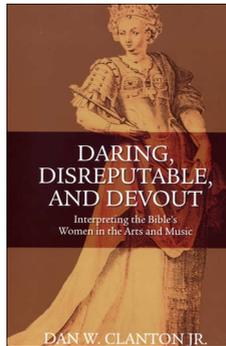


○ **REVIEW OF DAN W. CLANTON JR., *DARING, DISREPUTABLE, AND DEVOUT: INTERPRETING THE BIBLE'S WOMEN IN THE ARTS AND MUSIC***

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Dan Clanton has a catchy way with words; with chapter headings such as ‘Gee, Baby, Ain’t I Good to You’, ‘Trollops and Temptresses’, and ‘Susie-Q, Baby, I Love You’, who would not be tempted to follow the reception history of this three D collection of *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout* women? There are, in fact, eight or nine of them: Eve, Sarah and Hagar, Delilah, Ruth (and Naomi), Esther, Judith and Susanna. While some of the material has appeared before as separate articles, the book as a whole is designed as study material for undergraduates or ‘interested lay readers’.

Most chapters follow a similar format: a brief introduction, summary of the biblical text, discussion of particular representations either in literature, music or art, and a brief conclusion. That Clanton is a teacher is clear: he is constantly telling the reader what he is doing. In the chapters on Eve and Sarah and Hagar, for example, he lists four specific issues for Eve, and thirteen ‘ambiguities and questions... that have enthralled interpreters of Scripture for hundreds of years’ regarding Sarah and Hagar (p. 47), and then deals with each in turn. While Clanton draws upon a range of critical material, the book itself

is notably free of academic terms or jargon that could be a barrier for first-time readers. Then, at the end of each chapter, study questions both highlight issues to be teased out and set tasks, such as 'Take a few moments to write a personal response to the book of Ruth. Imagine yourself in Ruth's position' (p. 110). At the end of the Delilah chapter, readers are directed to access art websites and watch the Cecil B. DeMille (1949) film, and make their own responses. The generous footnotes provide references to a wealth of secondary material. This is a book designed to be user-friendly.

The Introduction sets out two main goals, 'to illuminate what the biblical text actually says about major female characters; and... to highlight how these later interpretations adapt, shift, and sometimes distort the biblical narratives'. The last introductory sentence, however, sets as the 'main goal', that readers might 'reengage the biblical text so that the biblical narrative's voice will not be lost in the interpretive layers of the centuries'. The concern is for the biblical text, although 'what the biblical text actually says' glosses over the knotty question of interpretation. The Conclusion, headed 'Why We Should Care about the History of Interpretation', sets the focus more directly on the retellings, which 'study the ways in which real people appropriate and utilise sacred texts to explain themselves to themselves as well as justify their current contexts' (p. 175). That an awareness of such 'popular understandings ... allows us to appreciate the role aesthetic and religious interpretations play in our understandings of biblical texts' (p. 176) certainly implies an appreciation of the importance of the texts' afterlives. Yet the final sentence suggests that the point of this is that 'we can begin to deconstruct' these 'in order to allow ourselves to come to the Bible anew'. Perhaps this is most clearly expressed at the end of the chapter on Judith, where Clanton writes,

Once we, as 'interested parties', accept the validity of artistic interpretations, we might be able to use them to elucidate unwritten undercurrents in the biblical text, so that the story world of the text becomes more alive to us. It might even allow us to approach the text with fresh eyes, fresh ears, and even fresh minds.

This contrasts with the statement of the editors of the current Blackwell Bible Commentaries in their Preface to the Series that 'how people have interpreted and been influenced by a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant'. There is a conversation to be continued on the purpose and value of Reception History.

While there may be a certain tension or ambiguity in these statements of intent, the liveliness of Clanton's text immediately draws in the reader. Eve's chapter begins with Elvis Presley in the film *King Creole*. Who would not want to continue reading! Although for the most part, it is the later rabbis and early Christian interpreters who are the creative interpreters in this chapter. But not entirely: here is also *The Simpsons* version with Homer aka Adam enticing Marge to take the fruit. The reading partners are interestingly varied; where Eve and Sarah and Hagar are met in literary retellings, popular music and French opera provide Delilah's afterlife. Throughout the book, in the opening biblical summaries, reference is made to the critical work of contemporary biblical scholars. For Delilah, the references are to studies by Cheryl Exum, Mieke Bal and Robert Boling, highlighting the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the actions of the biblical Delilah, leading Clanton to contrast this with Saint-Saëns' *Sampson et Dalila*, with its unambiguously dominant and vitriolic Delilah. Then follow brief discussions of four categories of popular songs with Delilah connections, in all of which she is the classic *femme fatale*, leading to Clanton's conclusion: 'it should be obvious by now that Delilah is a malleable character' (p. 78).

