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Reading the Bible with Rembrandt:

Graphic Exegesis in Christian Education

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Doctor of Ministry

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Abstract

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By Maren Sonstegard-Spray

Graphic exegesis, the visual interpretation of Scripture in pictorial form, is an effective and underutilized tool in Christian education in the local church context and there are several reasons for its inclusion. Graphic exegesis emphasizes the visual nature of Scripture and the need for the use of the imagination in reading the Bible. It recognizes the valuable contribution of artists as serious and skillful interpreters of Scripture, and art as an important contributor in reception history. It engages the visual aspect of learning, which is often ignored in religious education. Finally, graphic exegesis expands the interpretive world of a text, revealing the multiple meanings of Scripture. The use of graphic exegesis in Christian education is a means of providing a "visual vocabulary" for discussing various interpretations of a text, aiding in revealing more than textual study can do alone, so that interpretation might be more than explanation; it becomes a source of nurture and formation. This essay will espouse graphic exegesis as biblical interpretation, and will describe the preparation, pedagogy, and assessment of an adult Christian education offering in a local church setting utilizing graphic exegesis as an aid to interpretation.

Reading the Bible with Rembrandt:
Graphic Exegesis in Christian Education

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"Mira profunditas, my God, the wondrous depth! It causes a shudder to peer into it – a shudder of awe, and tremor of love."

Augustine, *Confessions*[1]

"It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self . . ."

Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*[2]

Introduction

Interpretation calls for imagination.[3] Standing before the life-sized painting of Bathsheba by Rembrandt van Rijn,[4] we are invited to view an imaginative visual depiction of the artist's reading of the text. We see Bathsheba bathed in light, her body on full display before us but she does not invite our gaze. Instead, she looks downward, vulnerable and lost in thought. Located at the center of the painting, in Bathsheba's hand, is a letter from King David, inviting her to the palace. The painting imaginatively explores a gap in the text. We read in 2 Samuel 11:4 (CEB): "So David sent messengers to get her. When she came to him, he had sex with her. (Now she had been purifying herself after her monthly period.) Then she returned home." Reading the Bible

[1] Augustine, *Confessions,* 12.14.17, quoted in Ellen Davis, "The Soil That Is Scripture," in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, 1st ed, ed. William P. Brown, (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 37.

[2] Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation,* trans. and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge; New York; Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 143.

[3] Martin O'Kane, "The Bible and the visual imagination," in *Imaging the Bible: An Introduction to Biblical Art*, ed. Martin O'Kane (London: SPCK, 2008), 6. O'Kane points out the imaginative focus of the Jesuit Order. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola "urged his followers to engage in visual contemplation of biblical texts, 'to see from the view of the imagination.'" O'Kane argues that imagination has been neglected in hermeneutics, as does Ellen Davis, in her essay "Holy Preaching: Ethical Interpretation and the Practical Imagination," in Ellen Davis and Austin McIver Dennis, *Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016), 95-96: Davis describes the Scriptures as an "other" in that "they speak a language and express a view of reality vastly different from our own" and our encounter with the "other" requires imagination: "Imagination is the interpretive faculty by which we relate to that which is strange, not fully known, or not immediately present to us."

[4] Rembrandt van Rijn, *Bathsheba at Her Bath*, 1654, The Louvre, Paris, accessed March 18, 2019, https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/bathsheba-her-bath.

with Rembrandt we are invited to pause in the midst of this very brief narrative and find worlds of meaning in the spaces between the words. As Bathsheba sits exposed, we, the viewers of the painting, become "surrogate beholders,"[5] standing in the place of, or perhaps alongside, King David, "complicit in David's predatory gazing."[6] We are invited to reflect on "the destructive impulses of the human heart and the insidious nature of sin to which we are all prone."[7] In what ways have we grasped at that which does not belong to us? What have we loved too much that should be loved less? We are invited to consider the choice Bathsheba must make, to betray her husband or disobey her king, and the implications of that choice. Given the terseness of the prose, we might be inclined to see these characters as flat and one-dimensional; we might be tempted to point our fingers in blame at either of them. But reading the text in conversation with a masterful visual interpretation, we can explore the familiar terrain of complicated human interactions: "What Rembrandt shows us is how David's 'indiscretion' wreaked havoc on the people he was charged to protect as king. A woman is exploited; a marriage destroyed; an illegitimate child conceived, born, died; and loyal soldiers killed."[8] Through the image, we are drawn powerfully into "the visual world of the bible" and then back into relationship with the text itself.[9] What has the artist revealed that we might have missed in the text? How does the "visual reading" of the text by the artist compare with our own reading?

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[5] Christopher Nygren, "Reflections on the Difficulty of Talking about Biblical Images, Pictures, and Texts," in *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images*, eds. Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal, Emory Studies in Early Christianity, Vol. 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 294.
[6] Amanda W Benckhuysen, "Reading the Bible with Rembrandt: A Fresh Look at Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11," *Calvin Theological Journal* 50, no. 2 (November 2015): 260.
[7] Benckhuysen, "Reading the Bible," 260.
[8] Benckhuysen, "Reading the Bible," 263.
[9] Martin O'Kane, "Interpreting the Bible through the Visual Arts," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 1, no. 3 (September 2012): 391.

Artists can be skillful interpreters of the Bible who provide a means of seeing the text with new eyes.[10] Visual interpretations of the Bible plumb gaps in the narrative, amplify the emotions of the characters, startle our assumptions, and bring the text to life: "That is, visual expressions of biblical texts have the potential to open the reader's imagination, expanding the capacity to see, to consider, and to understand new dimensions not only of the characters in the text but also the meaning of the text itself."[11] Works of art, from different cultures and time periods, give voice to a variety of perspectives on a text and reveal multiple meanings in a story that might be overlooked by reliance on textual study alone.

The visual interpretation of Scripture in the form of a painting or sculpture, or "graphic exegesis," is an effective tool in Christian education in a local church. Graphic exegesis can generate conversations around interpretation in diverse communities of faith, creating a mindful and creative means to explore the interpretative terrain beyond a single, plain reading of a text: ". . . artistic expansions of interpretive perspective serve to underline one of the points most valued in current biblical teaching, namely, that *biblical texts are multi-valent in meaning*."[12] A work of art represents an interpretative reading of a text, which itself can be interpreted in multiple ways by different viewers, and these perspectives can be brought into conversation with different readings of the text. Graphic exegesis benefits those who are visual learners and highlights the visual nature of the Bible. It engages the imagination in such a way that the reader is nurtured and formed by their study; aided by imagination, we enter the "worlds of possible

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[10] Nicholas Davey, "The Hermeneutics of Seeing," in *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual*, eds. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandwell (London: Routledge, 1999), 25: "The particular art work allows us to gain sight of that which without art's mediation we could never come to see."

[11] Benckhuysen "Reading the Bible," 250.

[12] Bruce C. Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 8, no. 2 (April 2005), 116. Emphasis original.

meaning" of the story, thereby "opening oneself to the new possibilities of meaning offered by these texts, realizing this meaning within oneself, and being transformed by this realization."[13]

This project rests on these two suppositions: that it is possible for art to function as interpretation (and the artist function as interpreter) and that viewing one or more visual interpretations of a particular text can help participants in a classroom setting acquire a richer understanding of the biblical passage. If participants are given multiple visual representations of a text, and the opportunity to discuss the artwork and the text in a group, will they be able to articulate a deeper and more varied understanding of the text, and will they be nurtured by their study and conversation?[14] I explored these questions in a Christian education class at First Presbyterian Church in New Bern, North Carolina. Four classes were offered over four weeks. The first week explored the idea of interpretation and the methodology for "reading" a painting and a text. The second and third classes engaged several paintings in conversation with a text from the Old and New Testaments, respectively. The final week reviewed the images and texts, and analyzed the learnings and method.

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[13] Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 299. Burton-Christie describes how the early desert mothers and fathers "saw the sacred texts as projecting worlds of possible meaning that they were called upon to enter. To ruminate on Scripture was to embark upon a deeply personal drama that the monks referred to as the quest for purity of heart. Interpretation of Scripture in this context meant allowing the text to strip away the accumulated layers of self-deception, self-hatred, fear, and insecurity that were exposed in the desert solitude and in the tension of human interaction. It also meant opening oneself to the new possibilities of meaning offered by these texts, realizing this meaning within oneself, and being transformed by this realization."

[14] C. Clifton Black, "Serving the Food of Full-Grown Adults: Augustine's Interpretation of Scripture and the Nurture of Christians," *Interpretation* 52, no. 4 (October 1998): 341–53. According to Black, for Augustine interpretation functioned to nurture Christians and is a means by which God conforms us to his will: "I refer to biblical interpretation in the service of nurturing Christians. I do not think that Augustine is merely setting forth a program of catechesis, for which biblical exegesis provides the theological prolegomena or raw material. Rather he is catechizing through exegesis, demonstrating for us how scriptural interpretation actually functions as Christian nurture. That demonstration is far more interesting, more vital, and every bit as needful in our century as in Augustine's" (p. 347).

Art as Biblical Interpretation

The Bible is inherently visual and visual depictions have long existed alongside the texts.[15] These have been used as a means of teaching biblical stories to the illiterate faithful or as illustrations to accompany texts. Recently there has been serious attention given to the interpretative value of some (but not all) works of art.[16] Visual representations of texts are receiving a growing recognition in the realm of reception history, placing art among other forms of interpretation.[17] Pictorial images are an important afterlife of a text, showing how a text has been understood in different cultures and time periods.

