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Visual Criticism from Hagar the Wife of
Abraham to Mary the Mother of Jesus,*
London 2019

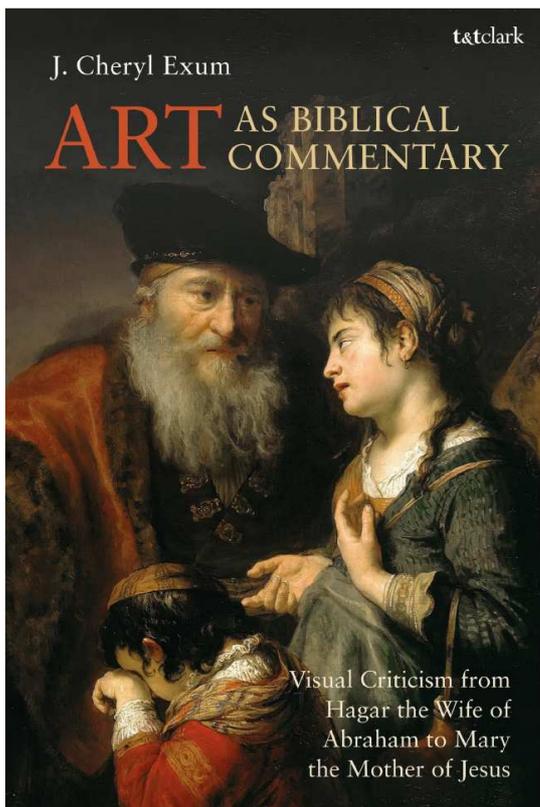
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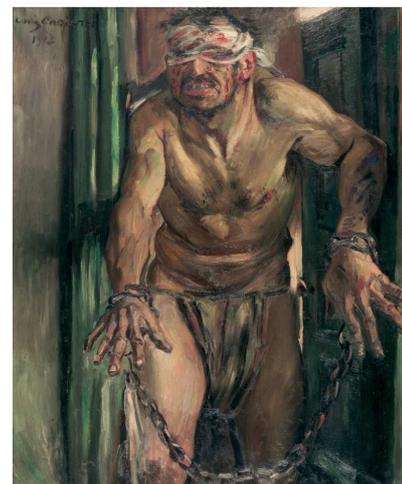
In a long and distinguished career in teaching, research and publication, J. Cheryl Exum has championed pioneering approaches to the place and role of the visual arts in interpreting the Hebrew Bible. Her expertise as textual critic and exegete has equipped her in a very special way to assess and evaluate the extent to which the artist captures – or fails to capture – the nuances and subtleties of the biblical narrative, and, as a feminist biblical scholar, she has been instrumental in critiquing how women’s stories in the Bible have been interpreted or misinterpreted by commentators, artists or their patrons, most of whom have, traditionally, been male. It comes as no surprise, then, that in her most recent volume, *Art as Biblical Commentary: Visual Criticism from*

Hagar the Wife of Abraham to Mary the Mother of Jesus, she develops approaches already introduced in previous publications and uses a vast range of paintings to offer new insights into long-standing textual conundrums. The book is a culmination of years of reflection, discussions with peers and students, and enthusiastic gallery-visiting; always questioning, always original, always appre-

ciative of the interpretive skills of the artist, always highlighting the erotic representation of women in western art, Exum truly offers the reader much to think about as she fearlessly challenges the assumptions we all too often make about the Bible and its many enigmatic characters.

Before moving to the structure and contents of the book, what is most striking is the volume's beautiful presentation: it contains well over seventy colour images and plates which means that, unlike most other commentaries on the Bible and art, the reader can actually see a very clear and detailed image of the painting the author is discussing. Exum has been most judicious in her selection of images: wisely, she has focussed on the Old Masters (seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch painting) and the Pre-Raphaelites, justifying her choice because of their narrative quality. She notes that paintings of biblical scenes flourished in the seventeenth century because of the large number of illustrated Bibles produced in the sixteenth century. Such paintings have become, she says, her 'important exegetical conversation partners'. But there are other reasons too, I would suggest, why her choice of Dutch painting is most appropriate for her purpose. In many cases biblical paintings from this period reflect the aims of post-Reformation Protestant art, produced for patrons, churches and public places. Artists were expected to support the message of the absolute authority of Scripture, not as mediated through Popes or Italian saints, or through any other 'decadent' Catholic means. Therefore, in the majority of these Dutch paintings, the scenes depicted are generally stripped of all unnecessary props so that the viewer can focus exclusively on what is happening in the biblical story; in many cases the artist wants to transfer the authority of Scripture from the medium of the word to the medium of the image. The viewer, it was felt, should not be distracted by extraneous or peripheral details in the painting. For this reason, the focus on Dutch art from this period suits ideally the approach that Exum employs. The choice of several Victorian Pre-Raphaelite paintings, coming from an age when viewers were biblically literate, is also particularly appropriate.