Clanton's own interpretive position is most clearly expressed in the chapter on Ruth. Here he engages with a wide range of recent critical scholarship, although he himself is clear: Naomi does not express love for Ruth, or Ruth for Boaz and *vice versa*. This sets the agenda for the discussion of popular retellings in books and films, with the addition of a third issue, 'what exactly happens on the threshing floor?' The writers, especially those writing for children, are seen taking great pains to avoid the slightest hint of any 'hanky-panky'! Their moves are intriguing: one storybook avoids the sexual only to highlight the sensual, with Ruth oiling her 'slim, tanned body' and winding her head with 'soft scarves dyed with pomegranate and saffron' before she sets off to meet Boaz. Clanton comments such a description 'in a children's book is a tad disturbing' (p. 99). Some children's books omit the scene entirely: Boaz proposes immediately after the gleaning! But all the retellings surveyed have Naomi loving Ruth, and love between Ruth and Boaz. The reason? Clanton suggests 'our modern understandings... of love and relationships', that 'one's own cultural conditioning and social perceptions play a role in how one tells the story' (p. 108). Although he notes that the retellings chosen here are mostly aimed at a younger audience and told from a particular religious perspective.

Chapter Five reads Esther in dialogue with film. Surprisingly, the biblical summary does not highlight the farce of the opening, although the irony and humour in Chapter Six is noted. Three scenes are chosen for the cinematic interpretations: Vashti's refusal, the preparation of the virgins and Esther's revelation in Chapter Seven, and five film

versions, including a 2000 children's film, *Veggie Tales – Esther: The Girl Who Became Queen*, 'a nonthreatening, nonsexual, nonviolent retelling' that avoids any mention of Jews or anti-Jewish hatred. This for the book of Esther! She does, however, remain the courageous heroine, albeit of a rather different plot line. The second study question deals specifically with the matter of violence, particularly of the ending of the biblical narrative. A quote from Elie Wiesel introduces the questions that follow.

Chapter Six discusses the 1913 film, *Judith of Bethulia*, based on a play by Thomas Aldrich. The deliberate historical inaccuracies that introduce the biblical narrative with a wink to the reader gain no mention, and although Clanton notes the use of irony and ironic puns, the full force of the double meanings in Judith's dialogue with Holofernes receives little attention. Interestingly, the film version adds an extra couple of lovers, Naomi and Nathan, and has Judith fall in love with Holofernes! She is, however, an instrument of God and so must still kill him. Judith has, of course, been much painted over the centuries, and readers are encouraged in the Study Questions to access these online. Chapter Seven, 'Susie-Q, Baby, I Love You', sub-titled 'Susanna and Art in the Renaissance', discusses Tintoretto and Rembrandt's Susannas. Were these religious works of art, or excuses to paint a charming nude? Clanton follows those who think the latter applied to Tintoretto. Rembrandt's Susanna looks outward, but whether her gaze involves and engages the viewer erotically is more debated. Clanton thinks not, and that Rembrandt presents a young woman in shock, appealing for help, or for viewers to turn away. The biblical tale concerns much more than this. Quotes from Erich Gruen and Marti Steussy make the point, and Clanton concludes that one needs to identify 'the ideological bases of an interpreter's rendering', particularly, in a work such as this, 'the ideology of images of women' (p. 171). Websites for accessing more contemporary paintings are given in the Study Questions.

I will certainly be adding this book to my resource list for courses on biblical women. Several chapters would have a place in undergraduate courses on the bible and the arts. For those teaching distance papers or bible study groups, Clanton's clarity and his questions and suggestions for further study would make this a most welcome resource. And for those who enjoy tracing the afterlives of biblical characters, it is a good read.