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Book Review:

Yaffa Englard,

When Seeing is Reading: Visualizing the
Reception of Biblical and Other Texts,
Sheffield 2022

Martin O'Kane



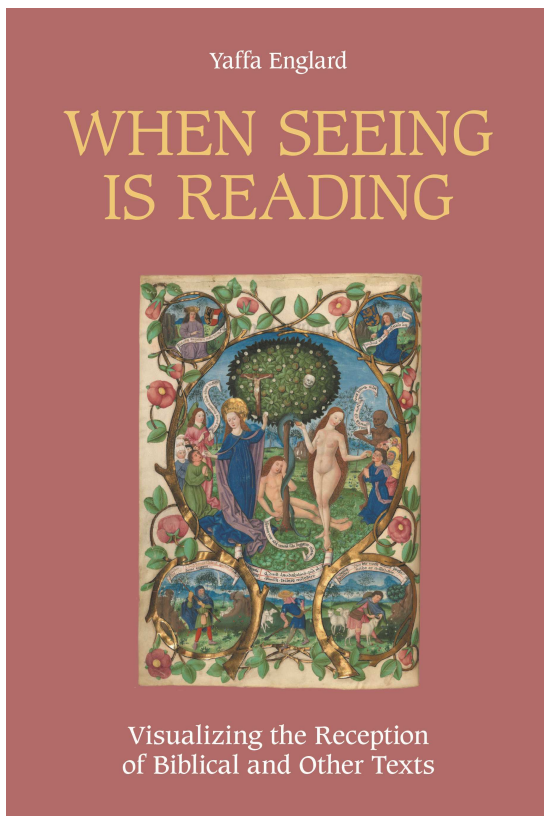
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This volume, although begun by the author, is, in fact, a posthumous publication of a selection of essays written by the late Yaffa Englard, a scholar well known to many biblical conference-goers over the decades. Yaffa, a Holocaust survivor, was lecturer in the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Haifa, Head of Biblical Studies at Gordon College of Education, Haifa, and art consultant for the Israeli Reches Educational Projects.

Long before the age of the internet, at a time when access to art collections throughout the world was much more limited, Yaffa accumulated her own collection of some three thousand transparencies of book illuminations, wall paintings mosaics and sculpture. Many of the artworks she engaged with

were relatively unknown to readers or students of the Bible and, Yaffa, a regular contributor at biblical conferences, frequently gave short papers that introduced many to the importance of visual interpretations of a wide range of biblical texts,

generally based on her own unique private collection. Although clearly steeped in Jewish tradition, Yaffa also had a comprehensive knowledge of the texts and cultural history of the New Testament and so was able to offer both Jewish and Christian readings of the artworks with which she engaged. The current volume consists of a number of essays that have already been published over the years and is a most fitting posthumous contribution to a scholar that has done so much over the decades to pioneer an interpretive approach to the Bible centred on visual culture.

Yaffa begins by explaining the title she has given to her volume *When Seeing is Reading*. Her inspiration came from a lecture she attended at Chartres Cathedral, a World Heritage site famous for its stained-glass windows depicting scenes from the New Testament, during which the lecturer began by saying 'Let me read you the windows of Chartres'. So impressed was Yaffa with this approach that she subsequently adopted the method of *reading* the visual presentation of events and figures from the Hebrew Bible.

Her opening chapter, *Mosaic as Midrash: The Zodiacs of the Ancient Synagogues and the Conflict between Judaism and Christianity*, focusses on the significance of the zodiac which was discovered in the mosaics found in five synagogues in northern Israel dating from the fourth to the sixth century. Most scholars contextualise it within a Jewish setting and associate it with the Jewish calendar. From a detailed study of the iconography both from Jewish and pagan sources, and with detailed reference to many biblical and Jewish texts, Yaffa argues that the function of the zodiac was to attest to God's everlasting covenant with David, the Israelites and the priests. Her argument is wonderfully illustrated by the inclusion of ten colour images of details from the mosaics of the five synagogues. Although Englard does not refer to Chagall's creative use of the zodiac sign in his image of the prophet Elijah, it is clear that Chagall was also much inspired by the zodiac signs from these same synagogues.

She then offers a number of case studies illustrating her methodology: the first three case studies are taken from the early chapters of Genesis. The first is entitled *The Sixth Day of Creation: Literal Problems, Visual Expressions and Theological Interpretations*. The second is entitled '*From the Dust of the Ground*': *The First Man's Formation in the Creation Cupola and the Spiritual Iconographic Plan of the Atrium Mosaics in San Marco, Venice*. The third is entitled *It's All Eve's Fault: The Evolvement of a Written and Visual Interpretive Tradition*. The final two case studies centre on the figures of Hagar and Ishmael: The first is called *The Expulsion of Hagar: Reading Image, (Re)viewing the Story*, and the second has the title *Ishmael Playing? Exegetical Understandings and Artistic Representations of the Verb m'saheq in Genesis 21.9*.

The first essay, *The Sixth Day of Creation: Literal Problems, Visual Expressions and Theological Interpretations*, examines mediaeval visual representa-

tions of the two accounts of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis as exemplifications of literary interpretive traditions. The second essay, *'From the Dust of the Ground': The First Man's Formation in the Creation Cupola and the Spiritual Iconographic Plan of the Atrium Mosaics in San Marco, Venice*, explores the way in which the atrium mosaics of this great cathedral mirror the textual difficulties and contradictions in the creation stories of Genesis 1-2 with reference to the history of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation. In *It's All Eve's Fault: The Evolvement of a Written and Visual Interpretive Tradition*, Yaffa, starting from the commonly-held view that Eve was solely to blame for sin and suffering in the world, seeks to demonstrate the way in which Jewish and Christian theological and interpretative traditions of the story are concretely exemplified in mediaeval visual representations. In the final two essays, Yaffa focuses on the characters of Hagar and Ishmael and, noting that the expulsion of Hagar has been largely overlooked in art, explores how artists have handled the textual ambiguity of the Hebrew word *məšaḥeq* in Gen 21:9 which can suggest that the young Ishmael was in fact playing in front of Sarah.

All essays in this volume are wonderfully illustrated with a very wide and inclusive range of colour images. Indeed, the viewer already familiar with visual representations of the texts that Yaffa explores, will find here many new and engaging images that entice the reader to reflect on possibly different interpretations of the story. Yaffa's own vast personal collection of transparencies which she collected over the decades helps to illuminate the biblical texts discussed in new and exciting ways. This volume is highly recommended to all students and teachers of the Bible. Yaffa's familiarity with both Jewish and Christian literary and visual interpretations offers something very distinctive and unique with regard to the stories and texts she explores in such an unforgettably erudite and culturally-informed manner.

Impressum

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