With regards to the structure, the book is divided into three sections: in Part 1, Exum outlines her approach in her introductory chapter 'Visual Criticism'. This is followed by a chapter, intriguingly sub-titled 'Paintings that changed my mind' in which she explains how a work of art (she uses Corinth's *Blinded Samson* and Moreau's *Scene from the Song of Songs* as examples) can influence one's long-held views on biblical texts whose meaning can appear ambiguous. Part 2



Corinth, *The Blinded Samson*
(1912, Nationalgalerie, Berlin).

consists of three chapters on Hagar: 'The Abjection of Hagar', 'The Rape of Hagar', 'The Theophanies to Hagar'. Part 3 is entitled from 'Eve to Mary' and has four chapters: 'Erotic Look and Voyeuristic Gaze: Looking at the Body in the Bible and Art', 'Shared Glory', 'Notorious Women in Manchester' and '*Ecce Mulier*: The Levite's Wife, The Mother of Jesus and the Sacrificial Female Body'.

In her introductory chapter, 'Visual Criticism: Biblical Art as Biblical Commentary', Exum explains her approach – and she emphasises that visual criticism is an *approach* and not a prescriptive *method*. Clearly and in great detail, she contextualises her approach within the whole gamut of current reception history methods. Having evaluated the appropriateness of these, she then explains what she feels is distinctive about 'visual criticism': the essence of it, she states, is that it shifts the focus away from artists and their historical circumstances to the work of art 'in and of itself', which she regards as a visual representation of the text that exists in the present and continues to affect and produce meanings for its viewers. Her emphasis on the role of the viewer in interpreting the painting chimes with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer who argues that an artwork is always an 'epiphany', uncovering something new or hidden in the subject it represents. Every painting has, therefore, something new to say about the biblical subject it depicts. Exum explores how artists can be 'keen textual interpreters' and suggests that a meaningful conversation begins with identifying a conundrum or ambiguity in the text and then investigating how this is resolved in one or more paintings. This approach gives a sharp critical edge to her work in that it sets up a focussed dialogue between the text and the painting. Exum offers fifteen questions that a reader/viewer might wish to bring to a biblical painting: for example, does the artist respond to a perceived gap in the text or to questions unanswered by the text? Does it alert us to something that the biblical writer has left out or attempted to gloss over? In an age when biblical literacy is poor, teachers may find that questions such as these provide an enticing way to engage students into questioning and challenging biblical texts as well, of course, as encouraging an appreciation of the interpretive skill of the artist.

The bulk of the book is taken up with three substantial chapters on the figure of Hagar in which Exum explores how particular works of art handle unresolved questions, gaps and interpretive cruxes that biblical scholars wrestle with. For her first chapter, she explores the many ways the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael have been painted, for example by Guercino, and argues that some of the most influential read-



Guercino, *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael* (1657, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan).

ers of this text have been artists: by divorcing this specific scene from its larger narrative context (which in the Bible is clearly ideological), artists focus the viewer's attention on this precise moment in the story. In her chapter 'The Rape of Hagar' (Gen. 16:3–4), Exum explores how a biblical scene that is 'salacious' and 'demeaning' for all the characters has been interpreted visually: by showing Hagar in various stages of undress, artists make her an object of the gaze who signifies and plays to the desire of a presumed heterosexual audience. The third chapter explores the angel's appearance to Hagar in the desert, a much-painted subject throughout the entire repertoire of western art. As Exum notes, although Hagar holds no interest for the biblical author after this event and disappears from the narrative, her plight is memorialized and lives on in so many painted versions in galleries throughout the world.

In her section on Hagar, Exum touches very briefly on a number of other fascinating aspects which she, or other writers, could profitably explore in more depth. The first is the importance and role of the landscape in biblical painting: given the overriding emphasis on the 'land' in the Hebrew Bible – and who gets to live in it and own it – the portrayal of the physical context in which the story is set gives the painting an extra interpretive dimension. Second, many of the Dutch paintings used as examples in this section depict biblical characters as 'oriental' figure, complete with turban, suggesting their 'otherness'. What might this say to contemporary viewers? Thirdly, given that the story of Hagar and Ishmael lies at the very heart of Islamic tradition and folklore, and that a large proportion of visitors to art galleries are now Muslim, how do they view and interpret such representations?

