' (p. 608). Due to the secondary nature of the aesthetic in many theological writings, readers might, as Bridget Nichols does in her chapter on liturgy, concentrate not so much on 'the uncertain business of identifying the attributes of liturgical texts that qualify them to rank as literature, [but on] the ways in which liturgy inhabits the English tradition' (pp. 670–671). Other chapters are on Cranmer and the Collects (Donald Gray), John Bunyan (Robert G. Collmer), Bishop Butler (Lori Branch), John Henry Newman (Ian Ker), Matthew Arnold (Luke Ferretter) and C. S. Lewis (Cath Filmer-Davies).

Part Six surveys what the editors call 'the Great Themes'. David Scott commences his discussion of the pastoral tradition in religious poetry with one of the single most influential and resonant images in the Christian tradition, the shepherd. The pastoral image is central to the Christian tenet of love. Love in all its complexities is explored by Eric Ziolkowski in his chapter on evil and the God of love and by Paul Fiddes in his piece on the Passion story in literature. Other chapters in this section are on Death and the Afterlife (Tina Pippin), Possibilities of Redemption through the Novel (Daniel Boscaljon), Body and Word (Alison Jasper), Visions of Heaven and Hell (Elena Volkova), Feminism and Patriarchy (Pamela Sue Anderson), Salvation – Personal and Political (George Newlands).

In Section Seven, Andrew Hass concludes the handbook with a speculative essay on the future of English literature and theology in a post-secular, globalised and postmodern world.

*The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* will be an invaluable addition to any library. This book will be of great interest to any teacher, student and reader who has an interest in a field that, judging from the expansiveness of this volume, will no doubt continue to grow.