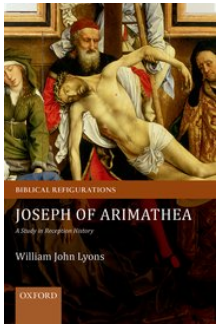
Joseph of Arimathea: A Study in Reception History, by William John Lyons



Biblical Refigurations | Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 | viii + 193 pages | ISBN: 978-0-199695-9-11 (hardcover) $99.00; ISBN: 978-0-199695-9-28 (softcover) $29.95

My initial attraction to this book was its cover—even if that may sound decidedly unacademic and facile. It features Rogier van der Weyden's famous oil painting entitled *The Descent from the Cross*—to be found in the Prado, Madrid. The detail shown is that of Joseph of Arimathea holding the dead body of Christ as he is lowered from the cross. Those interested in European art of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries know that Joseph of Arimathea features in a great many descent-from-the-cross paintings and yet, beyond being name-checked, few art historians deal with this character in any depth when discussing these works. My hope was that this mysterious and under-explored biblical figure of Joseph of Arimathea would be fleshed out in new and illuminating ways. The author does not disappoint in this regard and I learnt much that hadn't even been on the periphery of my awareness about Joseph prior to reading this engaging book.

As is clearly indicated by the subtitle, Lyons's book offers a reception history of Joseph of Arimathea. In this sense it is at the cutting edge of the emerging area of reception history within biblical studies. It is evidence, I am sure, of many more dedicated studies to come that will explore in depth the cultural and literary afterlives of single biblical characters in many different arenas. While I am familiar with studies that have explored the afterlife of female characters in particular, such as Judith or Susanna for example, in Renaissance and Baroque art—I cannot think of a study that attempts to simultaneously move across many cultural areas and eras. Lyons thus opens up an interesting new vista—and challenge—for reception history scholars with this work, through this focus, bringing a marginal biblical character from their portrayal in the biblical text right up to the present day. As has been noted by Lyons, he had to be particularly selective about which aspects of the afterlife of Joseph of Arimathea to give attention to. The consequence of these choices meant that much had to be selectively and consciously ignored—thereby leaving gaps in this particular study—to be taken up by other interested scholars at a later stage. His study does not follow either a strictly

chronological path or a focus on a particular area, such as the arts. Rather, he delves deeply in diverse areas of investigation including painting during the Renaissance period, as well as contemporary popular cultural appropriations of Joseph of Arimathea (many unconscious no doubt) such as the advancing of Blake's "Jerusalem" as a new type of "national anthem" for English sports teams! While acknowledging the gaps, there is no doubt that his study does present biblical scholars with one type of model of a reception history with which to proceed. One can see the potential for a series of similarly fascinating monographs exploring different characters in such a fashion. As with this volume they could have broad appeal to a wide range of readers including those outside the academy. In this sense, this is an exciting and timely addition to the burgeoning catalogue of biblical reception studies.

The volume contains six chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. Their scope is clearly defined in their titles: "The Biblical Joseph," "The Early Joseph," "The Renaissance Joseph," "The Glastonbury Joseph," "The 'Jerusalem' Joseph," and "The Twentieth-Century Joseph." The opening chapter on The Biblical Joseph serves as a necessary foundation to the rest of the book, grounding Joseph in his literary textual origins in the four canonical gospels. Here we have a close textual reading that acknowledges the downfall of certain practices, within traditional biblical studies of times past, that have sought to harmonise the gospels. Such practices, Lyons maintains "can just as easily hide the specific contours of each gospel's Joseph as reveal them."

The earliest recorded layers of the canonical Josephs' reception as they developed in the first millennium are opened out in the next chapter. A natural trajectory is developed as the effects of the four gospels are picked up in five examples from the following centuries. The Gospel of Peter (ca. second century), the Gospel of Nicodemus (ca. fourth century), the homilies of John Chrysostom, Jerome's Vulgate and Augustine's *De Consensus Evangelistarum* are all covered. Here we are introduced convincingly to the diversity emerging early in Joseph's literary afterlife. The initial difficulties posed by "the lack of a definitive characterisation of Joseph" in the canonical gospels and the attempts to deal with that in turn saw him moulded according to differing agendas and his afterlife in the literary tradition proceeded down many different strands.

