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Judith A. Kidd, *Behind the Image: Understanding the Old Testament in Medieval Art*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2014. xvi + 257 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index. \$67.95 (pb). ISBN 3034309937.

Review by Gerald B. Guest, John Carroll University.

“Scenes and characters from the Old Testament appear frequently in Western medieval art, yet the study of their significance is a neglected area of iconography.” This is the rather startling claim that opens the blurb on the back cover of Judith Kidd’s book. Whether or not this statement should be attributed to Kidd herself we cannot know, but such an assertion seems overstated to say the least, given the rich historiography on which art historians draw in their ongoing work to consider the myriad of ways in which the Hebrew Bible was reformulated in images across the wide expanse of the Middle Ages. That Kidd has taken on such a large and significant area of study is certainly to be commended. The resulting work is relatively short and can be read as an introduction to some of the complexities of the field. The book’s main text of 231 pages is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue. It almost goes without saying that any attempt to do justice to such a vast and complex area of study will be marked by an author’s own preferences and prejudices, and that is certainly true in this case.

The Introduction tackles a wide range of themes and ideas relevant to the book’s subject matter. The author’s penchant for dividing and subdividing her text belies this diffused approach to the material. Thus, the Introduction contains two major subdivisions, respectively entitled “The Biblical Perspective” and “Interpreting Medieval Imagery.” This signals the fundamental but complex tension between word and image that animates the study of biblical iconography. The first of these two sections is briefer, covering basic notions concerning Christianity’s general attitude toward the Hebrew Bible as setting the stage for the coming of Christ and that fulfillment’s documentation in the New Testament. The longer section on “Interpreting Medieval Imagery” is, in turn, divided into two more sections headed “Meaning and Nuance” and “Multiple Meanings.” Here, the author rehearses information that will be familiar to experts but perhaps useful to students with limited backgrounds in art history and/or medieval studies. Among the standard ideas covered are notions that events in the Old Testament stood as typological forerunners for events in the New Testament, but that they could also be valued by medieval Christians on their own terms as examples, say, of virtuous conduct or faithfulness. Kidd also touches on the different levels of scriptural interpretation in the medieval tradition (historical, allegorical, moral, spiritual), the porous border between scripture and commentary, and the tendency for medieval images to go beyond both in the visualization of the biblical and the parabiblical.

Chapter one is entitled “Precedent” and considers how medieval Christians turned to the Hebrew Bible as a source of validation for their own beliefs and practices. Characters, stories, and situations were regularly cited as models of authority, sanctity, and virtue. These precedents influenced medieval thought in the realms of politics, war, and the arts (to name only three). Kidd confines her discussion to key male figures from the biblical text. Joseph, Gideon, Daniel, Noah, and Job are all given substantive discussions. Although not considered by Kidd in these terms, the chapter begins to open up a way of looking at medieval culture that is, in essence, multitemporal. In this fashion, past and present interwove themselves in the minds of learned Christians. Thus, Noah was seen as a virtuous man in

general, but the Ark could also be seen as an allegory for the Church, making the biblical patriarch a typological forerunner of the Church prelate. It might have proven a useful exercise here to have included some biblical women or perhaps lesser-known biblical characters. Sadly, Kidd's bibliography shows little contact with recent feminist work on the art of the Middle Ages, one of the most vibrant areas of investigation in the field.[1]

Chapter two is entitled "Word" and turns on the notion that "most medieval imagery was the result of interpretation of biblical texts" (p. 24). Here, Kidd broadly acknowledges the importance of the parabiblical in medieval culture. Medieval Christians rarely experienced the Bible as an isolated text. Instead, its content was mediated through liturgy, commentaries, paraphrases and retellings so that the biblical text was repeatedly remade for a variety of medieval audiences. In a section from this chapter entitled "Scholarship," Kidd considers something of a random assortment of themes related to that notion. Thus, one finds discussions of Jerome's prefaces to the books of the Bible, the *Glossa ordinaria* (a key work of exegesis assembled in the central Middle Ages), and one of the great exegetical and artistic achievements of the twelfth century, the *Hortus deliciarum*. Moses' horns are also discussed. This is followed by another major section on "Story," which again offers a range of examples, including a consideration of apocryphal tales associated with the Hebrew Bible such as the fall of the rebel angels and the story of Marcolf the fool.

Chapter three concerns the importance of conceptions of time for understanding medieval art. Although Kidd is not particularly interested in reflecting more broadly on the complex notions of temporality undergirding medieval thought (and image making), she does begin to unpack some of the ways in which past, present, and future comingled in the visual culture of the Middle Ages and the ways in which notions of periodization served as important subtexts for representations of biblical history. Time was both cyclical and unidirectional for medieval Christians, both continuous and divided, as well as folding back upon itself in a variety of ways. The section entitled "The Importance of the Beginning" contains useful discussions of creation imagery, the influence of Plato's *Timaeus* on medieval thought, and theological notions of the different ages of the world. The section labeled "Continuum" looks at the genealogy of Christ and at Jesse Tree images (among other topics). Finally, the section on "Time Recurring" takes a look at Zodiac and Labors of the Months cycles in medieval art, two phenomena which arguably pull the author away from the main subject of her study.