Exum opens the third major section, 'Erotic Look and Voyeuristic Gaze: Looking at the Body in the Bible and Art', with a critical question that she then explores from a wide range of perspectives, examining how a number of women in the Bible have been painted. Her question 'When is looking at the body – the naked or partially clad body – voyeuristic and when is it erotic?' leads her to focus on two classic cases of biblical voyeurism: the narrative of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12) and that of Susanna and the elders in the Additions to the Book of Daniel. It is clear from the discussion that both were popular subjects in western art. In the case of Bathsheba, Exum argues that the iconographic tradition of Bathsheba at her bath goes well beyond the biblical text in portraying her as exhibitionist, narcissistic and conspiring with the gaze – and that such paintings have undoubtedly infor-



Massys, *David and Bathsheba*
(1562, Musée du Louvre, Paris).

med the view readers of 2 Samuel 11 have of her. With regard to Susanna, on the other hand, Exum argues that paintings can highlight not only the true nature of the elders' intentions (rape) in the biblical story but also the victim's point of view, visualising Susanna's reaction as one of terror and distress. This is a truly fascinating section in the book and Exum applies her same critical question to other texts such as Joseph and Potiphar's wife and scenes from the Song of Songs (in this case with reference to the contemporary Israeli artist Lika Tov and Chagall's major series on the Song of Songs in the Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall, Nice).



Stanhope, *Eve Tempted* (1877, Manchester Art Gallery).

In exploring the character of Eve and Delilah, Exum's starting point is two Pre-Raphaelite paintings from the Manchester Art Gallery, Stanhope's *Eve* (1877) and Pickersgill's *Delilah* (1850). This is an example of how she will often choose less well-known paintings to great effect to examine common assumptions about some of the most familiar female characters in the Bible. In her final chapter, her subject is 'The Sacrificial Female Body' and here, she makes a foray into the New Testament – unusual for this author – focussing on Rossetti's annunciation, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1850), which presents, according to Exum, an unsettling and unusual way to depict the scene, in that the artist implies a degree of resistance not normally associated with the biblical Mary.



Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1850, Tate Gallery, London).

In the light of Rossetti's depiction, she takes a closer look at Luke's birth account from a feminist-critical perspective, enquiring into the nature of Mary's response and the related issues of consent and the appropriation of a woman's body for the purpose of a male author's ideology. Her second character in this regard is the Levite's wife (Judges 19) – 'a blatant and distressing use of a woman's body in the service of an androcentric agenda; she is sacrificed in order to spare her husband from his threatened abuse'.

This is a unique book – authoritative and considered in the way it confronts long-standing interpretative conundrums and which, with the help of biblical paintings, tries to shed new light on them. Throughout, Exum consistently asks critical and often uncomfortable questions that many studies on reception history shy away from. While there is a common tendency in reception commentar-

ies simply to list the paintings that depict a character or scene, Exum, on the other hand, has shown how we need to be more analytical and critical. The scholarship with which Exum engages (as can be seen in her extensive bibliography) goes far beyond the world of biblical studies and includes many authors from the world of visual culture, art historians and art theorists. With its refreshing range and variety of images – many of which will be unfamiliar to the reader – the book offers an approach that can be profitably applied to other paintings too.

More than the author, however, I would tend to give a good deal of importance to the personal context and circumstances of the artist or painter. Quite rightly, Exum argues that her starting point is a conundrum or problem in the biblical text that an artist might resolve in a creative or novel way. But it is also true that knowing the context of the artist can inform us about an ambiguity – often deliberate – in the painting itself that only a knowledge of the artist's world might be able to resolve. Many biographies of artists emphasise the painter's close and detailed reading of the text or the artist's personal identity with one or other biblical character. For example, the Renaissance writer Vasari tells us that for the painter Bassano, reading the Bible was his favourite past-time; Michelangelo is said to have identified with the prophet Jonah, while Gauguin painted several images of himself as Christ. In some cases, such detail may well add an extra dimension to Exum's argument; the artist's own personal situation and context, or, for that matter, the patron's, must surely inform our understanding of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of any work of art.

Exum has dedicated this book to her former students and she warmly praises the insights they have given her throughout her career; indeed, the volume will be a most welcome and useful addition to any undergraduate, postgraduate or research programme in an age where biblical literacy is practically zero. For those whose knowledge of the Bible is limited or for those who have set and fixed notions of interpretation this book will also be a refreshing and challenging read. It reminds us that biblical stories can and should be always open to new and original interpretations and that artists are indeed valid interpreters in their own right. Anyone who has read this book will never again look at a biblical painting in a gallery without bringing to it an array of questions. The volume can be thoroughly recommended and is a most engaging, informative, readable – and often humorous and witty – book.

Impressum

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