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## Introduction

### Interpretation of the Bible through Art and Music

THIS ISSUE of *Relegere* explores the reception of selected biblical material through the medium of painting, visual presentation, and musical performance. The material which it contains derives from papers presented over several years at sessions of the Society of Biblical Literature meetings, within the programme unit Bible: Influence and Impact. This unit was introduced by Kenneth Newport and later came under the oversight of Andrew Mein and Mary Mills. At the time of its inception, the unit was unique in offering a place for the delivery of papers in reception history and popular culture. The topics offered for sessions ranged over a wide field of historical usage and cultural impact. Since then, dedicated units have been set up for Bible and visual arts, for Bible and music, and for Bible and popular culture. The programme unit remains, however, a context in which these several approaches to textual interpretation can be brought into dialogue with each other and

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where the essential nature of the hermeneutics of reception history can be investigated.

The focus in this issue is the manner in which different cultures engage their biblical inheritance and communicate text to audience through visual and aural experiences, one of the major sub-areas of interest within the wider remit of the field. This is, of course, an expansive subject and the present collection of papers is indicative rather than exhaustive, making no claims to providing a definitive account of the range of the unit. Rather, the material provides a collection of case studies, which in turn should lead the reader to reflect on the potential for infinite variety in biblical reception. The over-arching theme is that of the intersections of the Bible, fine arts, and performance—a theme which is explored via three papers that illustrate aspects of artistic interpretation and two papers dealing with the topic of musical readings.

Artistic and musical uses of Scripture are not neutral evaluations of art for its own sake, of course. They can be read as examples which flesh out some aspects of reception hermeneutics, but they do not tend towards an absolutist definition of that subject. They embed biblical meaning solidly within specific cultures. A visual depiction of a biblical scene is laden with the political and social questions and concerns of the time when it was produced. In that sense, a painting provides another text which comments on the original written format and adds another layer to the possible meanings which can emerge from a foundational text.

It is interesting in this connection to note the work of the St John's Bible project, pursued by the Benedictine College in Minnesota. The project emerged from the monastic tradition of producing illuminated Bibles, thus communicating ancient literature in new cultural contexts via the medium of artistic interpretation. The modern project desires to re-invigorate this ancient tradition by combining calligraphy with fresh artistic visions. In particular, the project aims to bring religion and science into dialogue through an artistic interpretation. Hence the illustration of Genesis 1 in the St John's Bible utilises images of cosmic energy derived from modern scientific cosmology and the topic of the creation of humanity is viewed through imagery drawn from anthropological discoveries concerning early human art forms.

The project creatively interweaves biblical text, religious understanding, and artistic creativity, highlighting the role of art and music in providing a bridge between culture, politics, and religious belief. This reflection serves as an introduction to the four papers in this special section, each of which

addresses in formal detail the specific artistic performance of a biblical work or works in their own time and cultural context. The leader of the St John's Bible project, Michael Patella, has commented that the St John's project provides an example of linking artistic development, scientific discovery and the communication of religious values such that it "forces one to ask whether the exegesis informs the art, or the art explains the exegesis."<sup>1</sup> It is the interwoven nature of literary and visual/aural media in performing the meanings offered by biblical texts which each contributor addresses in his or her own research interests.

Martin O'Kane is based at University of Wales Trinity St David and his paper offers a reflection on the parallelism in artistic representations of the landscape of Wales with that of the symbolic landscapes provided by biblical traditions. This paper draws on the foundational study of Biblical Art in Wales (for which he acted as principal promoter), a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, a major source of UK government funding. He explores the integration of biblical iconography with the specific spatial site of the Welsh landscape, which artists utilised in their representation of the Bible in regional churches and chapels.

Ian Boxall is based at the Catholic University of America and his academic focus is on the apocalyptic aspects of biblical books. Here he contributes a paper which focuses on one major biblical scene, the prophet John in his Patmos exile, and shows how depictions of the same scene come to be differently nuanced depending on the cultural frame of both the artist and the audience. One motif can thus have multiple depictions, each of which mediates a message targeted towards its original audience.

Peter McGrail works at Liverpool Hope University and has special interests in music and liturgy. In this paper he provides an examination of the work of composer Benjamin Britten, whose opera, *Burning Fiery Furnace*, was intended specifically for performance in a church. This leads McGrail to draw out the several strands woven into the piece by Britten, including the influence of Noh plays. From there, McGrail moves to reflections on the role and function of ritual in performance within religious settings.

Finally, Siobhan Dowling-Long, based in University College in Ireland, addresses the work of Metastasio, a court librettist in the Hapsburg court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He was a prolific writer whose

<sup>1</sup> Michael Patella, "Art as Exegesis, Exegesis as Art." Paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting, Rome, 2009.

oratorios were frequently staged across Europe. The aim of Dowling's study is twofold: to explore the biblical and extra-biblical sources used in the production of the libretti and then to analyse how this material was delivered in performance, using three oratorios as a case study.

While each topic stands in its own space, together they address some common issues with regard to the reception of biblical texts. O'Kane's paper crosses the centuries in order to showcase the wide range of biblical imagery found at Welsh sites. This in turn touches on the socio-political matter of national and local identity, a concern often intertwined with religious interest. Ultimately geography and religion are interwoven in the theme of mapping a land and so defining a society's cultural roots. Boxall stays within the Renaissance period but likewise demonstrates how shifting political and socio-economic circumstances re-shape the artistic imagination in its pursuit of appropriate imagery to comment on specific local debates. One single biblical passage can thus be the ground for a number of different illustrated meanings, all of which pertain to a bounded time and place.

The papers by McGrail and Long demonstrate something similar in regards to musical performance. McGrail's contribution explicitly aligns the space of performance with a dedicated religious place-setting and thence with ritual action more broadly. In his view, the performance of text, whether as art-form, philosophical tool, or religious practice, provides a further existence to biblical material beyond the literary. Long's exploration of seventeenth century Viennese courtly music returns us specifically to the issue of art's dependence on, and use of, sacred text. This contribution raises the question of the extent to which performance is necessarily part of that process.

Art and music have their own modes of operation and traditional styles which can be brought to bear on the task of dealing with the ongoing cultural life of literature. What these tools offer is a fresh creative layer to literary artefact in which the original literary form is not denied value but is shown to have many more possibilities for communication of religious and social meanings than can be seen from a surface reading of the text. These further layers embed the inherited material within the changing social, political, and ideological realities of human experience. However, this is a two-way process, in which a text inspires and helps to guide the interpretation of new events and in which the same text becomes embedded in the contemporary world in such a way that enriches that same text's possibilities as an agent of communication, often in ways that would have been impossible when the text was originally written.