Artists can be astute interpreters of Scripture. Berdini, writing about the art of Jacopo Bassano, first coined the phrase "visual exegesis" to describe the work of the artist.[18]

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[15] O'Kane, "The Bible and the Visual Imagination," 1: "From beginning to end, the Bible abounds in vivid descriptions of landscapes, people and events expressed in language designed to appeal to the readers' visual imagination. It opens with the image of God surveying all his work with the craftsman's eye to detail in Genesis 1 and closes with John's dramatic vision of the new heaven and earth and the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God in Revelation 21."

[16] Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds., *Art as Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 3: "The suggestions that Fra Angelico says more in this one image than could be said in a whole book indicates not only the power of this particular image but the importance of the visual modality for the communication of religious ideas. In recent years, art historians and critics, and a few theologians, have argued for a contemporary recognition of the visual modality as a means of theological, philosophical, and cultural reflection, not just as a mirror for aesthetic values and tastes."

[17] O'Kane, "Interpreting the Bible through the Visual Arts," 390-91: "Thus, while interest in visual interpretations of the Bible may have gained momentum among scholars over the last decade as part of a renewed emphasis on reception history, it is worth keeping in mind that 'visual exegesis' has been one of the most accepted and effective forms of explicating the Bible over many centuries." O'Kane describes how visual interpretation of Scripture fits into the categories of Rezeptionsgeschichte (reception history) and Wirkungsgeschichte (re-working of tradition); while the former is commonly used as a way of showing the influence of biblical stories, he favors the latter category for visual exegesis in that it "focuses on how a work of art affects its viewer and is concerned with the work's capacity to draw the viewer, sometimes quite powerfully, into the visual world of the Bible."

[18] Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis*, Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Berdini develops the concept of visual exegesis arguing that a reading of a text necessitates a kind of expansion, which is also present when a text is visualized by an artist: "Once subjected to the expansive modes of exegesis, the text has taken its reader quite far from textual literality; yet in hermeneutical terms the exegetical experience is nothing other than a reader's exposure to the existential condition that is integral to the interpretation of any text . . . Presenting exegesis as a hermeneutic activity implies that, by virtue of its multilevel reading, the text may reveal dimensions of meaning that exceed literality while unveiling existential conditions of the reader. When the reader moves beyond the literality of the text and begins to adjust the text to himself and herself to the text, he or she expands the text. Such expansion may be favored, or required, by indeterminacies contained in the text, though expansion

Paintings, Berdini argues, do not represent the text themselves but a reading of the text:

> The painter reads the text and translates his scriptural reading into a problem, to which he offers a solution – the image. In that image the beholder acknowledges, not the text in the abstract, but the painter's reading of the text so that the effect the image has on the beholder is a function of what the painter wants the beholder to experience in the text. This is the trajectory of visualization, and the effect on the beholder is a form of exegesis.[19]

Since then, the phrase "visual exegesis" has been used in number of fields in a variety of ways because of the flexibility of the word "image."[20] The language around "visual exegesis" needs refinement.[21] Nygren proposes "graphic exegesis" as a more precise term to refer to biblical interpretations found in produced works of art, either paintings or sculptures, suggesting that "the term graphic exegesis be employed to describe pictures that have exegetical ambitions":

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remains an activity inherent to reading, and a prerogative of the reader, not a characteristic of the text. Its occurrence, therefore, does not signal a fault in the text, but rather the trace of a reading. Exceeding the quest for meaning, textual expansion eludes practices of interpretation, which explains why exegesis is concerned, not with providing a definition of the meaning of a text, but with sustaining a notion of reading capable of describing the process and modalities that enable its expansion. Like exegesis, visualization acknowledges – and presupposes – the indeterminacies of the text as a condition for its expansion in the direction of the viewer . . . And my claim is that visualization enters into a relationship with the text which not only approximates (and presupposes) the hermeneutic trajectory of reading but itself constitutes a form of exegesis, a visual exegesis . . . For painters and preachers the practice of textual expansion – of which deviation is a particular form – falls within the domain of exegesis, that is, within the discipline of reading" (p. 6-7).

[19] Berdini*, The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano,* 35.

[20] Nygren, "Reflections," 271.

[21] Nygren, "Reflections," 288: "I employ the term graphic in order to distinguish the interpretative operation at play here from the sort of visual or image-based exegesis at the heart of rhetographic interpretations of the Bible or from other art-historical engagements with biblical exegesis." The flexibility of the word image has meant that the term "visual exegesis" has found utility in a number of fields of study. Image can be used to describe what is imagined and what is real; image can be used to describe archeological artifacts or the visual world of the writer; image can be used to describe what language does in the mind of the listener, or what is produced artistically in response to a text. See the variety of uses of "visual exegesis" cited in *The Art of Visual Exegesis*, including Vernon Robbins's use of the term in rhetography, as well as Rosemary Canavan's use in "Visual Exegesis: Interpreting Text in Dialogue with its Visual Context," Colloquium 47, no. 1 (May 2015): 141–51, to mean the interpretation of an image, specifically the material world of the biblical text, and see also the responses of Claire Renkin and Harry O. Maier in the same issue.

> The term graphic exegesis is predicated on the conviction that there is a category of biblical pictures that proffer their own exegesis of the biblical text or story. These pictures will, by necessity, be biblical illustrations, but to suggest that they merely illustrate the text would be to undersell their ambition. Not all biblical illustrations ought to be considered graphic exegesis. Some – perhaps even many – paintings, sculptures, stained glass, and so on that illustrate, say the crucifixion, simply recount the story without offering an exegetical gloss. By contrast, graphic exegesis focuses attention on pictures that interpret the biblical narrative through pictorial means. The utility of this category rests in its explicit acknowledgement that certain pictures do not merely give visual form to biblical exegesis already presented elsewhere in a textual form but instead do the work of biblical interpretation and theological argumentation in themselves.[22]

Graphic exegesis is comparable to the ancient interpretative practice of midrash in which "biblical texts are imaginatively interpreted in ways that extend the meaning of the text and often make the text more accessible to contemporary experience."[23] Both are exercises in imaginative textual expansion, paying careful attention to the details and gaps in the narrative in order to reveal meaning.[24] Birch argues that effective biblical teaching incorporates midrash

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[22] Nygren, "Reflections," 288. The word graphic "is used simply to underline the concrete, manufactured nature of the object" (289).

[23] Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," 115: "After a number of years I have come to believe that a key to my most successful efforts at biblical teaching that incorporates the arts is the recovery of the ancient Jewish interpretive method of midrash . . . The word 'midrash' is a Hebrew noun derived from a verb meaning 'to inquire.' It is used to describe both a methodology and a genre of literature in which biblical texts are imaginatively interpreted in ways that extend the meaning of the text and often make the text more accessible to contemporary experience . . . The term midrash encompasses a number of specific techniques for imaginative interpretation but all are characterized by a profound respect for the text itself and a remarkable freedom to extend and elaborate on the text. Narrative traditions can be retold, extended, or elaborated. What the text does not say can become as significant as what is said. Such silences in the text become invitations to the imagination."

[24] Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano,* 35: Berdini notes that a "painting is not the simple visualization of the narrative of the text but an expansion of the text . . ."

and that midrash "provides the ideal category for understanding artistic interactions with biblical texts":

> Through midrash students can understand artists to be both profound respecters of the power and integrity of biblical texts, while at the same time extending and entering into imaginative encounter with those texts. Without understanding midrash students tend to judge artistic treatments of biblical texts on the basis of how well they merely illustrate the literal words of the text. Openness to a more imaginative, artistic midrash on the text sends students back to the text with a new awareness of the range of potential meanings in those texts, and in turn opens new possibilities for the address of the texts in lives and ministries.[25]

Visual depictions of biblical stories can be influential and significant explorations and expansions of texts, along the lines of midrash, and artists have a place among other faithful interpreters of Scripture.

Art in Christian Education

Graphic exegesis has value in a local Christian education context for a number of reasons. A handful of superb paintings can reveal in a brief time what might take hours with several commentaries; according to Birch, "I can easily expose a class to ten paintings with distinctive points of view on the text. I could not ask them to read ten commentaries."[26] Art introduces students to the possibility of interpretation in forms other than sermons and written commentaries.[27] Images can be used in a number of ways in biblical studies: as illustration (of a

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[25] Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," 115.
[26] Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," 117.
[27] Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," 116: "The use of artistic interpretation of texts and traditions from the Hebrew Bible has the effect of broadening the range of interpretive voices available to the student. Most students, if that have thought about it at all, believe that biblical texts are primarily interpreted in commentaries, didactic essays, and sermons."

particular idea or tradition), as illumination (exploring complex ideas through nonrepresentational images), and as narrative interpretation (revealing the nuanced way an image interprets a text).[28] Graphic exegesis helps us to see what we might have overlooked in our previous readings of Scripture; artists explore gaps we rushed over or expand details we failed to notice.[29] Many people benefit from a visual approach to learning but churches tend to privilege words over images; graphic exegesis in Christian education is a helpful antidote.[30] Students may find great value in learning how the Bible has been interpreted by individuals in other cultural settings and time periods.

