



Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible : Genesis to Malachi

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For generations, poets have turned to the Bible for insight and inspiration. What did so many creative minds find in scripture? Is the Bible still a vital source of poetic inspirations?

Chapters Into Verse is the first comprehensive collection ever made of poems written in English inspired by the Bible. A groundbreaking anthology, it introduces readers to a distinct heritage of English poetry: the scriptural tradition. Though frequently ignored and sometimes suppressed, this tradition rivals the classical and is every bit as venerable.

Drawing a unique map of the history of English poetry, the two volumes of *Chapters Into Verse* survey and define the literary legacy of the Scriptures from the fourteenth century to the present. Each volume is arranged in scriptural order, and each poem is preceded by the biblical passage that inspired it. Thus readers can conveniently witness the various ways sacred text has sparked the imagination of poets throughout the ages.

In Volume I, which covers *Genesis* to *Malachi*, almost every book of the Old Testament is represented. The collection features verses both famous and unfamiliar, from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Lord Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* to Christopher Smart's hymns and Mary Herbert's psalms. The editors have included poems by virtually all the prominent religious poets--among them, John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Edward Taylor, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Included, too, are devotional and visionary works from a wide range of vintage poets--Robert Burns, William Blake, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Alfred Tennyson, and Robert Browning.

Proving that the Bible is just as powerful a source of inspiration today as it was in the past, the collection assembles a mixed congregation of modern and contemporary poets, such as Marianne Moore, Delmore Schwartz, Dylan Thomas, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Countee Cullen, e.e. cummings, William Butler Yeats, Robert Lowell, Hugh McDiarmid, Laura (Riding) Jackson, Charles Reznikoff, A.D. Hope, Geoffrey Hill, Denise Levertov, Philip Levine, John Ashbery, and Derek Walcott.

Of enduring interest to readers of both scripture and literature, this anthology illuminates key passages of the Old Testament. The measured speech and inspired leaps of poetry offer a spirited alternative to the textual exegesis usually

supplied by prose commentary. As such, Chapters Into Verse is truly a poets' Bible. In selection after selection, readers will encounter an astonishing variety of religious experiences, as a host of poets from many eras and many backgrounds respond to Holy Scripture spiritually, profoundly, and imaginatively.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This unusual anthology catalogues the tradition of English poetry written in response to the Bible. And while it's somewhat puzzling that Atwan (*The Best American Essays*) and Wieder (*The Last Century: Selected Poems*) believe that this scriptural tradition has "led a shadow existence" and received short shrift compared to the classical, their book is unique: it provides both the passages from the King James version and the poems they inspired. Only poems of high merit, written with reference to specific passages, qualified for inclusion, which accounts for the omission of such poets as Shakespeare, Shelley and Stevens, who meet the first criterion but not the last. While excerpting may have been necessary in the case of long poems, the reader might have preferred to see the poem as a whole and the context of the author's scriptural allusions. This first volume covers the Book of Genesis to Malachi. The intent has been to rescue a neglected tradition, but Atwan and Wieder also provide a new perspective by linking poets as different as John Ashbery and Lord Byron--thrown together by their interest in Job.

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From Library Journal

Astonishing that no one has come up with this idea before! Editors Atwan and Wieder have compiled an anthology of poems from all eras, styles, and degree of reverence, which take as their major inspiration lines, verses, or chapters from the Bible. Arranged in biblical order in two volumes (Old and New Testaments), the poems are preceded by the appropriate chapters and verses (the King James version has been used throughout). Poets as wide-ranging as Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Delmore Schwartz are interspersed with D.H. Lawrence and writers from the Harlem Renaissance. The editors limited their selection of poems to those of distinctive literary merit, rather than sentimentality or sanctimonious fervor, and to those that derived from one identifiable scriptural source. The result is a two-volume work that elucidates and sometimes contradicts the writings that form the basis of Judeo-Christian belief. To read these Scripture passages and the poems that follow them is to take an unusual, reflective journey through the Bible and through the history of English poetry. Highly recommended for all libraries.

- *Judy Clarence, Cal. State Univ. Lib., Hayward*

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Review

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