

# Die Bibel in der Kunst / Bible in the Arts

Online-Zeitschrift 6, 2022

## Book Review:

Caroline Blyth / Nasili Vaka'uta (ed.),  
The Bible and Art: Perspectives from Oceania  
(Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the  
Reception and Influence of the Bible 11),  
London 2017

Moritz Gräper



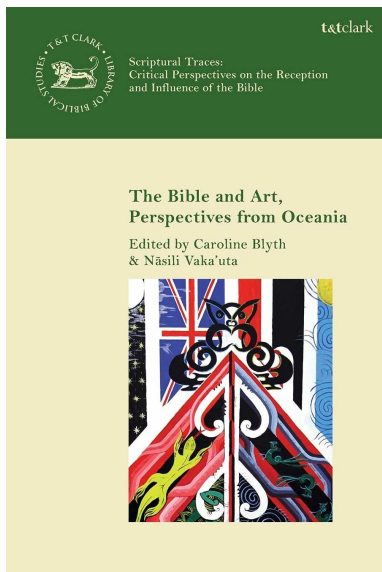
DEUTSCHE  
BIBEL  
GESELLSCHAFT

## Book Review:

Caroline Blyth / Nasili Vaka'uta (ed.),  
The Bible and Art: Perspectives from Oceania  
(Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the  
Reception and Influence of the Bible 11),  
London 2017

Pfarrer Dr. Moritz Gräper

Auferstehungs-Kirchengemeinde in Münster und  
Geschäftsführung des Ev. Jugend- und Bildungswerks Münster



Caroline Blyth (University of Auckland, New Zealand) and Nasili Vaka'uta (Trinity Theological College Auckland, New Zealand) offer an interesting and wide range of perspectives on the reception of the Bible in art from Oceania in this edited volume. While studies on the reception history of the Bible have increased in the past decades, publications from perspectives of the global south are still not as well represented as they should be in libraries and at conferences. The book is supposed to begin to redress this imbalance concerning publications from the Oceanic context. The volume introduces readers to “antipodean landscapes and ecology, (post)colonialism, philosophy, Oceanic

spiritualities and the often contested engagements between western and indigenous cultures” (3). The editors formulate a sophisticated hermeneutical understanding of the complex relationship between biblical texts, artistic expression and location of the recipient: “Our knowledge of a biblical tradition will impact our understanding of an art work that alludes to that tradition; *additionally* though, our viewing of this art work will also draw us back to the biblical tradition in question, summoning us to think about it with new insight and imagination” (2).

In 14 chapters very diverse artists, their works and their relationship to biblical traditions are reflected and analyzed by biblical scholars, theologians, ministers and religious scientists. From contemporary paintings or t-shirt-designs to traditional architecture and sculptures or photography and tattooing the reader can expect various insightful approaches to different epochs and cultural contexts of Oceania and its art in relation to the Bible.

After an introduction by the editors, the volume contains the following contributions:

*Emily Colgan* (Trinity Methodist College, New Zealand), *Analogies with Anathoth: Reading Land, Reading Jeremiah in the Paintings of Michael Shepherd*: Colgan compares contemporary paintings with texts from Jeremiah. She shows that both, the ancient Hebrew prophet and Shepherd, a contemporary artist from New Zealand, share an urgency in their message.

*Robin Woodward* (University of Auckland, New Zealand), *Darryn George: The Meeting of Modernism and Maori Tradition*: Woodward's contribution shows how another contemporary artist, Darryn George, speaks to a local as well as a global audience through his work, that alludes to biblical texts and different theological topoi.

*Roland Boer* (University of Newcastle, Australia), *The Absurdly Ideal Jesus of Reg Mombassa: The "Australian Jesus" as depicted by the Australian artist Mombassa* is introduced by Boer as full of ambiguities. Mombassa's work plays with pop-cultural imagery and confronts the viewer with the illusion of an easy redemption.

*Murray Rae* (University of Otago, New Zealand), *Architectural Expression of the Body of Christ*: Rae argues convincingly that architecture and design create sacred rooms and enable worship in communities. The body of Christ as imagined in the Pauline letters is resembled in Christian buildings he introduces while at the same time he traces Maori tradition in the architectural design.

*Nasili Vaka'uta* (Trinity Methodist College, New Zealand), *Art as Method: Visualising Interpretation Through Tongan Ngatu*: Vaka'uta shows how indigenous art (ngatu is a cloth made of bark) can shape a hermeneutical framework for interpreting the Bible. He makes a strong claim for inter-scriptural dialogue between indigenous and biblical texts.