Biblical engagement through art can be a unique mediator of Christian nurture and formation. As O'Kane highlights, there is an interplay between the artwork and the viewer, powerfully affecting the life of the viewer: "Understanding the process at work between a biblical painting and its viewer – and seeing this process in parallel terms to what happens between a biblical text and its reader – allows us to appreciate how the painting of a biblical subject presents the viewer with a biblical event that impacts his or her life."[31] Graphic exegesis emphasizes the need for imagination in our engagement with Scripture: ". . . the importance of the imagination in reading biblical texts has never been sufficiently highlighted. We rely on the

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[28] Lynn R. Huber and Dan W. Clayton Jr., "Introduction: Teaching the Bible with Art," in Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, eds., *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*, Resources for Biblical Study, no. 53 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 177-82.

[29] O'Kane, "The Bible and the Visual Imagination," 5: "Often, the lack of detail in a terse biblical narrative invites us to expand or enhance the story in our imagination and we look to the artist's interpretation to fill out and complete the details of the unsatisfactorily short narrative. The artistic afterlives of biblical characters provide opportunities to question the text and the motives of its author, and encourage us to read the passage again more imaginatively and acknowledge the range of possibilities and different perspectives from which the text may be understood and interpreted."

[30] Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York: BasicBooks, 2006), 5. Gardner's "alternative vision" for education is "based on a radically different view of the mind, and one that yields a very different view of school. It is a pluralistic view of mind, recognizing many different and discrete facets of cognition, acknowledging that people have different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles."

[31] O'Kane, "Interpreting the Bible through the Visual Arts," 391.

imagination of artists to provide original and creative afterlives for the text but the reader too must exercise his or her visual imagination in order to appreciate fully, to be persuaded by, the Bible's plots and characters."[32] Birch concludes that "the goal of our biblical teaching ought to be to kindle imagination and creativity in encounter with biblical texts that are themselves not documentary historical data but imaginative witnesses to the surprising grace of God and the fascinating variety of our human experience with God."[33] Examining several visual depictions of the same story is a way of turning a biblical story over and over as the rabbis did, in a careful and intentional approach to study, interpretation, and religious formation.[34]

Incorporating art into Christian education is an effective method for generating conversations around interpretation. Art reveals in a unique and accessible way the polyvalency (multiple meanings) of Scripture.[35] Visual interpretations of the Bible display layers of meaning often obscured by an insistence on a single, plain reading of Scripture.[36] Looking at more than one visual depiction of a text it is hard to ignore how a text can be read in more than one way: "By appreciating a range of visual expressions of the same biblical subject in many different art traditions, we free ourselves from the limits of our present

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[32] Martin O'Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter*, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 32.
[33] Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," 120.
[34] Davis, "The Soil That Is Scripture," 37. Davis writes how ancient rabbis had a saying about how to read Scripture wisely and well: "Hafokh bah wehafokh bah" meaning "Turn it over and over; everything is in it – and in it (or through it) you will see something."
[35] Doug Adams, "Changing Patterns and Interpretations of Parables in Art," *ARTS* 19, no. 1 (2007): 5–13. There are several terms used in the literature to describe how a text has more than one meaning. Adams adopts the term "polyvalency" to mean multiple interpretations. He appears to be the only one who uses that particular phrase and was planning to use it in a book about the changing artistic perceptions of Jesus' parables that was unfortunately never published. Other terms used are "polyvocal," "multiple layers," "multilevel meanings" (as used by O'Kane), and "multivalent" (as used by Birch). I use these terms interchangeably. See also Steven Shawn Tuell, "True Metaphor: Insights into Reading Scripture from the Rabbis," Theology Today 67, no. 4 (January 2011): 475: "The Bible is true metaphor. As metaphor, the meaning of Scripture is poetic, inherently multivalent, irreducible to single answers, inexhaustible in its capacity to address us, whoever and wherever we are."
[36] David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 82: "The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false."

horizon and recognize that no single expression of the theme is ever complete or definitive, since the subject addressed in simply inexhaustible and therefore always more than any individual expression."[37] Even as each artist interprets the text in a work of art, each individual work of art is open to a variety of interpretations by viewers, drawing us back to the biblical story to see, likewise, that the text has levels of meaning; it is through this process that "the arts opens up opportunities for multiple shared interpretations of the text."[38] Art creates a safe space for conversations around meaning; while it is perhaps easy to say that someone is wrong in how they read a text, it is more challenging to say someone is wrong in how they "read" a painting.

There are some caveats to the use of art in Christian education settings. An educator must carefully select images that have been acknowledged in reception history; not all biblical art is exegetically valuable.[39] Students will need guidance in how to "read" paintings; they need to be trained in "the discipline of seeing."[40] Without training, participants can get side-tracked by how similar or dissimilar a painting is to a text, or whether they like or dislike an image.[41]

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[37] O'Kane, "Interpreting the Bible through the Visual Arts," 397.

[38] Ofra Backenroth, Shira D Epstein, and Helena Miller, "Bringing the Text to Life and into Our Lives: Jewish Education and the Arts," *Religious Education* 101, no. 4 (2006): 467.

[39] Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano,* 10: Berdini notes the 1573 trial of Paolo Veronese before the Inquisition on account of his depiction of the Last Supper with many extra-textual characters including a jester with a parrot and a servant with a nose-bleed. Veronese gave the explanation that artists have license to add extra characters for ornamentation. Instead of changing the painting as ordered, he changed the title of the painting to "The Feast in the House of Levi."

[40] Adams and Apostolos-Cappadona, *Art as Religious Studies,* 4: "It is this visual modality that is developed and nurtured by the discipline of seeing. The problem of course with the discipline of seeing is that it makes demands and challenges the viewer . . . learning to see is a difficult task involving its own hermeneutic . . . To be trained in the discipline of seeing involves the total engagement of the viewer, and the viewer in turn is transformed. This is a central part of the hermeneutic of the discipline of seeing. Once a student has learned to see not merely to look, the visual arts take on a new and central place in human experience. Art becomes a primary document in its own right."

[41] Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano,* 1: "Attempts to systematize the possible engagements of an artist with Scripture have persistently emphasized the correspondence (or lack of it) between text and image, only to come to the conclusion that such a correspondence is in most instances partial. Invariably, either the image shows more than what the text describes or the text exceeds what the image selectively visualizes."

The use of several artistic interpretations of a biblical text may challenge students' understandings of biblical interpretation and the authority of the Bible, especially if texts are thought to have a singular meaning. Fretheim cautions that "some interpretations of the Bible seem to take on an authority that approximates that of the Bible itself; if they are challenged, the very authority of the Bible is thought to be called into question . . ."[42] Careful use of visual interpretations requires differentiating between a reading of the text and the authority of Scripture, and may require conversations about hermeneutical approaches; an image represents a singular interpretive reading of the text which does not take the place of the text itself nor take on the authority of the text. The wide variety of visual interpretations of a text might give the impression that a text "can mean anything a later audience wants it to mean."[43] It will be important to convey that a text has a "field" of meaning, circumscribed by the meaning of the words themselves, Scripture as a whole, tradition, and the community in which the text is read.[44] There is the added concern that the artist's interpretation can mistakenly take precedence over the viewer's own reading of the text. Always, the image brings us back to the text and our own readings:

> But what kind of experience then is visual exegesis for the viewer? Not one that replaces the reading of the text; the viewer may well return to the text after seeing the picture for that matter. A picture is not a sermon or any other form of text; it can only put the viewer

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[42] Terence E. Fretheim, "The Authority of the Bible and Imaging of God," in William P. Brown, ed., *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 50.
[43] Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," 78.
[44] Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," 78: "Yet the text cannot mean anything a later audience wants it to mean. The language of the Bible opens up a field of possible meanings. Any interpretation which falls within that field is valid exegesis of the text, even though that interpretation was not intended by the author. Any interpretation which falls outside the limits of that field of possible meanings is probably eisegesis and should be rejected as unacceptable. Only by confessing the multiple senses of Scripture it is possible for the church to make use of the Hebrew Bible at all or to recapture the various levels of significance in the unfolding story of creation and redemption. The notion that Scripture has only one meaning is a fantastic idea and is certainly not advocated by the biblical writers themselves."

> in contact with the text, tell the viewer something about Scripture that may concern him. What visual exegesis describes is the new encounter with the text made possible by the image, not its substitution, much in the same way as the painter's reading of the text should not be taken as a substitution for ours.[45]

There have been arguments made for greater inclusion of art in educational settings.[46] These have focused almost exclusively on higher education. Little has been written about the use of art in Christian education in a local church context, but there are exceptions.[47] Graphic exegesis has been underutilized in Christian education, partly because the church has tended to value text above everything else, and because good reproductions of truly great works of visual interpretations were difficult to come by and reproduce for a class. More and more, there are excellent and accessible digital images available online and an increasing number of public copyrights. Many museums are putting their collections online and grant permission to use images for educational purposes. Artists, or artist's foundations, can be contacted for permission to use more contemporary works. Good quality projectors and TVs make it easier to share images in a classroom setting. Additionally, an increasing number of scholars are producing resources on artists and their art as biblical interpretation. A Christian Educator does not have to be an artist or an art historian to make use of works of art in education.

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[45] Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano,* 114.

