

As Martin O’Kane says in the opening sentence of his preface to Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Illuminator: “Exploring the interrelationship between biblical text and image is nothing new” (xiii). This statement’s truth is, of course, established by the vast corpus of visual art that has been inspired by Jewish and Christian scriptures. Almost everyone, he confidently declares, “knows a painting, fresco, or sculpture inspired by the Bible” (1).

Given this widespread awareness of biblically inspired art, it seems surprising that until fairly recently biblical scholars have largely neglected the exegetical implications of this massive body of evidence. Like their colleagues in theology and church history, they tend to shy away from analyzing artworks, fearing to tread on the turf of trained art historians. For their part, art historians traditionally have been less interested in the religious implications of the objects they study than in their formal qualities (style, composition, and technique). Fortunately, since scholars are waking up to the role of art in biblical interpretation and the potential for cross disciplinary study, this situation is changing. Sections of the Society of Biblical Literature have recently been organized to consider the ways that biblical texts are imaged in visual art, although they too often lack the contributions of art historians (who attend meetings of different professional societies). Art historians, meanwhile, are increasingly cognizant of the religious significance (content, context, and function) of artworks; many regularly consult contemporary devotional writings, liturgical manuals, doctrinal tracts, and other relevant documents in their analyses.

The two books under consideration here are excellent examples of this positive trend, albeit mostly from the side of biblical scholars. Both of them offer exemplary studies of how visual art interprets verbal text, especially sacred text. Methodologically they both stress the obvious but often overlooked truth that text and image never have a simple one-to-one relationship. Whatever is meant by illustration or illumination, neither should be taken to mean literal representation. Readers can no longer cite the often-repeated assessment of Gregory the Great (and others) that seeing pictures is an alternative form of reading, or embrace the idea that art is merely a “textbook for the illiterate.” Overthrowing that simplistic judgment, these volumes show that images are highly complicated and their viewers are often exceptionally learned and sophisticated.

Biblically-inspired artworks not only recall written narratives but also shape and structure our understanding of them, but such artworks never do this by merely replicating textual details in visual form. Even the most literalistic images, intended for the most didactic use, are still interpretations. Artists make choices about scenes, characters, and points of view. They add, subtract, or conflate parts of the narrative to
bring forth a particular meaning. They compose their subjects and manipulate light, line, color, texture, or pattern to draw attention to certain elements of the story. They may translate the narrative to a different context, juxtapose or transform familiar elements, or compress details for the sake of emphasis. They may intend to arouse devotion, convict sinners, transmit dogma, or comment on contemporary social issues. Whatever they do, visual images are powerful and persistent, often inscribing traditions not found in the text at all (e.g. Mary Magdalene as having long red hair, Moses with horns, angels in long white dresses, or God with a long grey beard).

O’Kane reveals his primary locus as a textual scholar as he introduces his subject via a long excursus on visuality in the biblical text per se. Focusing on places where the text itself is strikingly visual and where the text is ambiguous or even cautionary about the dangers of seeing or of making images, he notes that these two impulses are often contradictory. On the one hand, one is being encouraged to produce vivid mental images; on the other hand, one is warned about images’ idolatrous potential. While acknowledging that the vehement debates between defenders and decriers of images (from John of Damascus to Calvin) left a “legacy of ambiguity and suspicion” (9), O’Kane argues that modern scholars have moved beyond those older doctrinal debates and must now bring the reader’s “imagistic consciousness” to bear on the study of biblical texts.

O’Kane then turns to specific places in the biblical text where the metaphorical use of such terms as “sight,” “blindness,” “darkness,” and “light” is essential to understanding the narratives’ deeper meanings. Since these terms refer to the contradictory states of confusion and comprehension, or obstinacy and obedience, they express the idea that while remaining invisible or concealed, God’s presence and will are revealed through those things that can be seen (cf. Rom 1:20). Such metaphors, he argues, are incorporated into visual art through the interplay of shadows and lighted areas, for example, but more profoundly by the way art resists full disclosure in order to guide the viewer to perceive what lies beyond sight. Here he draws upon the work of Patrick Sherry (along with Augustine and Plato) to explain the anagogical progression that rises from image to idea or from representation to model; in other words, the move away from the outward and visible to the inward and invisible. Of course, O’Kane is still mostly thinking here of readers rather than viewers, when he urges more attention to the visual imagination in the hermeneutical process (33).

Having laid this theoretical groundwork, O’Kane directs his attention to actual visual artworks as well as their artists and viewers (ch. 2). Once underway, he encounters and assesses the perennial matters of authorial and reader/viewer subjectivity. What guides or motivates an artist’s choice of narrative and details to depict (or suppress)? How are the production of images affected by artists’ (and viewers’) cultural context and social location? How much should we assume that viewers know of the source narrative versus how much they may read into it? He goes on to raise the issue of artistic freedom of expression: What is the role of the patron, ecclesial authorities, or other power wielders in determining how biblical texts might be depicted? How are viewers affected by the interpretations presented to them, then or now?