The third chapter turns to the visual arts and the Renaissance in particular. Obviously a reception history of Joseph of Arimathea in art could quickly require a volume of its own and again the potential for numerous such fur-

ther and expansive studies becomes apparent as one progresses through the book. Five paintings are considered here: Simon Bening's *Joseph of Arimathea before Pilate*, Rogier van Der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross* (detail shown on the book cover), Sandro Botticelli's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, Michelangelo's *Entombment*, and Simon Marmion's *Ducal Lamentation*. There is an interesting discussion around Michelangelo's sculpture, the *Florentine Pièta* and the ambiguity of the tall hooded figure lowering the body of Christ into the lap of Mary. The excursus into "Nicodemism" arising during this period is an illuminating addition to this exploration of the established depiction of Joseph and his visual relationship to the character of Nicodemus. It would be wonderful to see Nicodemus being given a parallel reception historical treatment to match this of Joseph of Arimathea.

There is an issue that arises from time to time with reception history scholarship that focusses on the visual arts and this is the strange exclusion of the art under discussion. This is a complaint levelled at the publisher rather than the author but unfortunately none of the artworks discussed were shown in the book. This seems to be a peculiar omission as these artworks are, as I understand it, in the public domain and out of copyright. These images appear frequently on blogs and countless other internet pages (without even so much as an acknowledgement of the artist in many cases), magazines, parish missalettes, book covers, and conference posters—often serving as nothing more than a decorative flourish. And yet they are not featured here in an academic book explicitly exploring the detail, meaning, and influence of those images. As we have now moved to digital printing there is no technical reason for not printing images in black and white; they can be just as easily and well reproduced as text. If we are able to include (often copyrighted) works of poetry, song lyrics, movie stills, photos from theatrical productions in our reception-history academic publications we must find a way to include the visual arts of painting, drawing, design and sculpture and treat them as being of equal importance for inclusion. This volume would have been enhanced by the inclusion of these artworks.

As a very small aside, in the discussion of Michelangelo's first *Pièta*, it is incorrectly cited as being in St Peter's Cathedral in Rome (60). This should read St Peter's *Basilica* (and to be really pernickety: in the Vatican City, as this is a sovereign state albeit a tiny one). A minor error appears on the back cover where Van der Weyden's painting is incorrectly entitled *Deposition* rather than *The Descent from the Cross* as it is labelled by the Prado and, indeed, the author. Admittedly these terms are occasionally used interchangeably.

At this point the book turns to Glastonbury, a town in Somerset in the South West of England. Some British readers might be familiar with legends connecting Joseph and the tin trade and Glastonbury. As one not overly familiar with the Arthurian legends and medieval English history, I admit to being slightly wary embarking on this chapter, feeling there was too much local history beyond my remit to allow me to fully appreciate its significance, but it proved to be thoroughly fascinating and worthwhile. Five turbulent centuries of English religious and political history are spanned, revolving around intersecting layers of Joseph legends. This moves seamlessly into the following chapter on the "Jerusalem" Joseph, which expands the reception in further surprising and delightful directions. This trajectory of Joseph reception—from the words laid down by William Blake in a preface to his epic poem "Milton," of which four stanzas have been popularised as the song "Jerusalem," later set to rousing music by Sir Hubert Parry during the Great War, and its subsequent uptake in popular culture during the last century—is intriguing.

Finally, beyond the desire to create a national anthem of "Jerusalem," Joseph of Arimathea has continued to find his way into other facets of contemporary social life, whether it be as the patron saint of pallbearers, funeral workers or tin miners, or a character in an Indiana Jones movie—among many diverse iterations well-covered here. In his conclusion Lyons makes an interesting observation drawn from his experience of researching this vast body of material. And he relates this back to the "broadly active Joseph of the three Synoptic Gospels" and the "passive Joseph of the Fourth Gospel." The receptions of Joseph largely conform to one or other of these dualities: "Joseph as an *active* man, looking at the examples of his bravery, his wealth and influence, his masculinity, his sanctification, and his dominance over others; and Joseph as a *passive* man, looking at examples of his guilt, his fear, his secretiveness, his malleability, and his submissiveness to those who have appropriated him." This insight gleaned from pursuing Joseph down the centuries and across the seas in turn offers something profoundly rich back to the historical-critical scholar.

Lyons's book certainly unveils the complexity of the task and scope of such a reception-historical project even when it considers a so-called "minor" character, like Joseph, who features in little more than a few verses. It also undoubtedly reveals the necessity of such endeavours and the immense value such research has to offer not only biblical scholars but a much broader interdisciplinary scholarship and readership. This book is very accessible and

has much to offer a wide range of readers from biblical scholars to Joseph enthusiasts of all persuasions. I hope it is proving a bestseller in Joseph's legendary stomping ground of Glastonbury.

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