[46] John Dillenberger, "Theological Education and the Visual Arts: The Situation and Strategies for Change," *ARTS* 5, no. 1 (1992): 3–6. See also Theresa Mason, "Opening Eyes to the Emmaus Story: A Case Study of Visual Art in Biblical Studies," *ARTS* 20, no. 2 (2009): 39–42; Bruce C Birch, "The Arts, Midrash, and Biblical Teaching," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 8, no. 2 (April 2005), 114-122; Steven Engler and Irene Naested, "Reading Images in the Religious Studies Classroom," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 3 (July 2002): 161–68; Ofra Backenroth, Shira D Epstein, and Helena Miller, "Bringing the Text to Life and into Our Lives: Jewish Education and the Arts," *Religious Education* 101, no. 4 (2006): 467–80; Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds., *Art as Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

[47] See Appendix 1. Roncace and Gray, in a compendium of practical approaches to teaching the Bible, include several examples of the use of art, and dedicate a chapter to art in the second volume.

Biblical Engagement in the Local Church Setting

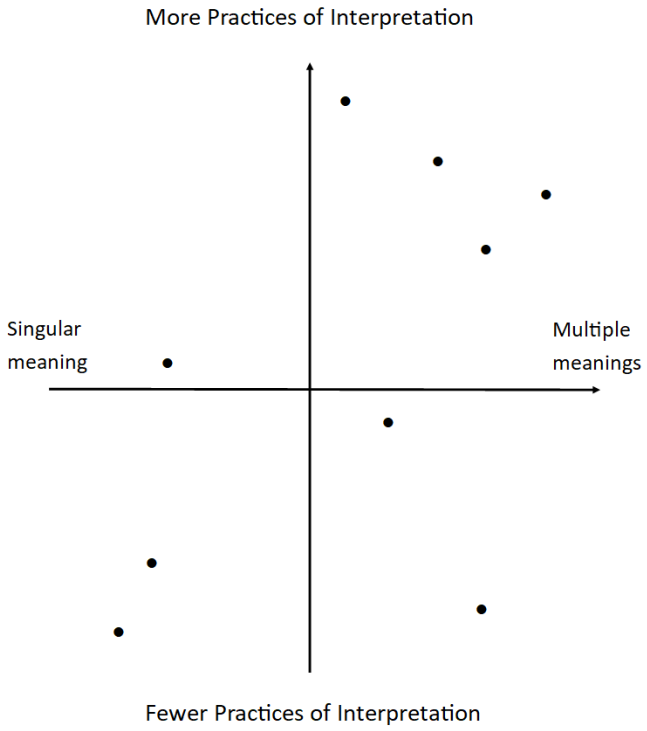
I explored biblical engagement and understandings of biblical interpretation in two different local church settings. Surveys and interviews at First Presbyterian Church in Winchester, Virginia, brought to light a variety of ways of reading and interpreting Scripture, and raised questions about helpful practices in Christian education. Further surveys at First Presbyterian Church in New Bern, North Carolina, exposed other challenges with biblical engagement. These findings led to the implementation of a new educational offering at First Presbyterian Church, New Bern, which made use of graphic exegesis in concert with textual study.

First Presbyterian Church in Winchester, Virginia, is located in a growing bedroom community of Washington D.C.,[48] and is also an attractive place to retire.[49] As such, the church tends to draw in worshippers from a variety of religious backgrounds and perspectives. When a church-wide survey of the congregation was completed in 2015, twenty-five percent of the congregation reported that they viewed Scripture as literal and inerrant.[50] This reflects the larger religious landscape in the United States; a 2017 Gallop poll reported that 25% of respondents professed a literal reading of Scripture.[51] I surveyed and individually interviewed nine people in the congregation as to how they engaged with the Bible. The survey asked questions about religious background, relationship with the Bible, how they understood its meaning and

[48] Onofrio Castiglia, "Report: Winchester, Frederick growth looks to continue," *Winchester Star*, January 5, 2017, accessed February 25, 2019, https://www.winchesterstar.com/news/clarke/report-winchester-frederick-growth-looks-to-continue/article_70e6d8eb-9dbc-5f26-8de5-5f421d05aa33.html.
[49] Sarah Mahoney, "10 Affordable Cities for Retirement," *AARP the Magazine* (Sept./Oct. 2011), accessed February 25, 2019, https://www.aarp.org/home-garden/livable-communities/info-07-2011/affordable-cities.html.
[50] Congregational Assessment Tool, survey completed in August 2015 at First Presbyterian Church in Winchester, Virginia, by Holy Cow Consulting. 421 respondents (94% response rate of average worship attendance). Statement: "Scripture is the literal Word of God, without error, not only in matters of faith, but also historical, geographical, and other secular matters"; 11% strongly agreed, 14.4% agreed.
[51] Lydia Saad, "Record Few Americans Believe Bible Is Literal Word of God," Gallup.com, accessed September 3, 2018, https://news.gallup.com/poll/210704/record-few-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god.aspx.

authority, and their challenges in reading the Bible. For the interview, participants were given a set of lectionary texts and asked to talk about the meaning of the texts and how they arrived at that meaning.

The responses ranged from a mostly literal reading of the text (but always with some nuance) yielding a singular meaning, to a more expansive approach to understanding interpretation, allowing multiple meanings. There were those who were uncertain about their approach to interpretation and some who had not given it much consideration; some who were confident in their articulation and some who had reflected significantly on Scripture and its meaning and authority. The graph is an attempt to give a sense of the wide spectrum of faithful responses. Each point represents one participant. Some respondents were much more inclined toward a singular or plain reading. One noted that when the plain reading didn't make sense, she used her reason to figure out the meaning. Another acknowledged that Jesus sometimes used metaphor or hyperbole to make a point, so his words shouldn't always be taken literally. One respondent who favored a plain reading of the text also acknowledged that when he re-read the margin notes he had written in his Bible, he noticed how his understanding changed over time. Some participants tended to express more than one understanding of the biblical text. There were two participants



who read the Bible in multiple versions because they wanted to take into account different translations of the text. "Fewer practices of interpretation" is meant to imply fewer opportunities to engage with interpretation, less resources used in the process of interpretation, or greater reliance on a single interpretative voice (either oneself or a particular preacher/interpreter). "More practices of interpretation" is meant to imply more opportunities to engage with interpretation, more resources used in the process of interpretation, or reliance on more than one interpretive voice.

The variety of responses raised several questions: How do we move beyond a plain reading of the text? What method would help us deepen our understanding of biblical interpretation? How do we explore a variety of interpretations, and approaches to interpretation, within a community of faith with a diversity of religious formation? What would facilitate community engagement and conversation around a text? What would enable participants to explore more than one meaning of the text apart from a particular interpretation being right or wrong based on whether it is our own? Visual interpretations of Scripture provide the medium for just such an exploration in that each artist provides a unique visual reading of a text, and each viewer of a painting is themselves a unique reader of the painting, while at the same time also a unique reader of the biblical text.[52]

Taking the insights gained from First Presbyterian Church in Winchester, I undertook a similar exploration of biblical engagement in a new setting, First Presbyterian Church in New

[52] The idea of using art was suggested by a Sunday school class offered by a liturgical artist at First Presbyterian Church in Winchester, VA. Participants explored the Revised Common Lectionary texts for Lent and each produced their own graphic exegesis (a painting) after textual study and conversation. Such a class is not possible in every local church setting, but the use of artistic interpretations of texts is a viable option as excellent digital images become more widely available. See more about the work of the liturgical artist, Hannah Garrity, at First Presbyterian Church in Winchester, VA, in Lisle Gwynn, "A Visual Choir: An Advent Installation and Interview with Hannah Garrity," *Reformed Worship* 117 (September 2015). Accessed October 6, 2018, https://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-2015/visual-choir.

Bern, North Carolina. The congregations have some key similarities. Both are large (700 or more members), historic (more than 200 years old) Presbyterian Church (USA) churches located in the historic downtown of a small city. Both churches are located in desirable retirement areas;[53] both boast congregations that tend to be wealthier, older, and with higher levels of education. Also, because of their size and locations, both churches tend to attract the attendance of people from a variety of Christian traditions, and thus a variety of approaches to biblical interpretation.[54]

First Presbyterian Church of New Bern provided an excellent mix of people for an exploration of the use of graphic exegesis in Christian education. The participants came from a variety of religious backgrounds and formation in biblical interpretation, and read from a number of versions of the Bible.[55] Students were given an initial survey that included questions regarding their relationship to the Bible, their understanding of interpretation, and the challenges they face reading the Bible. Some participants mentioned that they found the Bible difficult to understand or that they felt they needed to know more in order to understand it. One participant wrote, 'I have a sort of inner resistance to [reading the Bible]. I sometimes feel that you have to study and know much more than I do to 'get it right' and I just give up. It feels like something you are 'supposed' to do if you are a good Christian." Another noted, "I've always felt insecure with my knowledge of the Bible. I found it hard to understand, unapproachable even." More

[53] Bill Hand, "Fairfield Harbour listed as a top retirement spot," *Sun Journal*, April 20, 2018, accessed February 25, 2019, https://www.newbernsj.com/news/20180420/fairfield-harbour-listed-as-top-retirement-spot.
[54] Those interviewed at First Presbyterian Church in Winchester, Virginia, had the following religious backgrounds: Presbyterian, Evangelical United Brethren, Southern Baptist, ELCA, Church of God, Church of the Brethren, Episcopal, Catholic, Assemblies of God, and Non-Denominational Bible church. Those surveyed at First Presbyterian Church in New Bern, North Carolina, had the following religious backgrounds: Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran (Missouri Synod), Holiness tradition, Free Will Baptist, Presbyterian (including a Czech/Slovak Presbyterian Church), Congregationalist, Missionary Baptist, Christian Reformed Church, and parachurch organizations Young Life and Christian Business Men's Connection.
[55] The participants were asked which translations they use regularly; they reported using the NRSV, NIV, The Message, RSV, KJV, CEB, TEV, and TLB.

than one person mentioned having difficulty reading the Bible because they got bored or distracted. One participant wrote, "I have never done well with the discipline of Bible reading – My ADD takes over and I get very distracted when reading it alone." Another stated, "When I do try to start a daily practice [of reading the Bible], I find myself bored and very distractible."

