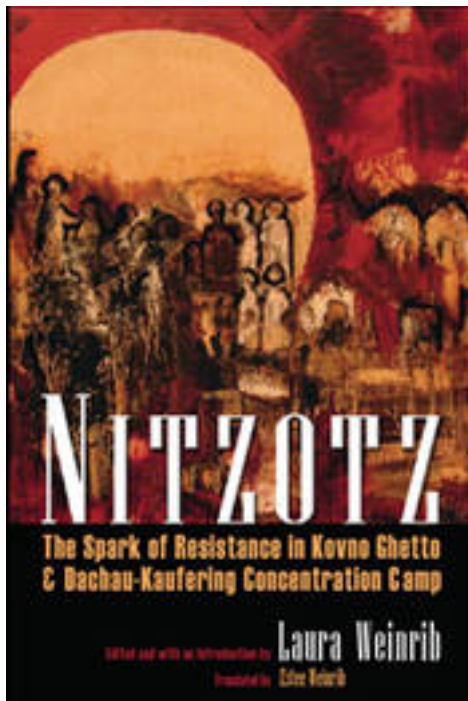




Moore, Rebecca, Jews and Christians in the Life and Thought of Hugh of St. Victor Marissen, Michael, Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach

| Doetzel, Audrey

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Michael Marissen, *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion: With an Annotated Literal Translation of the Libretto*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, \$16.95, ISBN 0-19-511471-X 109 pp (cloth). Two scholarly and timely publications, which indicate the level of achievement of several decades of Christian and Jewish efforts in dialogue and relationship



Jews and Christians in the Life

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Here are two scholarly and timely publications, which indicate the level of achievement

of several decades of Christian and Jewish efforts in dialogue and relationship. Both works

reach back in time to make careful astute distinctions in an effort to ascertain whether in

the medieval and the post-Reformation European context there were already Christian attempts at more positive expressions about Jews and Judaism. Moore reappraises the twelfth century theological work of Hugh of St. Victor, master of the school in the Abbey of St. Victor outside of Paris. Marissen enters the eighteenth century European world to determine whether and to what degree Luther's polemic and anti-Judaic theology influenced the foremost composer of the Baroque era, Johann Sebastian Bach. He focuses specifically on Bach's problematic masterwork, the *St. John Passion*.

[Rebecca](#)

Moore is Assistant Professor in Philosophy and Religion at the University of North

Dakota. Her book is based on her 1996 Marquette University dissertation in Religious

Studies. Her interest in the history of Jewish-Christian relations, especially during the

Middle Ages, was heightened when she came to realize that some Jewish scholars considered the 12th century a renaissance time in Jewish learning and culture. She re-evaluated and revised her doctoral work to begin a reassessment of Christian articulations regarding Jews and Judaism during this time. Michael Marissen, described by J. Neusner as "a musicologist possessed of a keen sense of morality", is Associate Professor of Music at Swarthmore College. He brings to his work his post-World War II experience of growing up in a Canadian Dutch Reformed immigrant community, his BA studies in music at the conservative Christian Reformed Calvin College, and his doctoral studies in music at Brandeis University, a liberal secular Jewish institution. In the preface of his book Marissen indicates that, while he has always taken a particular interest in how Bach's music reflects and shapes the religious aspects of culture, his motivation in this work is the motto of his graduate alma mater: to search for "truth in its innermost parts."

Rebecca Moore's examination of the Christian theology of Judaism as developed by Hugh

of St. Victor reveals that Jewish and Christian relations in medieval Europe were not uniformly hostile. Even as Christian triumphalism ultimately prevailed in medieval theology, the Augustinian canon as carried forward by Hugh of St. Victor gives indications of more positive views of both biblical and contemporary Jews and Judaism through Hugh's attempts to include Jews in God's plan of creation and redemption. In her carefully researched and presented work Moore provides the historical and biographical context for understanding Hugh of St. Victor's theological response and then shows that most previous studies have ignored the triumphalism built into the very structure of Hugh's theology and have also failed to recognize his attempt to deal with Judaism. Rather than being dominated by the medieval questions of: how do we know God, and how do we get to God? Hugh's interest is primarily in questions of: who is our neighbor? how should we live with our neighbor, particularly the Jewish neighbor? Instead of addressing Judaism within the context of *adversos judaeos* literature, he deals with it in biblical commentary, frequently turning to Jews for guidance in comprehending problematic passages.