Chapters four and five deal with the importance of typology in biblical art and thought. The first of these two chapters stresses the flexibility of typology, "how it could be adapted to different settings" or "to emphasize different messages" (p. 163). Kidd discusses such well known works of art as the Klosterneuburg ambo, the typological diagrams known as the Eton Roundels, and a set of lost typological paintings that once adorned the Worcester Cathedral chapter house. Special attention is paid to the so-called *Pictor in carmine*, dated here to ca. 1200. This text contains a lengthy catalogue of Old Testament types foreshadowing the life of Christ and salvation history more generally.

Kidd's second chapter on typology (chapter five) shifts the grounds of discussion to the later Middle Ages but again focuses on cycles of typological imagery with accompanying texts. Here, two manuscript types make up the bulk of the discussion, the *Biblia pauperum* and the *Speculum humanae salvationis*. The *Hortus deliciarum* makes a welcome return appearance in this chapter as well. Interwoven into these discussions are some useful observations on the flexibility of typology as a mode of thought in medieval culture and how it might have been used as a stimulus to personal devotion. More detailed readings of individual images would have strengthened Kidd's arguments here (more on this issue below).

The book's sixth and final chapter considers images of the personified *Synagoga*. Again, Kidd's discussion ranges widely. There is some consideration here of Jewish history in the Middle Ages and Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism in the central Middle Ages. Not surprisingly, this chapter has little to do with artistic representations inspired by the Hebrew Bible. Instead, there are discussions

of historical problems such as Jewish conversion and debates about Judaism by Christian authorities. Some attempt is made to link these historical trends to visual culture. Thus, the St. Nicholas windows at Chartres are used as an example of a conversion narrative, and the *Hortus deliciarum* is invoked for its richly visual approach to theology and history.

In assessing the strengths of Kidd's work in this book, one must begin with the question of audience. Taken as a whole, the book is rather short (given the scope of its subject matter), offering a basic introduction to the field. Readers with a strong background in either biblical iconography or medieval studies will likely be familiar with much of what is discussed here. The book will therefore prove most useful to students wishing to gain a bit of background in this important aspect of medieval visual culture.

Nevertheless, a few *caveats* are in order for those using the book as an introduction to biblical iconography. Kidd's approach is fundamentally logocentric. Images are seen as reflections of texts. Kidd acknowledges that knowledge of the Bible in the Middle Ages was regularly filtered through a range of textual intermediaries, but rarely in her study does she acknowledge that images too are rich and complex in their mediations of biblical text and thought. Certain works of art are considered in more than one chapter of the text (for example, cycles of Joseph the Patriarch in stained glass or the sophisticated theological diagrams of the *Hortus deliciarum*), but rarely does the author bear down to gauge the richness of these works. Instead, she offers basic descriptions of what one sees, mapping the visual back on to the textual. The ways in which the textual is exceeded or superseded in art is rarely considered. Thus, the art in question never gains a cultural life of its own; it is consistently anchored to the word.

A related weakness is the author's bibliography. Kidd tends to cite a small number of sources when analyzing her chosen examples. These sources tend to be useful starting points, but rarely does she gesture toward recent work in the field. Thus, there is an entire chapter circling around the figure of *Synagoga* but no mention of Nina Rowe's recent book on the topic.^[2] Similarly, Kidd analyzes several pages from the *Hortus deliciarum*, but recent work such as Fiona Griffith's monographic study goes unmentioned.^[3] Other examples of this tendency could be cited.

Finally, the book is rather narrowly illustrated. This factor may relate to the cost of reproduction rights and/or the publisher's desire to keep costs at a reasonable level. Nevertheless, of the book's fifty-two reproductions, the overwhelming majority come from the central Middle Ages (that is, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries). In terms of media, the strongest emphasis is on the monumental arts of stained glass and architectural sculpture. Geographically, art from France and England predominates.

These criticisms aside, Kidd's book offers a useful starting point for those wishing to learn more about biblical iconography in Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

NOTES

[1] Two useful starting points are Madeline H. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) and Marian Bleeke, Jennifer Borland, Rachel Dressler, Martha Easton, and Elizabeth L'Estrange (from the Medieval Feminist Art History Project), "Artistic Representation: Women and/in Medieval Visual Culture," in *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Kim M. Phillips (London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 179-213 (chapter 8).

[2] Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral, and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[3] Fiona J. Griffiths, *The Garden of Delights: Reform and Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

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