*Robin Woodward* (University of Auckland, New Zealand), *Sister Gael O'Leary: A Road Less Travelled*: In her second contribution to this volume Woodward portrays the New Zealand artist and former nun O'Leary. Her work mirrors her vocation, that is, to preach and reach out through her sculptural art.

*Caroline Blyth* (University of Auckland, New Zealand) / *Alex Farrell* (Independent Scholar), *Exploring Visual Exegesis: A Conversation Between Artist and Beholders*: Blyth and Farrell take the reader on an interesting methodological journey by introducing visual exegesis. By drawing on a piece of art of Maori artist

Brooking, they exemplify how visual art can enrich the reader's understanding of biblical literature and vice versa.

*Anne Elvey* (Monash University, Australia), *Michael Riley's Bible and the Touch of the Text (With Reference to the Gospel of Luke)*: Elvey tries to put forward a counter-colonial reading of Luke in the context of the role of the Bible in colonizing Australia. Her aim is not to leave behind the heavy historical weight of Christian colonialism but to re-establish the possibility of a liberating perspective.

*Jione Havea* (Charles Sturt University, Australia), *Tatauing Cain: Reading the Sign on Cain from the Ground*: Havea draws on another art form, that is tattooing. *Tatatau*, as traditional Oceanic tattooing is called in Maori, has a long history of inscribing history, cultural practices and values in the skin of indigenous people. This cultural practice was attacked by missionaries and others but remains a significant rite in Oceanic culture. Havea argues for a tattoo-perspective in the reading of the Cain and Abel narrative.

*Robin Woodward* (University of Auckland, New Zealand), *Terry Stringer: From Scripture to Sculpture*: Woodward's third article in this book looks at the contemporary New Zealand sculptor Stringer. She shows how Stringer uses biblical symbols and texts for his figurative work.

*Yael Klangwisan* (Laidlaw College, New Zealand), *Berešit: Countersigning Maria O'Connor's Equus' Ashes with Derrida's L'animal*: Klangwisan introduces a film installation (*Equus Ashes*) as a contemporary art form that sheds new light on reading Genesis 1-3.

*Elaine Wainwright* (University of Auckland, New Zealand), *Of Birth and Death: Hearing and Seeing Then and Now*: Wainwright introduces the work of Australian artists Mung Mung and Boyd as linking biblical imagery and texts with contemporary ecological crises.

*Judith Brown* (Presbyterian Church of New Zealand), *Is this the Place? The Promised Land in Colin McCahon's Paintings*: Using a postcolonial hermeneutical lense, Brown reflects the biblical topos "Promised Land" and the landscape paintings of McCahon.

*Jacky Sewell* (Ripon College Cuddesdon, UK), *"The Painting is Suffering": Maori and Pasefika Boys Respond to Images of Christ and Peter*: Using an approach similar to South African Biblical scholar Gerald West's "Reading with Ordinary Readers", Sewell impressively shows that art is not only to be explored and considered in its original geographical context by "professionals" but that hermeneutical encounters are worthy anywhere with anybody.

The clearly formulated contextuality of the book by its location in New Zealand, which in the book is constantly also referred to by its Maori name *Aotearoa*, is a strength. At the same time Jacky Sewell's contributions shows how art has the potential to transcend cultural boundaries between recipients from various

backgrounds and that art does not only “function” in the context it was created. The transformative power of encountering art works is highlighted and is surely a helpful insight for people mainly dealing with the interpretation of texts, which have a similar potential.

The way the volume chooses a sensitive language regarding Maori and other indigenous cultural practices and languages can serve as an example how to bring together privileged and marginalized voices and views in one book. Until today white people from the northern hemisphere like me can learn much from the approach of “The Bible and Art: Perspectives from Oceania” in how to deal with the colonial past responsibly and intellectually adequate.

That the images in the book are printed in black and white and in most cases rather small is one aspect that I wish could be done differently. Larger sized pictures in colors or links to an online database would help the reader’s imagination even more.

## Impressum

Herausgeber / Editors:

Prof. Dr. Brad Anderson, brad.anderson@dcu.ie

Prof. Dr. Régis Burnet, regis.burnet@uclouvain.be

Prof. Dr. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, s.gillmayr-bucher@ku-linz.at

Prof. Dr. Klaus Koenen, koenen@arcor.de

Prof. Dr. Martin O’Kane, m.okane@tsd.ac.uk

Prof. Dr. Caroline Vander Stichele, C.H.C.M.VanderStichele@uvt.nl

„Bible in the Arts“ is a project of the German Bible Society.

„Die Bibel in der Kunst“ ist ein Projekt der Deutschen Bibelgesellschaft

Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft

Balinger Straße 31 A

70567 Stuttgart

Deutschland

[www.bibelwissenschaft.de](http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de)