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Drawn to the Word:  
The Bible and Graphic Design,  
Atlanta 2021

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# Amanda Dillon, Drawn to the Word: The Bible and Graphic Design, Atlanta 2021

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The Bible and Its Reception

### DRAWN TO THE WORD

The Bible and Graphic Design

Amanda Dillon



Amanda Dillon's *Drawn to the Word* offers an important step in the direction of moving the field of biblical reception history beyond the study of canvas art and other “museum pieces” and towards popular, everyday art and liturgy. Part of The Bible and Its Reception series with SBL Press, *Drawn to the Word* explores the artwork of Meinrad Craighead and Nicholas Markell, America graphic designers who have composed illustrations to accompany Easter lections for, respectively, the Roman Catholic *Sunday Missal* and a series of publications known as *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. In each case, Dillon examines how visual design features such as color, silhouette, framing, perspective, and scale convey meaning and inform how the viewer understands the accompanying biblical lection.

*Drawn to the Word* is Dillon's first monograph and it's an ambitious project. Not only does it include close readings of the graphic designs of Craighead and Markell, but it also provides lengthy forays into a number of related matters, including the field of biblical reception history (ch. 2), visual social semiotics (ch. 3), the history of the Christian lectionary (ch. 4), and the semiotic function of color (ch. 5) and silhouette (ch. 6) in visual media. These excursions are rich and informative, albeit somewhat dissertation-like in their exacting review of secondary literature, use of technical terms, and interest in theory. While some readers might want to fast forward to the analysis of graphic designs in question (chs. 7-8), the upside of Dillon's approach is clear: *Drawn to the Word* is a mature project that is meticulously researched and methodologically sophisticated.

Chapter 2 traces the field of biblical reception history. The theoretical underpinnings of reception history is often traced back to two foundational scholars, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss. Broadly construed, their work establishes that the meaning of a text, biblical or otherwise, is neither exhausted by nor identical with the meaning intended to be conveyed by the original author. Rather, meaning is always co-determined by subsequent readers who receive the texts in specific social locations and historical contexts. While few biblical scholars would disagree with the general contours of this claim, biblical reception history has been the subject of considerable critique, especially by those who deem its departure from traditional historical-critical approaches to signal a lack of rigor. While Dillon rightly defends reception history as a legitimate scholarly endeavor, she acknowledges the need for greater methodological clarity within the field, especially as it relates to how visual and multimodal media are interpreted.

Chapter 3 represents Dillon's attempt to provide this methodological clarity through the notion of a "visual social semiotics." Based on the work of semioticians Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, visual semiotics posits that images have a communicative function and thus an implicit grammar that can be read and analyzed. What makes Kress and van Leeuwen's visual semiotics "social" is their insistence that the meaning of images can change when that image is re-used in different contexts and seen by different viewers. The meaning of an image is a function not only of the formal features of the object but how those features intersect with discourses related to gender, social class, race, politics, ecclesial traditions, and other factors pertinent to the social milieu of the viewer. Thus in the work of Kress and van Leeuwen, Dillon finds a "semiotic toolkit" that can equip the biblical scholar with "a vast array of comprehensive analytical tools that address every aspect of an image from position through color" (78).

In chapter 4, Dillon offers a fascinating survey of the history of the Christian lectionary. Rooted in the public reading of Torah in early Jewish synagogues, efforts to prescribe and organize a selection of biblical texts for Christian worship

