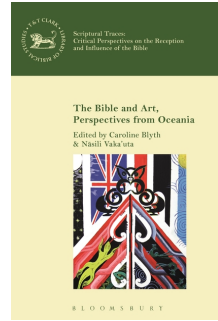


*The Bible and Art, Perspectives from Oceania*, edited by Caroline Blyth and Nāsili Vaka’uta

Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible 11 | Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 656 | London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017 | xiv + 301 pages | ISBN: 978-0-567-67329-9 (hardcover) \$125.00 | ISBN: 978-0-567-68385-4 (softcover) \$39.95 | ISBN: 978-0-567-67330-5 (ebook) \$35.95



As academic genres go, edited volumes are a mixed bag—often because they are not mixed at all, but items merely thrown together with no real blending. Thankfully, Blyth and Vaka’uta’s edited volume on engagements between the Bible and art in Oceania makes for a harmonious stew. Its fourteen essays by biblical scholars, theologians, and art historians aim to create a rich conversation on visual exegesis, itself a relatively new method in biblical criticism, using a body of artwork relatively neglected in the literature. The volume succeeds in meeting J. Cheryl Exum’s goal of visual exegesis as a genuine dialogue between art and sacred text.

At first, this volume’s focus on a particular geographic region might make it appear narrow: Oceania, mainly New Zealand and Australia. But in fact, its chapters raise many questions relevant to visual-exegetical studies in any context. There is also a valuable dialogical relationship between the subject matter of the various chapters.

One trademark of visual exegesis is an attention to how an artist’s context interplays with how they read the Bible. In examining Oceanic art, a pivotal identification is whether the artist is indigenous, of colonial European descent, or both. In “Exploring Visual Exegesis: A Conversation between Artist and Beholders,” authors Caroline Blyth and Alex Farrell interview Tony Brooking, New Zealand artist and Anglican priest, on his *Te Tīmatanga* exploring Genesis 1–3 through the lens of his Māori culture’s visual language. Their questions elicit Brooking to explain the story behind, and the iconography of, this vibrant abstract work. Similarly, Robin Woodward shows how Darryn George incorporates the philosophy and artforms of both his Māori culture and his Christian heritage in his abstract art. However, other artists

profiled in the volume are of European descent, and may or may not pay honor to indigenous cultures in their work. Judith Brown's article on the paintings of New Zealander Colin McCahon, "Is This the Place?", analyzes two of his works through the lens of the biblical Promised Land. McCahon invites his viewers to deepen their relationship to land and place, to undergo the kind of spiritual pilgrimage the Israelites did in the desert as they prepared to enter their Promised Land. In our postcolonial era, Brown notes, this rhetoric raises an immediate caution (261–62). This same "Promised Land" slogan was used to bring Europeans to New Zealand, displacing native peoples, making McCahon's use of this theme as ecological critique somewhat ambivalent.

What tensions and differences might emerge between artists who identify as *Christian* artists, and those who speak the language of biblical symbolism as one of many tongues? In her profile of sculptor and painter Gael O'Leary, Robin Woodward carves a portrait of this former Sister of Mercy's irony-filled career. She is a sculptor of several pieces which honor the history of her order—an order that opposed and devalued her vocation. Though her work explicitly glorifies God through depicting biblical subjects, often commissioned by churches, she left her order after over four decades, frustrated with the position of women in the Church. Now, as a laywoman, O'Leary continues in her walk of faith and artistic work for churches. By contrast, Woodward's profile of New Zealand sculptor Terry Stringer's biblical work highlights that he is just as likely to draw on classical myth as on Christian scripture—though, interestingly enough, not Māori narratives. Moving further away from a pious aesthetic, Anne Elvey shows how Australian indigenous photographer and filmmaker Michael Riley uses the material Bible as a vehicle to explore concepts of colonial contact, which brought the Bible alongside its horrors. Riley's art suggests that, in Elvey's words, "the tragic ambiguity of the Bible as a cultural artefact of the colonizers may open to hope through kinds of Indigenous resistance to, and enculturations of, the Bible" (163). The contrast between these essays brings out a persistent theme in reception history: the Bible lives through those who treat it as a close friend as much as it speaks through those who see it as an acquaintance and even those who distrust it.

