

**CONTRASTING IMAGES OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ART: A CASE STUDY IN VISUAL EXEGESIS** by **Natasha F.H. O'Hear**, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, pp. xvii + 287, £75, hbk*

Although this book is part of the Oxford Theological Monographs series, we are actually looking at an inter-disciplinary work. O'Hear involves three different disciplines in this study: theology, art history and history. Her skill in theology and art history is more evident than that in history, but I shall say more about that later. O'Hear attempts in this book to understand the different ways in which images of the Book of Revelation from the late medieval and early modern period engage with the subject matter of this New Testament work. She looks at seven distinct images or series of images, starting with the Lambeth Apocalypse in the twelfth century and finishing with Lucas Cranach's *Passional Christi und Antichristi* from the sixteenth century. The breadth and the ambition of the sweep in art historical, theological and historical terms is immense even for a scholar of many years' standing, let alone for one starting out. But given that this was an ambitious topic for her to choose, O'Hear has delineated the work in such a way as to make it manageable and within her capacities.

In Chapters 1 to 5 O'Hear concerns herself with her chosen images. In each of these chapters, she includes not only a physical description of each piece, and questions of iconography, artistic style and influences, but also theological questions such as John of the Apocalypse's function in the image/images, or questions of its Eucharistic message when looking at altarpieces, or in the case of Cranach the influence of Reformation theology on the images. In Chapter 1, she looks at the Lambeth Apocalypse, and she concerns herself with questions of date, provenance, patron and style, as well as looking at contemporary theological issues such as the Elect and the Reprobate, the Antichrist and the anti-Jewish elements found in the images. In Chapter 2 she concerns herself with the Angers Apocalypse; she looks at the patronage and purpose of the tapestry, and manuscript models of the work. She nicely examines the style and the physicality of the work as well as looking at the theological issues such as the exegetical function of the tapestry. In Chapter 3, O'Hear examines two altarpieces: the Ghent altarpiece (1432) and the St John altarpiece (1479). Here she examines patronage and function, artistic and theological influences as well as the possible theological messages found within each work. In Chapter 4, O'Hear concerns herself with an examination of the Mystic Nativity by Botticelli. She examines the cultural and intellectual context in which Botticelli worked. She also looks at the patronage, purpose and place of the Mystic Nativity before finally turning her attention to a more detailed examination of the work itself, looking particularly at theological, cultural and artistic themes at work within the image. Finally she examines Dürer's and Cranach's attempts at visualizing the Book of Revelation: Dürer's Apocalypse series and Cranach's *Passional Christi und Antichristi*. She looks at the artistic and theological influences on the works. She is particularly keen to stress Dürer's interpretative capacity in his images of the Book of Revelation, as against Cranach's images as a representation of Luther's Protestant theology and polemic against the papacy.

Chapter 6 concerns theological reflections on the different images, notably the knotty question of Biblical hermeneutics and exegesis in relation to the images studied. This is a theory-driven chapter, in which O'Hear attempts two things: to advocate that the viewer of these images should read them in terms of visual exegesis, and also to categorize, classify, and codify the images in those terms. To this end she considers whether her chosen images attempt literally to re-present the text (of the Book of Revelation) or whether some of the images instead focus on getting to the essence of the text. She seeks to distinguish which images act to decode the text and which attempt to 'actualize' the text.

In the book's Conclusion, O'Hear argues very persuasively that the Book of Revelation's visionary character lends itself very well to visual exegesis and that these images can and indeed should contribute to Biblical studies. She also convincingly objects to the notion that Biblical interpretation can be seen as objective and scientific. Thus she affords room within Biblical hermeneutics for an understanding of the *Sache selbst* of the text to be explored through the visual, as opposed to the written, medium.

This book has much to commend it, and O'Hear can be proud of the amount of scholarly research that has gone into this work. Each image is well described, both physically and stylistically; she engages well both in the art-historical discourse, and with the theological discourse that each image (or series) calls up. O'Hear also has done well in her appraisal of the secondary literature and the scholarly debates are detailed and well-handled. However, this book does feel somewhat piecemeal. Each section is tackled perfectly adequately, but one struggles to find any connectivity between the chapters, other than the very loose question surrounding visual exegesis. There did not seem to be any particular rationale in her choice of images from the Book of Revelation. She was not strong on the history, and the few historical points she made were not set fully in context and were left somewhat free-floating. For instance, O'Hear notes that the iconography of the Angers tapestry demonstrated its strong connections to Louis I of Anjou; but, given the Book of Revelation's strong denunciations of temporal power, this unusual iconographic connection is neither fully explored nor fully explained. More generally, though the book has a theme, namely visual exegesis, there is no over-arching concept that adequately ties the disparate discussions together. The reader is left without any feeling of progress, coherence or trajectory; everything is explained piecemeal. I would have preferred O'Hear to have been bolder and more dynamic with her research, so that I was left feeling not merely informed but also enlivened by the book.

JENIFER M. DYE

**THE FRIARS IN MEDIEVAL BRITAIN: PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2007 HARLAXTON SYMPOSIUM** edited by Nicholas Rogers, *Shaun Tyas*, Donington, 2010, pp. xii + 372, £49.50 hbk, and **MEDIEVAL IRISH DOMINICAN STUDIES** by Benedict O'Sullivan OP, edited by Hugh Fenning OP, *Four Courts Press*, Dublin, 2009, pp. 237, £50, hbk

Fewer histories have been written of the medieval friars in Britain and Ireland compared to those of the monks. Certainly some of this has to do with the relatively fewer material remains, which can be easily explained by the friars' poverty. Yet, it would also seem that some of it has to do with the rather different formation of friars, who tend to specialise in philosophy and theology rather than in history or liturgy. For this reason, and for many others, the medieval friars have received far less attention than their monastic counterparts.

A number of academics have helped to fill this gap through research shared at a recent Harlaxton Symposium, which has produced a substantial volume entitled simply *The Friars in Medieval Britain*. This collection of nineteen essays by twenty-one authors covers a wide range of topics under the following six subject headings: Preachers and Theologians, Relationships, Texts and Writers, Art and Iconography, The Image of the Friar and Local Studies. While one could quibble with the arrangement of essays, the variety of topics across a range of disciplines is astonishing. Some of the essays are of more than merely local interest. For example, William H. Campbell argues quite persuasively that English Franciscan preaching in the thirteenth century was quite innovative. Whereas the use of