are first found in liturgical books from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE. The practice is further codified and formalized in 1570 with the publication of the Roman Catholic *Missale Romanum*. Post-Vatican II efforts led to substantial reforms of this lectionary, including the introduction of Old Testament readings and the ordering of lections around different synoptic gospels over a three-year cycle. The resulting *Lectionary for Mass* (1969) was subsequently adapted by a number of other Christian denominations and became the basis for the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992). This chapter concludes with a brief look at the hermeneutics of lectionary selections and an assessment of the multimodal quality (or “iconicity”) of many published lectionaries.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer in-depth analysis of two often overlooked semiotic functions of graphic design: color and silhouette. With respect to the former, Dillon focus on the color triad of white, black, and red which is used by both Craighead and Markell. These colors not only carry with them a range of associations related to biblical imagery and themes, but they also function to focus the reader’s attention and signify actions to be taken within the liturgy. Dillon asserts that “color contains and brings together metaphor, symbol, and text, creating interactions and depths of meaning beyond the purely verbal text” (132). As a form of visual metonymy, silhouette is able to capture the basic and essential shape of its referent while at the same time intentionally concealing and cloaking its details. In the hands of Craighead and Markell, silhouette is a means by which the artists can represent the human body of Jesus while refusing to specify Jesus’ gender and ethnicity. In this way, silhouette also functions as “a site of reception for the projections laid on it” (152).

Finally in chapters 7 and 8, Dillon turns to the artwork of Craighead and Markell. Part of her analysis includes the identification of certain visual elements in the graphic design, such as the presence of vines, leaves, boats, fish, a cross, waves, and a sunrise. Attention is given to how these elements correspond to and interpret the Easter lections associated with the images. What Dillon offers, however, is not just iconographic decoding. She also attends to other visual design elements, such as the presence of vectors that, through a series of straight lines that imply interaction between elements, creates a sense of narrative engagement with the viewer. Perhaps the most provocative aspect of her analysis comes in chapter 8, where she posits that Craighead’s *Christ Yesterday and Today* functions to “hold the space of Holy Saturday in the missal” (191). Specifically, she interprets the series of abstract, wavy lines that emanate out from the silhouetted image of Jesus as a visual metaphor for the liminal space between death and resurrection and the already-but-not-yet nature of God’s reign.

One sign of a book’s potential impact is the extent to which it might invite further research. On this score, *Drawn to the Word* has tremendous potential. It

offers an important movement in the direction of engaging graphic design as a medium for biblical reception. Graphic designs abound in Christian visual culture, be it in lectionaries, illustrated Bibles, liturgical banners, bookmarks, prayer cards, or educational curricula. Even if one does not strictly adhere to Dillon's visual social semiotics as a methodology, the path she paves provides a generative framework for research on a wide range of analogous objects. At the same time, *Drawn to the Word* invites further reflection on the lectionary as a site of biblical reception in its own right. This could involve closer attention to the hermeneutics that guide the selection and arrangement of texts or an analysis of the iconicity of these texts, including the nature of the image-text relationship.

While there is much to applaud about the book, at least two aspects of its design might raise questions for some readers. First, and as noted above, one must wade through 154 pages of scholarly framing before arriving at Dillon's analysis of the two pieces of graphic design identified at the outset. One could argue that such extensive framing is necessary in light of the critiques leveled at biblical reception history. Be that as it may, devoting two thirds of a project to methodology might well be perceived as an over correction to the claim that reception history is a form of "Biblical studies *lite*" (38; emphasis hers). These early chapters can feel laborious and at times tendentious. One wonders if the project would not have been even more effective if the first six chapters were greatly condensed so as to make room for the analysis of additional graphic designs by Craighead and Markell. The proof of the method Dillon employs is in the eating of the pudding. This reader, at least, was left wanting a little more pudding and a little less recipe.

Second, given Dillon's insistence that the meaning of an image is co-determined by subsequent viewers, I was somewhat surprised to find that Dillon does not engage with actual viewers in her research. This is in marked contrast to the work of art historian David Morgan, who, in his book *Visual Piety*, attends to patterns of visual response and reception among viewers of the artwork of Warner Sallman. Through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, Morgan is able to describe how people of faith – not just scholars – interpret religious visual culture, including how their implicit beliefs and values mediate their experience of religious visual media. To be fair, Morgan and Dillon come from different fields and *Drawn to the Word* and *Visual Piety* both make important, albeit different, scholarly contributions on their own. Nevertheless, some engagement with popular, everyday reception of Craighead's and Markell's art would have made for an interesting addition to what is otherwise a compelling work.

## **Imprint**

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