
The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images. Edited by Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2017. Pp. xix + 511.
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The present volume of essays developed during monthly seminars over the 2013-14 academic year at Emory University. The point of these monthly meetings was to engage in scholarly discussions which focused on visual hermeneutics and exegesis as applied to multiple religious traditions. The book consists of twelve essays and is divided into three parts – “Methodology for Visual Exegesis and Rhetography,” “Visual Exegesis Using Roman Visual Material Culture,” and “Visual Exegesis Using Christian Art.” The purpose of this book is to examine the relationship between the verbal or written word and its visual production, whether it be words that elicit a visual image in the mind or an image that elicits a text. The importance of images for both the writing and interpretation of the New Testament is an area which has garnered much attention in recent years.

Part 1 opens with “New Testament Texts, Visual Material Culture, and Earliest Christian Art” by Vernon K. Robbins, who presents an overview of scholarly works which interpret New Testament texts in light of visual material culture. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, textual evidence dominated scholarly debates, but in the last few decades, scholars have begun to emphasise the importance of visual culture and cognitive studies in biblical interpretation. Robbins’ survey of works covers scholars who focus on how words elicit mental images in the reader/hearer and scholars who focus on the role of material culture in biblical exegesis.

Roy R. Jeal in the second chapter, “Visual Interpretation: Blending Rhetorical Arts in Colossians 2:6–3:4,” discusses visual exegesis as it relates to Colossians 2:6-3:4. He is interested in how a biblical text evokes images in the imagination of the reader/hearer and how these images impact group behaviour and identity. Colossians 2:11-15 serves as an excellent example of what Jeal describes as the “blending of images.” These verses present a mingling of images, such as circumcision, burial and baptism, all “located in Christ and brought about by the workings of God” (77). This highly complex set of images, Jeal maintains, presents a new reality or mental space for its audience, often creating a new visual argument about social formation.

In the next two chapters, L. Gregory Bloomquist applies rhetography as defined by Robbins to the study of the Gospel of John. In his first essay, “Methodology Underlying the Presentation of Visual Texture in the Gospel of John,” Bloomquist is interested in the cognitive sciences, in how the text creates visual images in the mind of the reader/hearer and how such images “create meaning through narrative” (92). In his second chapter, “Eyes Wide Open, Seeing Nothing: The Challenge of the Gospel of John’s Nonvisualizable Texture for Readings Using Visual Texture,” Bloomquist again applies the term rhetography to highlight the visual argument in

the Gospel of John, showing how the mind is capable of shaping complex images into persuasive narratives. His contribution illustrates the difficulty of using rhetography for reading the Gospel, a narrative that at times is not so easy to form in the mind's eye as it employs abstract concepts, such as word, darkness, light and life. Bloomquist nevertheless shows how the Gospel, through "conceptual blending," a phrase coined by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, links mental images together in order to form memorable narratives that gain power the more they are used in local as well as broader cultural contexts (130-2).

Part 2 begins with Harry O. Maier's chapter, "Paul, Imperial Situation, and Visualization in the Epistle to the Colossians." The Roman Empire was a world in which the image functioned as a major tool for communication regardless of one's literary ability. Maier, in his chapter, draws attention to the importance of Roman material culture for the interpretation of Paul's letters, as well as Paul's use of imperial imagery as a persuasive rhetorical tool. In his chapter, Maier discusses the significance of *ekphrasis*, or graphic speech, in Paul's writing, a literary device that helped focalize his audience in an imperial situation. Paul used graphic language constructed from the imperial world to fashion a positive and beneficial image of Christ's reign. Maier uses the Letter to the Colossians as a test case to emphasize the importance of *ekphrasis* for situating Christ followers within a larger Roman visual narrative.

Brigitte Kahl's contribution, "The Galatian Suicide and the Transbinary Semiotics of Christ Crucified (Galatians 3:1): Exercises in Visual Exegesis and Critical Reimagination," explores the graphic image of a suicidal Gaul in relation to the crucified Christ in Galatians 3:1. Kahl uses sociohistorical and sociorhetorical interpretation, as well as a structural-semiotic component to examine how sculptures, like *The Galatian Suicide*, would have provided an important visual context for Paul's audience to understand Christ's dying on the cross. The image of the defeated Gaul originally symbolized the victory of Pergamon and subsequently the triumph of Rome in the province of Gaul. Kahl notes that in the Pauline community, *The Galatian Suicide* might have come to signify in death the power of a new life, such that when viewed through the lens of Christ crucified, the image re-focalizes the reader towards a messianic reading, one in which there is victory and hope in death.

