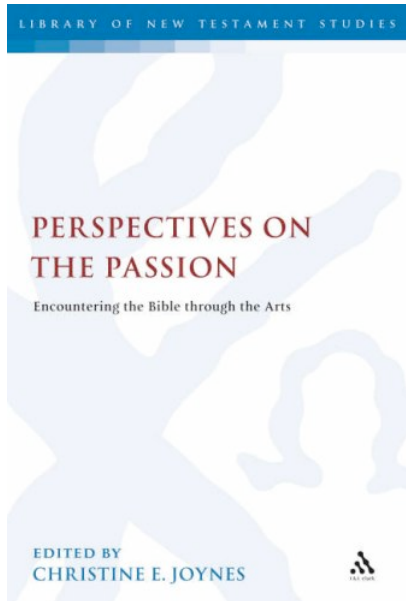


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Joynes, Christine E., ed.

Perspectives on the Passion: Encountering the Bible through the Arts

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In the Western and Eastern Christian traditions, the arts have depicted the passion event as described in the Gospels in various mediums and forms. Either through graphic representations of the passion in visual art, such as Grünewald's suffering Jesus in his Isenheim Altarpiece, or through the auditory medium of Anglican hymnody, the arts have served as a reliable vehicle to convey the import of Christ's suffering and death on the cross. However, in recent years scholars have noted that the arts quite often are a forgotten discipline in the study and teaching of biblical scholarship and religious studies. The "visual literacy" of students and members of the academy has arguably been underdeveloped. Perhaps this lapse should motivate scholars to rediscover the capability the arts possess in illuminating concepts that pure textual analysis cannot perform alone. This recent collection of essays concerning the passion in the arts addresses the utility of the arts as it pertains to the study of religion, and the essays therein effectively address the importance of incorporating the arts in theological discussion.

Joynes's collection derives from a conference held at Oxford University's Centre for the Reception History of the Bible in March 2005. A diverse range of expertise in different aspects of artistic interpretation was obviously presented at Oxford and is prominently featured in the book. The book begins with Ulrich Luz's essay on the reception history of

the passion event in visual art. Luz's contribution speaks broadly to the rich and lush voice artistic examples lend to the interpretation of scripture and the study of biblical history. Luz cites Giotto's *Betrayal of Judas* in the Scrovegni Chapel of Padua as an example of the depth of meaning visual art can provide. Giotto's emphasis on the dominating figure of Christ during a moment of belittlement convincingly illustrates that a convincing and powerful reading of a well-read text can be discovered within the borders of art. In a candid moment of self-reflection, Luz recalls his own spiritual background as a member of the Reformed tradition and provides a strong endorsement for the role of art and imagery in the wider church. Luz maintains convincingly that the dearth of the arts leads to a spiritual and eventual biblical illiteracy.

Following Luz's commentary on the hermeneutics of passion imagery, Peter Hawkins provides some compelling examples of the Gethsemane moment captured in poetry. Hawkins clearly believes a poem can evoke deeper emotions or stir dormant sentiments to a greater degree than a portrait of the crucifixion by Rembrandt. Contrasting this thought is the essay by Timothy Gorringer, which suggests that a violent and graphic representation of the passion event is not necessarily the only means available to evoke a thoughtful and emotional response. Gorringer further claims that interpretations of the passion event should not be limited to the borders of theology. Visual renderings of the crucifixion have been infused with political insinuations, as in Goya's *The Third of May 1808* and Chagall's *White Crucifixion*. What should not be lost in Gorringer's essay is how the passion event is an effective canvas to illustrate and convey a political message.