These comments raised additional questions: What educational method would help those who are daunted by reading and interpreting the Bible because of their perceived lack of knowledge, or who are reticent to speak up in class because they feel they do not know enough to contribute? What would engage those who find reading the Bible boring or challenging? Visual interpretations of Scripture in a classroom setting seemed like a possible solution. While people may have difficulty acknowledging that they have a unique contribution to make as a reader of Scripture, it is perhaps more commonly accepted that each viewer of a work of art is a unique interpreter. Participants can share more easily what they see in an image and how it relates to a text, in lieu of commenting on the text alone. Art also adds another dialogue partner to both individual and group biblical study. The image can bring the text to life, raise questions, communicate new perspectives, ignite the imagination, and elicit powerful responses in the viewer, which can be helpful to those who find the text alone to be dull and difficult to read.[56]

[56] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001). Freedberg writes about the responses of people to images. He uses "response" to mean "the symptoms of the relationship between image and beholder" and explores the "beholders' symptoms and behavior; but also the effectiveness, efficacy and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do; not only what people do as a result of their relationship with the imaged form, but also what they expect imaged form to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all" (p. xxii). He notes, "People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys with them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do" (p. 1).

A more intentional exploration of biblical interpretation is needed in the local church setting because the authority of the biblical text itself goes hand in hand with its interpretation.[57] Mature Christian faith depends on the ability to understand what Scripture is, how it is to be understood, and how it functions in the life of the believer. Any number of things can contribute to a failure in this activity: a lack of knowledge and engagement with the text, a narrow view of biblical interpretation and authority, or an over-reliance on one's own perspective or some other authority's perspective. Engaging with the text meaningfully and in conversation with the faith community is the basis for the Bible functioning as Scripture in the local church.[58] As Davis articulates, what is needed is the ability to read the Bible in community with charity, humility, and patience.[59] In the local church, we can have difficulty hearing other perspectives on a text; we struggle with the authority of the Bible because we have discomfort with interpretation; we have difficulty balancing the idea of the text as the Word of God with the idea that the text has layers of meaning, and that the meaning might change.

[57] William P. Brown, "Introduction," in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, 1st ed, ed. William P. Brown, (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xiv: "Discerning the many voices of Scripture, cast in various rhetorical forms and rooted in diverse historical contexts, is the challenging task of interpretation. The Bible's authority is intimately welded to its interpretation. Indeed, one cannot discuss one without the other: the authority of the Bible is realized in its interpretation, and interpretation gives concrete expression to the Bible's authority."

[58] Ellen Davis, "Holy Preaching: Ethical Interpretation and the Practical Imagination," in Ellen F. Davis and Austin McIver Dennis, *Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016), 90: "The essential form of the common life is in the broadest sense a conversation in which members of the community explore and debate the meaning of their sacred texts and find ways to live together in accordance with what they have read."

[59] Davis, "The Soil That Is Scripture," 37.

Description of Christian Education Offering

A four-week educational offering entitled "Reading the Bible with Rembrandt" was held in the fall of 2018 at First Presbyterian Church in New Bern, North Carolina.[60] Over the four weeks thirty-four participants attended one or more classes and were asked to complete an initial survey and submit written responses each week. In preparation for the class, I selected two stories well-represented in the artistic tradition, the story of Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21:1-21) and the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-56); these also had the potential for intertextual connections.[61]

There are a number of images associated with each of these texts that have been thoughtfully written about by scholars, especially with an eye towards their value as biblical interpretation. The first challenge was to cull the number of paintings to a manageable amount for the class and to select images that interpreted the stories in different ways.[62] The second challenge was to find high quality digital copies of each image and to ensure that every image was used lawfully. This involved a significant amount of time to find the institutions which held the copyright, some which allow use of images within certain guidelines and others which require an application for permission to use.[63] Some of the images are in the public domain because of the age of the work or are covered by one of a variety of public copyright licenses.

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[60] I am indebted to Amanda Benckhuysen's article, "Reading the Bible with Rembrandt: A Fresh Look at Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11," for the title of the class.

[61] Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Immanuel: The Coming of Jesus in Art and the Bible* (Grand Rapids; Geneva: W.B. Eerdmans, World Council of Churches, 1984), 35. There were a number of times when an image seemed to generate intertextual connections for participants. One person noted the connection between Sarah and Elizabeth's conception in old age; another noticed a connection between the way Rembrandt depicted Hagar on a donkey and the story of the flight of the holy family into Egypt.

[62] Three to five paintings is a good range, though I did use more paintings if I was showing how one painter's interpretation changed over time.

[63] This is a crucial step in using art in educational settings. There are excellent databases of art which are covered by the same public copyright license which makes this process easier, especially if you are looking for a variety of images around a particular text or theme, rather than looking for a specific image. For contemporary art, I found that if I could contact the artist directly they were usually very willing to grant permission to use their work. There was one image I had wanted to use that had been held by a museum but then was recently sold into a private collection, so even though the image was available online, I was not able to use it for the class.

For contemporary art, I contacted individual artists, or the artist's foundation, to receive permission to use their work.

Once I had the images selected and the appropriate permissions and attributions, I created a PowerPoint presentation with a slide for each image with the appropriate information. These images were also printed with a good quality color copier on color-copy paper. While the focus of the class was on the biblical interpretation made by the artist (rather than on the style of the art, history of the artist, or technical aspects of the work), I provided a little background for each work and artist.[64]

The first class established practices in reading a text and "reading" a religious image using two contrasting paintings of Hagar in the wilderness when Ishmael is dying.[65] The students were given a handout on how to "read" a work of art through the examination of composition, colors, shapes, figures, and paired concepts.[66] The goal of the first session was for students to acquire the ability to identify some of the important elements in religious art, to practice "seeing" before assigning meaning to an image, and to work with two very different visual interpretations of the same biblical story in conversation with their own reading.

In the second class, the story of Hagar was again used, this time focusing on the dismissal of Hagar as Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away.[67] In the third class, I used the story of the

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[64] See appendix 2 for some of the resources I used for information about individual paintings.

[65] In the first session, the class viewed *The Angel Appears to Hagar and Ishmael* by Guercino (1652-3), National Gallery Picture Library, London, and *Hagar in the Wilderness* by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1835), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, public domain, CC0 1.0 Universal.

[66] See appendix 3. The guide to "reading" art was adapted from Steven Engler and Irene Naested, "Reading Images in the Religious Studies Classroom," Teaching Theology & Religion 5, no. 3 (July 2002): 161–68.

[67] In the second session, the class viewed: *Abraham Casting Out Hagar* by Guercino (1657), Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan; *Abraham's Farwell to Ishmael* by George Segal (1987), Perez Art Museum, Miami, used with permission; *Hagar and Ishmael* by Brent Fabritius (1658), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, public domain, CC0 1..0 Universal; *Dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael* by Rembrandt (1640-43), The British Museum of London, used with permission, Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International; *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael* by Rembrandt (1637), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, public domain, CC0 1.0 Universal; and *Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael* by Rembrandt (1640), Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Annunciation with images depicting Mary with the angel.[68] In each of the first three classes, the participants read the story individually (and the class was encouraged to read from a variety of translations) and wrote about what they noticed in the text; these answers were shared in a whole group discussion. Then the class viewed together various artistic interpretations of the text, walking through the steps of reading an image. After viewing the examples of graphic exegesis and hearing the perspectives of others in the class, participants were asked to reconsider how they had initially read the passage and reflect on new insights. We always began with the text so that students had their own reading in mind before seeing the visual interpretations or hearing from classmates. The learning goal for the second and third class was for students to notice differences in interpretation between their own readings, the art, and the perspectives of their classmates, to become aware of their own assumptions and preconceived ideas about the text, and to be able to articulate new insights into the text.

In the final class, we reviewed all the images used over the first three classes and evaluated the method used in the class. At the end, each participant was asked to pick one of the paintings that most spoke to them and share how it impacted their understanding of the biblical story. The goal for the final class was to have students attend to their own understandings of interpretation, to reflect on the value of other's perspectives and the experience of reading the Bible in a diverse community, and to articulate insights gained over the course of the four weeks. The final written assignment asked students to reflect on what they learned from other's perspectives and how their understanding of interpretation had changed.