While pursuing a genuine conversation between the Bible and Oceanic art is valuable, two articles in the volume ask: can we also devise *hermeneutical models* derived from indigenous Oceanic cultures to look at the Bible and art? Here, rather than reading Oceanic art through the lens of the Bible,

the Bible is read through the lens of Oceanic art and is culturally embedded meanings. Nāsili Vaka’uta uses the Tongan artform of *ngatu*, a type of patterned barkcloth with great social and artistic significance, to examine the first creation story (Gen 1:1–2:4a). In doing so, he finds an ecological critique of the text, which he claims depicts ‘Elohîm ignoring and silencing ‘Eretz’s role in creation: “‘Eretz as an active subject in creation has now become a mere side note in the story. ‘Eretz is silenced!” (108). Likewise, Jione Havea’s “*Tatau*ing Cain” reads the mark of Cain (Gen 4:15) through the lens of the Tongan practice of *tatau*. Like *ngatu*, *tatau* is not art for the gallery, but part and parcel of social identity, daily life, and cultural significance; the *tatau* is not hung on a wall, but worn on one’s body as a form of clothing (191). In both cases, these models felt somewhat underdeveloped, but naturally there is room to develop these frameworks.

The *ngatu* and the *tatau* naturally raise the question: What is the connection between an artwork’s visual exegesis and its social function? Cue Murray Rae’s examination of two New Zealand church buildings exhibiting “a distinctively Māori architectural and theological imagination” (74). In writing about the Te Maungārongo, a Presbyterian meeting house, he shows how its decorations draw from Māori symbolism. In Rae’s estimation, these sacred spaces cultivate the Body of Christ, the community, and even become themselves the Body of Christ wrought in wood, stone, and stained glass. In a different vein, Jacky Sewell’s investigations on art and spiritual well-being led her to guide ten teenage Māori and Pasefika boys through several meditations on art drawn from gospel narratives. None of the three works were Oceanic in origin. For Sewell, her subjects’ “empathic engagement” with these works demonstrates art’s capacity to “transcend cultural and societal difference” (291). Her conclusion, coming in the last chapter in the volume, underscores the beautiful power of many of the culturally embedded artworks discussed in this volume, and will appeal to specialists and non-specialists alike.

Finally, several essays in this volume raise the question of the connection between visual exegesis and social critique. How might an artists’ choice to draw on biblical symbols in their art strengthen their prophetic critique of injustice? We have already seen this in two artists who critique the churches: O’Leary for their gender oppression, and Riley for their historical entanglement with colonialism. However, several contributions to this volume tackle the theme of ecology as well. Emily Colgan tackles New Zealand artist Michael Shepherd, who draws on the theme of Anathoth, the field Jeremiah

buys in Jeremiah 6:1-8, to explore ecological devastation. I especially appreciated Colgan's use of intertextual methods in this chapter, especially the question of markers that create specific allusions (14). Finally, Elaine Wainwright's intertextual dialogue between ecological criticism of the Bible and New Zealand biblical art and poetry underscores the importance of the materiality of art, of the sacred text, and of course, of the threatened world in which we live.

As in any edited volume, the contributions here are not of equal quality, and some felt out of place. However, for the most part the volume hangs together as a whole. Many of the scholars in the volume are members of the Oceania Bible Studies Association, making this volume reflect real-life conversations as well as written dialogues. Clearly, this volume is of value for more than just scholars working in Oceania, but for those interested in visual exegesis more broadly. The chapters raised by this volume magnify the voices of artists less-discussed in scholarship, but also raise questions relevant for visual exegesis of many artforms.

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