

The Bible and Visual Culture II

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Contributors and Papers

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Formal Equivalence: Biblical Studies as an Approach to Visualizing Scripture

The paper represents research in the visual culture of the Bible conducted through the discipline of art practice. The discussion will demonstrate some of the ways in which biblical texts can be visualized within an anti-iconic framework of religious art using methodologies and learning native to Biblical Studies (such as textual analysis, hermeneutics, and commentary, and the study of material culture of the Scriptures). The substance of the paper comprises artworks by John Harvey made for *The Pictorial Bible* series.

The artworks are informed by the Judaic, early Christian, and Protestant Reformation views of Scripture, and a visual tradition predicated upon the illegitimacy of pictorializing spiritual concepts and scriptural stories and events. For example, the seventeenth-century Protestant Reformers adopted the New Testament's emphasis on the primacy of textual revelation and developed a tradition of text-based decoration and images wherein typographical representations of biblical verses and phrases substitute for religious imagery. The concept of an image that is simultaneously word reflects the convergence of the textual, verbal, and visual in metaphor and experience in the Old Testament, and in the incarnational theology of the New Testament. The text-based images comprising are a self-conscious and deliberate endeavour to contrive a non-representational religious art form which connects with other expressions of Judaeo-Christian and Protestant culture in particular, and with specific developments in Modernism, namely abstract, systems, and conceptual art. Informed by these concepts, the revived text-based images attempt to reinvent an 'iconoclast art'. In the context of the series, the term signifies an art which, rather than defacing religious representation, mounts a constructive reaction.

In the course of the paper, John Harvey will inaugurate and discuss (as an exemplar) a web-based artwork entitled *One Jot or One Tittle*. The artwork seeks to visualise Christ's pronouncement 'For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in on wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled' (Matthew 5. 18). The artwork literalises the hyperbole by rendering (visually) every jot and tittle in the Old Testament (to which Christ refers). This is in order to objectify and make significant (in both the sense of important and to serve as a sign) the tiniest and very least part Scripture, in keeping with the spirit of the pronouncement.

Martin O’Kane

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The Artist as Reader of the Bible: The Biblical Paintings of Nicholas Poussin

The French artist Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665) is revered for two qualities in particular: his subtle and utterly original interpretation of subject-matter drawn from biblical, classical and mythological sources and his mastery of composition. Influenced by the Neapolitan poet Marino who regarded poetry as the ‘speaking painting’ (*pittura parlante*) and painting the ‘mute eloquence’ (*muta eloquenza*), complementary arts each needing the other and both intimately related, Poussin learned how to interpret different genres of literature, especially the classics and the Old and New Testaments, and to depict classical and biblical themes with illuminating insight and imagination. As the supreme *peintre-philosophe*, Poussin has left us an invaluable legacy of masterpieces inspired by the characters, plots and human dilemmas of the bible, engaging and challenging the viewer in every age affectively and intellectually.

Poussin often treated the same biblical theme twice. Sometimes his second versions of a subject appear as ‘improvements’ on their predecessors - or the second may depict the same moment in the story in a radically revised manner. In other instances, however, he painted two complementary canvases which reveal the subject or biblical text in a wholly different light, much as a composer might devise contrasting variations on a single theme. Two such examples are *The Triumph of David* and *The Destruction of Jerusalem*.

The paper extends Paolo Berdini’s interpretation of the biblical paintings of the late sixteenth century Veneto artist Jacopo Bassano to selected works by Poussin. Far from simply ‘translating’ biblical episodes into painting, Poussin’s works represent subtle, insightful and demanding readings of biblical texts, designed to address, engage and change the viewer in a process Berdini calls visual exegesis. The paper pays particular attention to how (and why) Poussin frequently revisited and re-interpreted biblical episodes he had already depicted and will include discussion of a number of his biblical paintings including aspects from *The Seven Sacraments*, *The Triumph of David* and *The Destruction of Jerusalem*.

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In Danger: Representations of David and Jonathan in Western Art

The relationship between David and Jonathan has become a cause celebre in contemporary debates about gender and sexuality. This paper looks at the interpretative assumptions lying behind the depiction of the pair in the Western artistic tradition and traces two visual traditions which differ in the relative ages assigned to the two figures. Particular attention is paid to the unique approach in Frederick Lord Leighton’s *Jonathan’s Token to David* where the ambiguities of the text are given a remarkable visual representation. Reading text and painting together raises fundamental questions about the use of modern understandings of sexuality in interpreting a late Victorian artwork, let alone an ancient near Eastern text.

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Layers of Biblical Interpretation: Text, Painting and Film

This paper deals with the award-winning, short documentary film *Dresden 1964 – Im Zwinger*. Recorded in the Zwinger museum during socialism, the film observes a tour guide interpreting two of the museum's paintings, Veronese's *Madonna of the Cuccina Family* and Rubens's *Bathsheba Bathing*. I will be asking why Rubens's *Bathsheba* is presented by the guide, and the film, in a very positive light, while Veronese's painting acts as a negative counterpart. In search for an answer to this question, I will be looking at the way in which Rubens's painting constructs its spectator, and at whether such a spectator could be implied in the biblical text itself. I will argue that, as far as the status of the spectator is concerned, Rubens's painting fits better into a socialist ideology than Veronese's.