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[68] The paintings viewed were: *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico (1425-26), Museo del Prado, Madrid; *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico (1437-46), Convent of San Marco, Florence, CC BY 2.0; *The Annunciation* by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1898), Philadelphia Museum of Art; *Annunciation* by Raphael Soyer (1980), Smithsonian Museum of American Art, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/annunciation-22746; *The Annunciation* by Jennifer Linton (2002), used with permission of the artist; *Annunciation* by Sandro Botticelli (1489), Uffizi, Florence; and *Annunciation* by William Congdon (1960), used with permission of The William G. Congdon Foundation, Milan.

The overall intent of the class design was to touch on three of the six facets of understanding identified by Wiggins and McTighe in their guide to designing effective learning experiences: interpretation, perspective, and empathy.[69] In terms of interpretation, the key questions for understanding are: "What does it mean? Why does it matter? What does it illustrate or illuminate in human experience? How does it relate to me?"[70] Wiggins and McTighe describe the process of interpretation as the movement "between the text and [the students'] own experience to find legitimate but *varying* interpretations."[71] The assessment at the end of each class was intended to help students return to the question of the meaning of the text for them personally. Perspective is an aspect of understanding that "is a mature achievement, an earned understanding of how ideas look from different vantage points."[72] It involves unearthing assumptions and "is a powerful form of insight, because by shifting perspective and casting familiar ideas in a new light, one can create new theories, stories, and applications."[73] The method used in the class was intended to expose students to a variety of perspectives and to create a safe means for perspectives to be shared. One aspect of the assessment through written responses was for students to be able to articulate more than one perspective on a particular text at the end of each class. Finally, empathy involves asking these important questions: "What do they see that I don't? What do I need to experience if I am to understand? What was the writer, artist, or performer feeling, thinking, seeing, and trying to

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[69] Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, Expanded 2nd ed (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).
[70] Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 88.
[71] Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 91: "In the interpretive realm, unlike the realm of scientific explanation, it is not only acceptable but likely that different understandings of the same 'text' will be proposed . . . All interpretations are bound by the personal, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they arise. On the other hand, not just anything goes. Some understandings of a text, work of art, person, or event are more insightful or defensible than others . . ."
[72] Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 96.
[73] Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 95.

make me feel and see?"[74] Wiggins and McTighe describe empathy as "a form of insight because it involves the ability to get beyond odd, alien, seemingly weird opinions and people to find what is meaningful in them."[75] The hoped-for outcome of the class was that students would not only hear multiple perspectives but be persuaded by them and be willing to hear what was valuable in them, so that the individuals gained not just additional information but a change of heart.

Assessment of Method

The written responses made clear that, through the use of art, the students gained a deeper, richer understanding of the texts and were able to hear and see aspects of the stories they had not noticed before; their comments revealed that in the process of this biblical engagement, they were personally impacted by their study of the texts. In the initial survey, students mostly wrote about private Bible reading and interpretation; in the final survey, most students remarked on the importance and value of hearing other people's perspectives on a text. Viewing different visual interpretations and hearing from other participants enhanced their understanding of biblical interpretation and opened their eyes to multiple meanings in the text. Art helped the visual leaners and proved to be an enlightening alternative to educational offerings that rely heavily on the written word.

At the end of each class participants were asked to reflect on what new insights about the biblical stories they had gained. Specifically, they were asked: "What did you notice in the text that you hadn't noticed before viewing the paintings?" and "What have you learned today through the art and discussion that has changed your perspective on the story?" From the images of Hagar, Abraham, and Ishmael, participants noted a number of things. Some were more

[74] Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 98.
[75] Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 99.

attentive to Abraham's relationship with Hagar and his son.[76] Some noticed that Abraham did not seem eager to send them away; others found him to be cruel because he was a wealthy man and sent Hagar away with little. After viewing the paintings, more participants were willing to consider the possibility that Abraham acted out of faithfulness, trusting in God's promise to care for Ishmael.[77] For several members of the class, the paintings brought to life the emotions of the characters.[78] Some participants had a far more negative view of Sarah after viewing the art; others were taken with Hagar's powerlessness and suffering.[79] It was also noted how the sparseness of the text makes room for reading the story in different ways.[80]

From the images of the Annunciation, several participants observed how they had not really considered how young Mary might have been and they noticed her humanity and emotions.[81] They noted how she was portrayed as regal in some images and as lowly and poor in others.[82] They remarked on the gap in the text about when and where the angel visited Mary,

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[76] All quotes from participants are used anonymously and come from written survey responses. One participant wrote, "It isn't said, but it seems that Abraham was not eager to send Ishmael and Hagar away. I think that concept makes some sense. A parent most always has protective feelings for their children. It is implied but not said, but it is believable that Abraham loved his son Ishmael. I think the art work brings this concept out." Another wrote, "Interesting to hear the other observations because we so often limit ourselves to our narrow views – was there a loving relationship that had to be broken? How did he respond to losing his child?"

[77] One participant wrote, "It didn't occur to me that Abraham might have sent Hagar into the desert because he trusted God would take care of her (still think it's pretty iffy)."

[78] One participant wrote, "The emotions are revealed in a more personal manner – these paintings put faces on the characters therefore making me more empathetic and analytical."

[79] One participant wrote, "I am much more aware of Hagar's powerlessness in the situation: powerless against Sarah, helpless to protect and provide for her child." Another wrote, "Much more emphasis on Hagar's feelings and emotions in the paintings. Don't pay much attention to this in the text." Another, "Feel more of Hagar's pain – Sarah falls in my estimation of her – Hagar seems like the unwitting pawn in the situation."

[80] One participant wrote, "The text is sufficiently spare to give multiple interpretations."

[81] One participant wrote, "It made me think more about the emotions of Mary. Where was she? The confusion – the humanness of this all. I saw her as more human – more questioning – more fearful – surely her trust in God grew as the child grew inside her." Another wrote that after viewing the paintings he noticed "the different possibilities of Mary's reception of angelic news expressed through her body language!" Another wrote, "She was so young to take on this role as mother of the Savior." Another wrote, "Mary was a human – a 13 year old girl who experienced shock, surprise, awe, love, assurance and joy through her experience with Gabriel." Another wrote, "Pictures emphasized how really young Mary was."

[82] One participant wrote about the "different presentations of Mary – sometimes a young teenager and disheveled – sometimes portrayed as being regal."

which the artists depicted in a variety of ways: "I noticed that the text does not give any details as to time and place (where in Nazareth, i.e. in a garden) – [it] leads me to believe God wants us to be open to hearing from God anytime from anyone."[83] Several mentioned that because of the images they were far more aware of the Holy Spirit's actions in the story.[84] Many were struck by the renderings of the angel, especially those that didn't look "angelic," and they drew from that we should be more alert to communication from God that does not come in forms we expect; we need to "be on watch for angels unaware to us."[85] Several noticed an intimacy between Gabriel and Mary in the paintings that they had not been aware of in the text.[86]

Students found great value in hearing the perspectives of others on a particular text. In the initial survey given to the class, students were asked, "Describe how you read and interpret a passage from the Bible (i.e. how do you come to understand its meaning)." Of the 18 survey responses only five mentioned that some aspect of understanding the Bible involves hearing other people's perspectives on the text. In the final survey 25 out of the 28 surveyed made mention of the value of either seeing and/or hearing the interpretations and insights of others. In response to the question, "What did you learn from the perspectives of others with regards to the paintings and the texts?" participants wrote: "That others can see things I did not see – so it is important to listen"; "It made me more aware of the different views people have while looking at

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[83] One participant wrote that the paintings got them "thinking about 'where' was Mary when this story happened. Setting could be interpreted many ways." Another wrote, "We don't know if Mary was interrupted when the angel came? Was she waiting, was she praying, or was she in a deep sleep when the angel came to her?"

[84] One participant said what they hadn't noticed before viewing the paintings was "all the mentions of the Holy Spirit." Another wrote, "The beam of light representing the Holy Spirit which is the main action of the story. The Holy Spirit is what is doing all the action!"

[85] One participant wrote, "Angels don't always come with wings. When Gabriel came, did [Mary] know it was an angel?" Another wrote, "How do we think about angels? Gabriel isn't described; depicted very differently by different artists. How do we see angels in our life?"

[86] One participant wrote, "Relationship between Angel and Mary is the key. I didn't get that from reading the long text at first." Another wrote that from the art and discussion they learned about "the intimacy of Gabriel with Mary is delivering the message – the revealing of God and Spirit to the real world."

the same thing. This was valuable to me in that it shows how varied peoples' interpretations of the Bible can be and how many different views must be evaluated to reach your own conclusions."[87] Additionally, it seemed that some students felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts with the class when this method was used. One participant mentioned that she felt that more women spoke up and participated in the class and "their answers were valuable to me."

It was evident in the survey responses that for most participants the method of using a variety of visual interpretations enhanced their understanding of biblical interpretation. In response to the question, "How has your understanding of biblical interpretation changed in the course of this class?" respondents wrote: "I think I better understand that variety of interpretation is essential – and perhaps what the writers intended"; "That there are so many avenues to opening the text to understanding"; "I really have enjoyed using the Biblical scriptures and art together to enhance my understanding and widen my perspective."[88] One commented that they had a "better understanding of the variety of interpretation through history." Two respondents reported that their understanding of biblical interpretation did not change in the course of the class.

