

Imago Exegetica: Visual Images as Exegetical Instruments, 1400–1700. Walter S. Melion, James Clifton, and Michel Weemans, eds. Intersections: Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture 33. Leiden: Brill, 2014. lv + 1,008 pp. + 24 color pls. \$329.

Imago Exegetica is a formidable tome. This brick of a book, with its Latin title and over 1,000 pages of essays, makes a first impression of the utmost scholarly seriousness. The essays, written by junior and senior scholars, are red meat for all who are interested in knotty questions about the mutually reinforcing relationships between words and pictures in the early modern era. The question about the role of pictures in Christianity extends back to Saint Gregory's assertion that religious images aid the prayers of the sluggish, and reaches forward to more recent debates about the biblical and Hollywood accounts of the Passion. Art historians necessarily consider the ways that images respond to, depart from, embellish, distort, reiterate, or perpetuate notions expressed in words.

Happily this book offers worthy and provocative discussions. Walter Melion declares in the introduction that the volume's objective is to "examine the relation between artistic practice and biblical hermeneutics" (29), and the essays that follow make good on that promise. Contributions are arranged in the following categories: "Visual Typology" addresses images as types and antitypes, such as Old Testament motifs as forerunners of New Testament motifs; "Visual Analogy as an Exegetical Instrument" offers a visual corollary of type and antitype. "Exegetical Imagery of Spiritual Conformation" concerns the ways in which images allow the viewer to identify with Christ and the spiritual life.

“Reading the Bible through Images” explores the role of pictures as aids for reading scripture. “Visual Inflections on Textual Authority” assesses the authority of images relative to the texts to which they pertain. “Emblematic Images and the Discernment of Religious Truth” focuses on the discrete category of emblems — that is, images combined with proverbs and lessons. And “Prefiguration and Transfiguration” brings the reader full circle, to the transformation of type through antitype.

In the opening essay Melion introduces the mechanics of exegesis, a method of textual interpretation that “in the Christian tradition involves the close reading of Scripture by a theologian trained to search out the divine truths it conveys” (1) with reference to levels of meaning, including the literal (inspired author’s intended meaning), consequent (inferred from the literal by way of analogy or allusion), or typical (biblical content as figurative types of truths). Melion then argues powerfully that the strategies of Bruegel’s celebrated *Woman Taken in Adultery* (1565, London Courtauld Institute of Art) exemplifies Christ’s humility, as he bows down to write his response to the Pharisees’ accusation on the ground. With reference to an influential exegetical compendium known as the *Glossa Ordinaria*, Melion contends that Bruegel’s painting is an antitype of Exodus 31:18, where Moses receives the Tablets of the Law “inscribed by the finger of God” (10).

The book contains too many fine essays to detail in this short review. One highlight is Jamie Smith’s “Jan van Eyck’s Typology of Spiritual Knighthood in the *van der Paele Madonna*” (1436, Musea Bruegge), where the author contends that a scene in a historiated capital to the right above the Virgin’s throne depicts the story of Jephthah, the illegitimate son of an Israelite expelled from his clan (Judges 11). Just as Jephthah gained legitimacy by service and sacrifice rather than by birth, the illegitimate van der Paele, so the painting claims, fought for and earned his own legitimacy. Larry Silver’s essay “Bruegel’s Biblical Kings” responds to scholars who have seen such images as *The Tower of Babel* (1563) and *The Suicide of Saul* (1562; Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum), among others, as allegories for the miseries inflicted on the Low Countries by the Spanish. Adding nuance to the work of scholars such as Margaret Carroll, who has seen Bruegel’s paintings as primarily political, Silver contends that spiritual content is as important, and in fact consistent with, political content.

The word *unfortunately* inevitably appears in reviews right before a fatal criticism. Although it is not fatal, it truly is unfortunate that *Imago Exegetica* does so much to make itself inaccessible. The pompous Latin title will give graduate students pause and ensure that no undergraduate picks the book up from the library shelf. The inclusion of gratuitous Latin, especially in the introduction, will discourage those brave enough to crack the binding. The organizing principle of exegesis may not actually serve the purpose of the book, and exegetical vocabulary may confuse the issues, because what is offered is in fact solid and worthy iconography.

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