Part 2 concludes with Rosemary Canavan's chapter on "Armor, Peace, and Gladiators: A Visual Exegesis of Ephesians 6:10-17," which engages in a visual exegesis of how clothing and armory imagery reflect the spiritual struggle in Ephesians 6:10-17. Canavan uses the findings from a gladiator graveyard in Ephesus and the context of the *Pax Romana* in Asia Minor to situate the letter and thus its imagery. Canavan argues that a dialogue exists between the material data in the Greco-Roman world and in the text. Her interest lies in looking at how the iconography in the author's world interacts with the textual account of putting on

military armour and taking up weapons, and the effect this interaction between material culture and text has on its audience.

Part 3 opens with Christopher J. Nygren's chapter, "Graphic Exegesis: Reflections on the Difficulty of Talking about Biblical Images, Pictures, and Texts," which focuses specifically on the role of pictures in biblical exegesis. He begins with examining how the term "image" has been understood by art historians and rhetographers. Image is a complex term and often used to signify both physical form and nonphysical form, such as a mental projection or a literary figure. Regardless of its diversity, Nygren notes that the image is essential to understanding Christian religion, and as such, art history and rhetography when utilized collectively can show how "pictures, texts and images exist in dialectical tension" (275). Crucial to his discussion is the term "graphic exegesis," which differs from "visual exegesis" in that it is rooted in actual pictures. To illustrate the significance of graphic exegesis, Nygren concludes his essay with a case study of Titian's *Ecce Homo*.

Chapter nine, "The Gifts of Epiphany: Geertgen tot Sint Jans and the Adoration of the Magi," by Henry Luttikhuisen, takes a look at how the Dutch painter Geertgen tot Sint Jans interpreted the story of the magi found in Matthew 2:1-12. Luttikhuisen examines three of Geertgen's paintings of the Epiphany, noting that, while they draw from the biblical narrative, they also represent varying exegetical layers. For example, Luttikhuisen remarks how Geertgen's paintings allude to Origen's account that there were only three magi, a detail not found in the Matthean account; to Pseudo-Bede's description of one of the wise men as dark-skinned; and to the depiction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, also not found in the textual account but an important pilgrimage location under Hospitaller care.

In chapter ten, "'Exactitude and Fidelity'? Paintings of Christ Healing the Blind by Nicolas Poussin and Philippe de Champaigne," James Clifton, rather than analyse paintings by one artist, considers the same content by different artists – Poussin and Champaigne – in order to understand how paintings function as a form of biblical exegesis. Clifton notes that this is not necessarily an exact interpretation, but is often fluid and open to a variety of readings. Indeed, paintings do not offer up meaning so readily; in fact, meaning must be drawn out and conjured in our imagination.

Next, "Topos versus Topia: Herri met de Bles's Visual Exegesis of the Parable of the Good Samaritan," by Michel Weemans, offers a detailed analysis of Herri met de Bles' *Landscape with the Parable of the Good Samaritan*. Weemans focuses on two characteristics of Bles's painting; its compositional structure and its recurrent motifs. Weemans maintains that met de Bles structures his painting on horizontal and vertical axes, which creates a tension and helps the painter to articulate his visual exegesis of the parable. Understanding the metaphorical use of Bles' motifs helps the viewer to interpret and understand the biblical story, yet the inclusion of

“topoi” not found in the textual version allows the viewer to realize the account on his/her own terms.

In the final chapter, “Signa Resurrectionis: Vision, Image, and Pictorial Proof in Pieter Bruegel’s Resurrection of Circa 1562–1563,” Walter S. Melion provides a detailed analysis of Pieter Bruegel’s *The Resurrection*. Melion points out that the subject of Bruegel’s engraving, the resurrection, was never witnessed in the Gospel narratives, yet Bruegel attempts to visually explain the significance of this unseen event. If read correctly, the image points to the *signa resurrectionis*. He depicts signs, like this, by breaking with the pictorial tradition in order to engage with the exegetical tradition, such as the *Glossa*. Through a juxtaposition of light and dark, as well as the role of the gaze, for example, *The Resurrection* shows the importance of vision and image for faith.

This collection of essays nicely addresses Margaret R. Miles’ statement over thirty years ago of the need to include the use of both texts and images in the search to understand the past. For those readers interested in the relationship between text and image, this book offers a rich and diverse collection, drawing attention to the need to be more precise in methodology and terminology. It is not, however, for those without any prior knowledge as some of the essays do presuppose a familiarity with biblical interpretation and material culture. Further areas to consider would be how rhetography and visual exegesis are shaped through a gendered and class reading. But, as Vernon K. Robbins points out in his introduction, regarding the interaction between text and image, “we can expect many more [discussions] to appear in the coming years” (54).