The visual aspect of the class proved to be important in learning for several participants: "As a visual person seeing the art in context with the biblical text helped me to remember and understand the story better. By reading the text first then looking at an artist's representation, I got a better understanding of the story . . . I found it very valuable to see God's Word in a visual

[87] Participants wrote: "I learned how many ways of 'seeing' there are in one small group. There are many things I didn't see"; "There were several interpretations. This reminds me about our human interpretations of the Bible"; "I learned so much from hearing others reactions and insights – whether I agreed or not and from [instructor's] comments the Bible was not meant to be studied by individuals but communally."

[88] Some other responses: "How many understandings there can be – as many as there are people to read and study a text. How important it is to study with and listen to those who experience is different. And how rare"; "The biggest realization I've taken from this class – look for different perspectives, meanings, thoughts."

picture. I liked seeing the different images of the same story." Another participant wrote, "The use of art works was a refreshing change from the use of written commentaries. The variety of responses to and interpretations of the text by visual artists was very effective."

The overall feedback from participants was enthusiastic. More than once a participant noted that the conversation around the art sent them back to the text for further study and made them want to study the Bible more. One participant wrote, "Each image makes me want to go back and read the passage again with that visual in mind." Another wrote, "The emotions and postures depicted in the painting were so powerful and revealing. After the class, I revisited the biblical scriptures about Hagar and Ishmael and had a better understanding of the relationships." And, more than one participant stated that they will continue to use art in conversation with Scripture for their own spiritual growth and learning: "What worked about the class method is that the class combined art, Scripture, and dialogue. I loved the different perspectives from our classmates. I gained knowledge in how to read art. I loved the handouts and the art pieces that were shared. I have planned a trip with a friend to go to Raleigh to view art that responds to Scripture." One participant mentioned that the positive aspects of the method were that it was "intellectually stimulating, relaxing, there were opportunities to examine/question Scripture, connection to the past" and then she added, "I liked having permission to stop and think (visualize) the story instead of rushing to find meaning."[89]

There were two points of constructive feedback. One had to do with the length of time of the class. The hour of Sunday school proved too brief to cover all the images well. More time was needed to explore how the artist was reading the story and there was seldom enough time to return to the text again after viewing the images. The other suggestion had to do with class size

[89] One participant did note that as a "slow thinker" she found all the thoughts of class members coming at her to be exhausting.

and effective discussion. The size of the class tended to be large, which allowed for a number of perspectives to be shared but was less beneficial for conversation around images and texts. More effective exchanges could have taken place in smaller groups.

Two practical aspects of pedagogy proved to be especially effective. First, the images needed to be both projected and provided in good quality color handouts. The handouts made it possible for everyone in the classroom to view the images up close and enabled individual study of paintings at certain points in the class.[90] At first a projector was used to display the images for the entire class to view, but the projector altered the coloring of the image detrimentally, making images darker than they were and obscuring details. In all following classes a large flat screen TV connected to a laptop provided a clearer and truer reproduction of the images. Second, it proved crucial to walk together through the process of reading a religious image and to practice doing so as a class. A handout was provided that helped participants see various important elements in the art works.[91] Even with the instruction, there were times that participants' initial reactions to paintings was an immediate like or dislike, or an evaluation of correspondence to the text or to the cultural/historical setting of the text.[92] Several participants mentioned in the survey responses that learning how to read a painting was a valuable tool that they will continue to use.

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[90] Also, if small group discussion had been used, the handouts would have been needed.

[91] See appendix 3.

[92] Interestingly, the more modern depiction of the Annunciation by Raphael Soyer was not well received by the class initially. They found its composition confusing; it was difficult to tell which figure was Mary and which was the angel. They did not understand why the angel had her hands in her pockets and why she did not look more angelic or supernatural. They did not like the modern setting of the painting. But, when participants were asked in the final class which painting most impacted them, the painting by Soyer was one of the most frequently mentioned. One participant, reflecting on the painting, wrote, "How God uses the world around us to speak to us. The chance conversation with anyone just might be God bringing you a message. The need is great for us to try to place these stories in our life today, our house, our street . . ." Another wrote, "'Oh my God . . . I'm going to be a mother!' That is what I see. Very personal. The sink (present day) not 2000 years ago really struck me." Another wrote, "The modern day image of Mary's annunciation was relatable. It happened during a common day occurrence. I like her face – it matters, the text said she was confused. I like the angel's feet – they look like Jesus' feet on the cross. I like how the angel is 'trapped' behind Mary – she couldn't have gotten in without Mary seeing her first." Another, "The import of how God comes to us – usually – almost always in the ordinariness of our lives."

Conclusion

This project rested on two suppositions, that artists can be astute interpreters of the Bible and that art can be a valuable tool in Christian education in the local church, and posed the questions: If participants are given multiple visual representations of a text, and the opportunity to discuss the artwork and the text in a group, will they be able to articulate a deeper and more varied understanding of the text, and will they be nurtured by their study and conversation? The use of art in Christian education in a local church proved beneficial to learning and interpretation. After participating in one or more weeks of a four-week class that combined art, textual study, and conversation (what one participant called a "visual/verbal" method[93]), the vast majority of participants had an increased awareness and appreciation of the multi-valency of Scripture, and were edified by the perspectives of others. Students were able to articulate new insights into the biblical stories and were nurtured by their encounters with the images: "I have a new found respect for the art created based off the Bible. I had not really given much thought to it but now I see it completely different. Talking through it together helped me to understand the story better and remember it better and ultimately improve my faith." The use of graphic exegesis provided an imaginative, refreshing approach to Bible study and aided visual learners. Graphic exegesis created a means by which participants from a variety of backgrounds were open to the perspectives and interpretations of others and were drawn back to the biblical texts to see the stories in new ways.

[93] One participant wrote, "I will always remember this story in detail. Before it was foggy even though I heard it for years – Love this visual/verbal way of learning!"

Appendix 1: Resources for the use of art in worship, education, and other areas of ministry

Adams, Doug, and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds. *Art as Religious Studies*. New York: Crossroad, 1987.

This book is a collection of essays exploring the use of the visual mediums in Jewish and Christian religious studies. It uses as its basis the premise that visual arts are primary texts, and that there is value in training students in the discipline of "seeing." A wide range of methodological approaches are expressed in the essays and they are meant to be practical. The essays represent a number of ways that the visual arts are incorporated into religious studies research and teaching. The first section explores the visual medium and studies in Judaism. The second section explores the visual arts in Christian studies with the guiding principle that "the visual arts offer the possibility of new understandings of well-known historical and theological materials" (p. 10). The third section explores incorporating the arts in more practical applications such as pastoral care, counseling, religious communication, and social justice. The book also includes two bibliographies, one for studies in Judaism and one for studies in Christianity.

Adams, Doug. *Eyes to See Wholeness*. Prescott, AZ: Educational Ministries, Inc., 1995.

This text is a resource for pastors and educators, to better enable the use of visual images in worship and in classroom settings. The author makes the point that the majority of people are visual learners, and that younger generations are more likely to be accustomed to getting information in this way. The book is organized by the liturgical year (in three sections: Lent through Easter, Ordinary time, and Advent through Epiphany). Each chapter explores one or more works of art (provided in the appendices). The author's intent is not to select works of art that illuminate specific Bible stories, but rather pieces that tell a larger story, in order the develop a sense of "wholeness" and a fullness of theology. He contrasts this with "heresy" which he defines as a picking and choosing and then over emphasizing it at the exclusion of other ideas. Art teaches us to appreciate ambiguity and listen to those who see things differently: "Thus the arts aid us in learning to love our enemies and to live in diversity in community" (p. 1). Each chapter has both description and interpretation of the artistic work, but also theological and practical implications (relating to worship and education). Also, each chapter includes teaching tips, such as viewing particular works in conversation with certain passages of Scripture.

Backenroth, Ofra, Shira D Epstein, and Helena Miller. "Bringing the Text to Life and into Our Lives: Jewish Education and the Arts." *Religious Education* 101, no. 4 (2006): 467–80.

The authors make that case that imaginative and creative approaches are needed in Jewish religious education, to move children from simply acquiring information, to awareness and personal understanding. They make a case for arts-based learning in Jewish educational settings. Citing Kincaid (1991), they lay out four means in which people learn: by being told information from others (verbally, visually, written); by working with others to clarify an idea or problem, or argue about an issue; by working independently to solve a problem; and by direct experience. These methods are not

mutually exclusive. There are four modes of traditional Jewish education that are instructive: the p'shat, which is the plain meaning of the text; the remez, which is the connection to other texts and the students' own lived experiences; the drash, which asks what are the stories between the words and phrases (the midrash); and the sod, which is the hidden personal meaning for the individual.

Bryans, Nena. *Full Circle: A Proposal to the Church for an Arts Ministry*. San Carlos, Calif: Schuyler Institute for Worship and the Arts, Thomas House Publications, 1988.

The preface by Catherine Kapikian suggests that the author's writing of the book is born of questions regarding the lack of regular engagement between religious and artistic communities, and why the arts are missing from theological education. Bryans begins by describing some signs of changing attitudes within the church towards the arts. She explores the need for art in worship and education, and offers practical considerations for beginning and arts ministry and/or incorporating art in the local church. Throughout the book, the author provides relevant quotes in the margins from prominent artists and theologians such as Wassily Kandinksy, John Dillenberger, Albrecht Durer, Nancy Chinn, Martin Luther, and Paul Tillich, among others.

Chinn, Nancy. *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church*. Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998.

