

***Textes sacrés et culture profane: de la révélation à la création*, edited by Mélanie Adda**

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This collection of fascinating and immensely scholarly papers was first delivered at a colloquium for young researchers at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art in the Sorbonne in January 2008. Thanks to imaginative editing on the part of Mélanie Adda, lecturer in Comparative Literature at the Sorbonne, the ten papers, revised in the light of “les riches débats” that followed their original delivery, are arranged in three sections in such way as to create a coherent monograph, despite the huge diversity of the material covered. The papers are arranged in order of the proximity of their topic to the original sacred text, from relatively close interpretations to more complex and distant relationships, and seek to contribute to the ongoing discussion of two overarching concerns: what exactly do we mean by a “sacred text” and what happens when sacred texts interact with secular cultures. The considerable achievements of this interdisciplinary project are commended in a friendly preface by François Boespflug, Professor of the History of Religions at Strasburg, who chaired one of the sessions at the original colloquium.

After an introduction in which the editor summarizes the papers and explains the structure and rationale of the volume, the first part, entitled “Textes sacrés et Traditions,” looks at four examples in which the route from the biblical text to its reception is fairly straightforward and direct, though often involving interesting elaborations and transformations. A mediaeval French translation of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, preserved in three manuscripts of the Bible, prompts discussion of the canonicity or “sacredness” of the original Latin text and of the effect of translating it into the vernacular for the laity (Lydie Lansard). The next paper suggests that Philo saw himself as a divinely inspired successor to Moses, like Aaron, as interpreter of God’s word, and that consequently his works may be considered in a sense sacred texts on a par with the Hebrew Bible and the LXX (Géraldine Hertz). A short study of the crucial role played by the Bible in the works of Paul Claudel (1868–1955), not only in his poetry and other writings but also within the commentaries (which account for half his published works), plays down the differences between the Bible and the exegetical works it in-



spires, since in both, poetry, theology and science are three facets of the same experience of God (Alexandre Solignac). By contrast, a study of twelfth- and thirteenth-century illuminated manuscripts of Zacharie de Besançon's *In unum ex quattuor*, an influential exegetical work on the Gospels, concludes that in this case the art-work is ornamental and functional and acquires none of the sacredness of the Biblical text it illustrates (Frédéric Tixier).

In the second part, entitled "Contournements et détournements du texte sacré," there are three contrasting illustrations of how the text can be distorted or misappropriated. A close reading of Descartes' *Le Monde* demonstrates how he interprets Genesis in such a way as to find truth there complementary to Cartesian philosophy, not opposed to it (Delphine Bellis). The other two papers in this part examine St Augustine's polemical use of the Bible in his anti-pelagian treatise *Contra Iulianum* (Mickaël Ribreau), and political propaganda in fifteenth-century biblical frescoes on the walls of the Palazzo Trinci in Foligno (Jean-Baptiste Delzant). The third part is entitled 'Textes sacrés, textes profanes' and deals with the complex relationship between sacred texts and secular literature in three very different examples. The first examines the process whereby the popular mediaeval motif of Christ's Descent into Hell, ultimately derived from the Bible (e.g. Eph 4:8ff; 1 Pet 3:18ff) and then elaborately dramatized in the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate* and *Gospel of Nicodemus*, was reused in mediaeval works of secular fiction such as Robert de Boron's *Merlin* (Irène Fabry-Tehranchi). The editor's own contribution to the collection discusses the literary function of biblical names in the novels of Albert Cohen (1895–1981) (Mélanie Adda), and the last paper examines the notion of sacred text in Chinese tradition with reference to the *Analecets* of Confucius and their translation into other languages (Nicolas Idier).

Few readers, particularly biblical scholars like the present reviewer, will have expertise in all or indeed any of the disciplines represented so impressively here—Philo, Patristics, Mediaeval Art, Mediaeval Literature, Descartes, Modern French Literature and Chinese. But two features of the volume suggest that it should reach a wide readership beyond the specialists' own universe of discourse. On the one hand, the authors have clearly gone to great trouble to make their writing intelligible to the non-expert, both by avoiding technical jargon and by filling in relevant background details where necessary. On the other hand, the Bible is the starting point for most of the discussion, or at any rate plays a significant role in all the papers, even the final one, and this means that anyone with an interest in the Bible and its afterlife—and that accounts for an ever-increasing number of readers, will find

this remarkable monograph a source of enjoyment, useful information and enlightenment. Like the *Dictionnaire de la Bible dans la Littérature française* by Claudia Jullien (2003), this is an invaluable way into French reception criticism for biblical scholars, even though the word Bible is missing from the title and there is no index of biblical references.

John F. A. Sawyer
Perugia