When discussing the passion in visual art, a natural question audiences ask is when the earliest depiction of the crucifixion appeared. A crucified Christ did not arrive *ex nihilo*, and as Robin Jensen points out in her well-executed essay, there is no evidence of any portrayal prior to the fifth century. Early Christians initially did not appear as interested in depicting the crucifixion. Jensen details the history of crucifixion images, presenting the various arguments concerning the early Alexamenos graffiti of a crucified figure with the head of an ass in Rome and detailing the earliest undisputed crucifixion depictions on the doors of Santa Sabina in fifth-century Rome and the Maskell Ivory in the British Museum. The lack of any crucifixion portrayals prior to the fifth century is an argument from silence, and one that Jensen suggests should be approached with trepidation. Jensen provides several possible explanations of why early Christians avoided portraying the crucifixion. Perhaps the most persuasive reason is that early Christians were more interested in emphasizing the divinity of Christ manifested in his life, not his suffering and death. For example, there are manifold early Christian depictions of Christ's healings and miracles, elements of his earthly ministry, and no representations of his suffering and death. In early Christianity, it appears that a harrowed Christ did not provide the succor or comfort that the healing or miracle-working Christ could. This emphasis would, of course,

change as Christianity progressed, but in the first centuries the image of a suffering Jesus was eschewed in favor of images illustrating Christ plying his trade on earth. Jensen's essay forces the reader to question how the suffering Christ emerges in contemporary Christianity, such as Mel Gibson's recent film *The Passion of the Christ*, and how this image of Jesus provides comfort for audiences.

The essays on musical renderings of the passion event offer an opportunity to delve into this rich academic genre; however, they unfortunately embody a large weakness in the collection. Emma Hornby contributes an interesting treatment on melodic chants, but for the nonspecialist in musicology the article has limited accessibility. The material on chant may be useful for a hymnody course at the graduate level, but for the general reader or undergraduate student it has a narrow appeal. Similarly, William Flynn's essay on the usefulness of the Song of Songs in passion hymnody subtly reveals the ability of the medium to offer broader interpretation of the event. Instead of the typical reading of the love between a bride and a groom, the hymns reveal the devotion between man and the divine. While revelatory in the effectiveness of music in renderings of the passion event, the subject is slightly restricted in scope. Of greater interest for the general reader is the work by J. R. Watson on the passion in post-Reformation hymns. The body of evidence in English hymnody from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century may be more accessible and recognizable, given popular composers such as Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts. For Watts, Wesley, and other hymn composers, imagery of Christ's sacrifice on the cross poetically springs alive with words such as "slain," "pierced," and "blood." What Watson so expertly points out is that hymns from this period employed vivid imagery to connect the worshiper to the sacrificial moment of Christ's passion. The essay provides excellent examples from English hymns and allows the reader to discover (or rediscover) the obvious presence of the passion in hymnody and the robust ability hymns possess to present the passion to the congregation.

Following this subsection on the passion in music is a piece by Jaime Lara on the inception and development of passion iconography in Mexico. Lara, a current fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art, details the conversion of the Aztecs following the Spanish arrival and the alteration their interpretation of the passion embodied in visual art. The religious rituals of the Aztecs that included human sacrifice obviously colored their reception and development of the story of Christ's sacrifice. Lara traces this development with care and includes several wonderfully graphic images of a bloody and suffering Christ from the cathedrals of Mexico. The Christians of the New World married the passion event to the existing ritual framework of the Aztecs, an action that one can realize also in the appearance and development of passion iconography in Jensen's essay. Lara's work also includes an

important non-Western voice to the conversation on how the passion is interpreted in art.

The collection concludes with presentations of the passion event in literature; Regina Schwartz focuses on evidence in Shakespeare's *Othello*, and a final piece of original fiction by Sara Maitland concerning a theophany during Holy Week ends the book. These selections would appeal to readers interested in how the passion appears in specifically nonecclesial artistic mediums. However, the real strength of the collection exists in what precedes these concluding essays, where the function of the arts in interpreting the passion event is more abundant.

The book represents a valuable contribution to the field of religion and the arts that goes beyond the usual collection of conference proceedings. Moreover, the book illuminates an arguably forgotten methodology: that the arts can illustrate the depth and gravity of possible meaning in the Christian tradition. This collection certainly belongs on the shelf of the specialist in religion and the arts or the nonspecialist with an interest in the passion in artistic mediums. Given that the subject matter suggests a limited audience, the book would make an unlikely candidate for adoption in anything other than an upper-level religion or art history course or a graduate-level religion course. Regardless, this should not detract from the book's intrinsic value. The interested reader will find much to glean from the essays and will likely discover that the arts can yield diverse and profound readings of the scriptural tradition.