The author describes her work of using visual arts in the church in the context of worship spaces. She begins by exploring how visual arts have been used in the West for narrative purposes, and how art can serve as a metaphor which is polyvalent. Art is never exhausted by repeated encounters; it has something to say to young and old, women and men, of every race and nation. The author develops the idea of art as a dialogue between the artist and God. This book has several case studies, provides practical guidance for the creation of art installations for worship, and contains numerous images of art installations.

Engler, Steven, and Irene Naested. "Reading Images in the Religious Studies Classroom." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 3 (July 2002): 161–68.

The authors make the point that education in religious studies classrooms tends underemphasize images and overemphasize texts. The authors, representing both art education and religious studies, propose a practical method for using images in education, using a two-fold method of first teaching students how to analyze an image and then how to study a religious image. To this end they utilize the work of Edmund Feldman (a fourfold process: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgement) to teach students how to analyze an image before moving too quickly to interpretation, and giving students a basic vocabulary for analysis. The first session they propose involves understanding the work of art (again, before moving to judgement). A handout is given to students to guide them, beginning with the process of description (What media is used? What lines, shapes, colors, textures, and patterns are present? Are the colors light or dark, dull or intense, warm or cool? What are the basic representative elements of the picture, and

where are they located?), then moving to analysis (How have the principles of design been used to organize the elements in the art piece?), then interpretation (What does the artwork mean to you? What is the artwork saying to you? What is the image about? What is the overall feeling or mood? What feelings does it invoke in you?), and then, finally, judgement. The second session applies the same process of images expressing religious concepts. The first two steps remain largely the same; at the interpretation step, the students are asked to infer religious meaning from the analyzed characteristics of the image, and at the judgement step, the students may express personal opinions about what was accomplished in the image. When examining religious images the author suggest looking for paired concepts that are in tension in an image, and they offer as examples: light/dark, big/small, up/down, left/right, divine/human, good/evil, order/chaos, etc. Other helpful questions suggested by the authors are: Do the visual qualities of the image emphasize or de-emphasize some figure, object, or area within the frame, and does this have anything to do with sacredness? Is the sacred portrayed explicitly, through its effects, or through people's reactions to it? Do the gazes of the figures within the frame direct your eyes somewhere within or outside the frame? Do any eyes meet yours? Is anyone pointing? Do you recognize any figures or objects from your own knowledge? Does anything about the image suggest that it comes from a certain culture or historical period? The authors report that they have received very positive feedback from students when the analysis of images is included in curriculum.

Paintner, Christine Valters, and Betsey Beckman. *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2010.

The authors begin by making the case for the use of art as a mediator for the sacred and the use of arts (music, dance, visual arts, etc.) in spiritual direction. Art and prayer are similar, they argue, in that they both involve a surrender, an “openness to inspiration,” and an opportunity to engage with mystery (p. 23). They offer practical guidelines to using arts: becoming familiar with the art forms and materials you wish to engage, framing the artistic process as an invitation, how to develop the process of art-making, how to be attentive to what the art form is teaching you, how to use imagination to create a spaciousness, how to recognize places of resistance and experiences of resonance and dissonance, and how to prepare the space and materials. Chapters in the second section focus on specific art forms such as storytelling, poetry, dance, music, and visual arts. The section on visual arts focuses on using the making of art as a spiritual practice. The third section describes how art can be used in spiritual direction in various seasons of life: transitions and discernment, grief and loss, interpreting dreams, etc. The book emphasizes the sacredness of the encounter with art, which can be a helpful foil to the historical or analytical approach to art. It is not simply information that we gain from art, but an experience that takes us outside ourselves allowing us to see God and ourselves differently.

Roncace, Mark, and Patrick Gray, eds. *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*. Resources for Biblical Study, no. 49. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.

This volume contains a practical compendium of approaches to teaching the Bible in the classroom. The wide variety of authors offer their best approaches to teaching a specific topic. There are essays on general topics relating to biblical interpretation, followed by entries related to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. A number of the approaches use visual media and there is an index containing all the artistic works cited.

Roncace, Mark, and Patrick Gray, eds. *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*. Resources for Biblical Study, no. 53. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.

This volume is a follow-up to the first "Teaching the Bible." The authors describe how many of the teaching methods used in the first volume made use of nonbiblical media, including music, film, and art. The objective of the book is to provide a practical resource for teaching the Bible in classroom settings. The book is divided by media genres. In the section on art, the first chapter discusses the use of art in classroom setting and how art can function in a number of ways (as illustration, narrative interpretation, and illumination), and the second chapter describes and lists works of art that depict particular Bible stories and characters.

Appendix 2: Resources that explore specific works of art as graphic exegesis

Adams, Doug. “Changing Patterns and Interpretations of Parables in Art.” *ARTS* 19, no. 1 (2007): 5–13.

Adams, Doug. “Changing Perceptions of Jesus’ Parables through Art History: Polyvalency in Paint.” in *Reluctant Partners: Art and Religion in Dialogue*. Edited by Ena Giurescu Heller. New York: Gallery at the American Bible Society, 2004. P. 68-87.

Benckhuysen, Amanda W. “Reading the Bible with Rembrandt: A Fresh Look at Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 50, no. 2 (November 2015): 247–64.

Dillenberger, Jane, and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. *Image and Spirit in Sacred and Secular Art*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.

Glaspey, Terry W. *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know: The Fascinating Stories behind Great Works of Art, Literature, Music, and Film*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2015.

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MacGregor, Neil, and Erika Langmuir. *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000.

O’Kane, Martin. *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009.

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O'Kane, Martin. "'The Bosom of Abraham' (Luke 16:22): Father Abraham in the Visual Imagination." In *Retellings: The Bible in Literature, Music, Art and Film.* Edited by J. Cheryl Exum, 135-168. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007.

Rickett, Dan. “The Art of Separation: Visual and Textual Exegesis of the Separation of Abram and Lot.” *Biblical Reception* 3 (2014): 112–26.

Robbins, Vernon K., ed., Walter S. Melion, ed., and Roy R. Jeal, ed. *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images*. Emory Studies in Early Christianity; Vol. 19. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017.

Roncace, Mark, and Patrick Gray, eds. *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*. Resources for Biblical Study, no. 49. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.

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Appendix 3: Class Handouts

How to Read a Text

World behind the text:

What about the setting, culture, history, and customs do we need to understand in order to better understand the text?

Was this likely passed down orally or written first?

What does the text assume we already know (symbols, images, people, stories, etc)?

What do we know about the author and when it was written? Who was it written to and why?

World of the text:

What kind of text is it? (Function follows form . . .)

What are the details and where are the gaps?

What words are used and how are they used?

Who are the characters and what do we know about them?

What are the perspectives of the different characters? Who speaks and who is silent?

What do we see, smell, touch, taste, and hear?

What emotions are present?

Is there a pattern or structure to the text (repetition, parallels, etc)?

What is the text doing?

What is the center of gravity in the text?

What comes before the text and what comes after?

How does the text connect to other parts of the Bible?

What questions remain for us?

World in front of the text (where does our horizon meet the horizon of the text):

What emotions do you experience in reading this text?

What analogies to you see to your own life/world?

What does the text mean to you? What questions does it ask of you? How is it asking you to change?

What are you looking for as you approach the text?

How is God speaking through the text? What do we learn about God and ourselves?

How do others read and understand the text?

How does the experience of each reader contribute to the richness of interpretation?

How do different translations render the text and how does that contribute to the richness of interpretation?

How to Read a Painting

1) **Description**

   What lines, shapes, colors, textures and patterns are present? Where are they found in the image?

   Are the lines curved or straight, light or dark?

   Are the colors light or dark, dull or intense, warm (yellow, red) or cool (blue, green)?

   What are the basic representative elements of the picture and where are they located?

   Where does the light come from? What does it shine on?

   Does anything about the image suggest that it comes from a certain culture or historical period?

2) **Religious imagery**

   Who is present in the painting?

   Where are the figures in the painting looking?

   Do the gazes or gestures of figures within the frame direct your eyes somewhere within or outside the frame?

   Do any eyes meet yours? Alternatively, is any figure averting their gaze or warding something off?

   Is anyone pointing?

   Do you recognize any figures or objects from your own knowledge?

   To which figures are you drawn? With whom would you wish to be associated?

   Do the visual qualities of the image emphasize or de-emphasize some figure, object, or area within the frame (larger, more prominently placed, brighter, etc)? Does this have anything to do with sacredness?

   Is the sacred (divine beings or energies, etc) portrayed explicitly, through its effects, or through people's reactions to it?

Look for paired concepts:

light/dark	divine/human	order/chaos
big/small	good/evil	community/individual
central/peripheral	sacred/profane	enlightenment/ignorance
up/down	life/death	reward/punishment
left/right	female/male	continuous/broken
solid/faint	nature/culture	celebration/solemnity
smooth/rough	heaven/hell	creation/destruction

3) Interpretation

What does the artwork mean?

What is the artwork saying to you?

What idea is communicated?

What do you believe the artist intended to communicate?

What is the overall feeling or mood?

What feelings does it evoke in you?

4) Correspondence

What parts of the text does the image capture?

What parts of the text does the image ignore?

What did you notice in the text that you hadn't noticed before viewing the image?

What has the artist helped you to see that you hadn't seen before?

Adapted from Steven Engler and Irene Naested, "Reading Images in the Religious Studies Classroom," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 3 (July 2002): 161–68.

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