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Alison Jack

Building on current interest in biblical reception history, and in the reception history of the Book of Revelation in particular, Natasha and Anthony O'Hear offer a comprehensive and yet focused analysis of a range of responses to Revelation in this handsomely produced book. While literary, musical and popular responses are covered here, it is in the field of artistic representation of the text that the book makes the greatest contribution. Its fifty-three colour plates and multiple black and white illustrations, and the commentary which accompanies them, are a rich resource for the specialist in biblical criticism, reception history or art history, or for the interested non-specialist. The glossary of terms (from 'Alpha and Omega' to 'Woman clothed with the Sun'), the 'Suggestions for Further Reading', and the accessible writing combine to make this a book which will appeal to a wide readership.

The book's structure promotes ease of its use. The opening chapter offers an 'outline' or 'topology' of the contents of Revelation that stresses its emphasis on the visual and, more specifically, on the dream-like nature of its succession of visions. The poetic coherence of the narrative rather than its linearity is noted, and it is suggested that visual representations of the text may have value over academic commentary because of this. John's role as visionary, standing in a long biblical tradition, and the visual and metaphorical language used, point to the value of artistic interpretations that allow for synchronic representations of events with little logical relationship. These artistic interpretations may offer new insights into the text. With this expectation, the key works of art referred to and depicted are briefly introduced in this opening chapter, from the *Trier Apocalypse* (ninth century, drawing on fifth/sixth-century manuscripts) to the work of Max Beckmann (1884–1950).

It is further argued in this introductory chapter that the key themes of Revelation, such as the current evils confronting humanity, the possibility of a better form of life than the one being experienced, and the transformative power of a morality based on the self-sacrificial rather than worldly influence, remain relevant in the twenty-first century, even in the absence of a religious worldview. Given this ongoing relevance and interest, the book aims to help readers understand the context, history and range of meanings of Revelation itself.

In order to further these aims, the following nine chapters explore themes prevalent in Revelation, both in their original contexts and as they are interpreted in a range of artistic media. These themes include the Lamb of God, the woman clothed with the sun, and the three satanic beasts. The book concludes with a chapter surveying the way Revelation has been used in twentieth- and twenty-first-century high and low culture, including films, music and literature.

The structure of the book is exemplified by the chapter on the New Jerusalem. The main exegetical issues raised by Revelation 20–2 are detailed, such as the paradoxical nature of the detailed descriptions, and the question of whether or not this is a future reality or something to be striven for in the present. A survey of various sources, such as the Trinity Apocalypse manuscript and the Angers Apocalypse tapestry, suggests that the disjunction between the urban image of the holy city and the restored Garden of Eden in this section of the text may

be dealt with in different visual ways. It is argued that complex theological issues about breaking down the barrier between God and humanity may be reflected in the Angers tapestry in the image of John stepping out of the shelter (in which he had been represented) in order to be closer and nearly on a level with the image of God in the Garden. In contrast, the O'Hears suggest that John Martin's pastoral New Jerusalem canvas of 1851–3, *The Plains of Heaven*, denies the urban nature of the earlier chapter of Revelation and retains the notion of the aloof creator God. They argue that the divine–human reconciliation of the text is not dealt with here as knowingly as in the earlier representation and, in general, in later depictions details of the literary text are not portrayed in as literal a way. This example points to an occasional tendency in the book to be more sympathetic towards earlier representations than to later ones, seeing complex theological issues profitably raised in ‘inaccuracies’ between the visual and the text in the medieval, which are judged as faults or shortcomings in the more modern.

In their conclusion, the O'Hears write that ‘we hope . . . that by showing Revelation and its artistic interpretations through the ages we will have helped to demonstrate which interpretations are merely of their time, using Revelation as a peg on which to hand their own convictions, and which can contribute to a fuller and more rounded interpretation of the text’ (p. 287). This attempt to judge the relative merits of interpretations on what might be considered somewhat subjective and sweeping grounds is a slight weakness of the book, which is otherwise a fascinating and rich resource.