Moore scrutinizes various scholars' understanding of Hugh's use of Jewish exegesis.

She presents examples of his exegesis many of which indicate that, contrary to the common

medieval Christian view, Hugh perceived Jews as understanding their own Scriptures very

well. She pays particular attention to Hugh's works which cast Jews and Judaism in a

negative light, and ends up questioning the authenticity of ascribing the commentary on

Lamentations to Hugh because of its extremely hostile attitude and language about Jews.

After an examination of the theology of Judaism presented in his major book *De*

sacramentis, she describes Hugh of St. Victor's approach to Jews and Judaism as

inclusive yet ambiguous. He remains a medieval Christian and must be evaluated in the

context of a medieval Christian interpretation of the Bible and history.

Michael

Marissen's work on Bach's *St. John Passion* is original, thorough, honest and persuasive. Designed for both general readers and scholars, it meets the scholarly requirements of history, musicology and religion. In a concise text of 109 pages he presents a long interpretive essay of perceptive musical and conceptual analysis, followed by an annotated literal translation of the libretto, a guide to numerous musical examples from CD recordings, and a detailed bibliography - all of which provide the reader with the tools to assess Bach's work on its own terms and in the appropriate contexts.

Marissen shows that though Bach, Cantor at the St. Thomas School of Leipzig, was very knowledgeable of and committed to Lutheran theology, his message about Jews and Judaism is a far cry from Luther's. The subject or purpose of his *St. John Passion* is not to foster hostility toward Jews. On the contrary. Marissen's work indicates that by assigning guilt for the crucifixion to the Fall of Adam and Eve, Bach shifts the focus of responsibility for the death of Jesus from the Jews to all of sinful humanity. While texts

from the Gospel of John which manifest anti-Jewish features were significant elements in

Lutheran teaching in Bach's time, his chorales serve as powerful and moving

reinterpretations and applications. Though the *St. John Passion* libretto consists of

Luther's translation of John's biblical narrative verbatim, "Bach's setting

serves to amplify and deepen the verbal messages of the libretto and, at times, to suggest

different meanings for the words than they might have if they were simply read."

(Marissen, 8) Marissen's ethically intelligent, carefully reasoned work contains sections

on: Lutheranism and Theories of Atonement; Following Jesus, According to the *St. John*

Passion; Lutheran Concepts of Jews and Judaism; Jew-Hatred and the *St. John Passion*.

Moore and Marissen both acknowledge the danger of "applying contemporary or

otherwise inappropriate standards to the past." (Moore, 6) Moore warns of the danger of

"presentism", insisting that Hugh of St. Victor be evaluated on his own terms and

compared to those of his own times. Marissen is careful to explain why he cites historical

biblical criticism in interpreting Bach's music, even though Bach predated such interests:

"Bach's music is neither timeless nor trapped in its own epoch. (His) music lives on

in part because it is able to speak to our contemporary needs and diverse interests. The

results of historical biblical research are only beginning to reach the general public. I

concluded that reporting on some aspects would clarify interpretation of Bach's

music." (Marissen, ix)

Moore concludes her work with "The Value of Hugh Today" and Marissen ends his

essay with the question "Where Now?" Both have written with the hope that their

work will contribute to the continuing engagement of Christianity with Judaism today and in

the future.

Students and scholars with interests in Jewish-Christian relations or in Christian

biblical studies in medieval Europe will benefit from Moore's book. She concludes that

"Neither Jews nor Christians will be satisfied with (Hugh's) account, but both ought to recognize the significance of his effort" (Moore, 141) - an effort which can continue to inspire dialogue and scholarly efforts today. Because he was in contact with Jews and because they influenced his understanding of Scripture and his approach to history, Hugh of St. Victor's chief concern was the relationship between Christians and Jews. His careful and clever use of language, his approach to the concepts of redemption and sacrament, his acceptance of the "messiness of history", his belief in the necessity of humility - all allowed for inclusiveness even during this medieval period of Christian triumphalism.

Marissen admits that "Bach's setting by no means comes to terms with all ecumenically or socially troubling aspects of John's first century text." (Marissen, 35) However, his music represents a step in the right direction - at a time and in a context of extreme contempt and hostility toward Jews. Marissen began his work with clearly

expressed concerns and assumptions: "Music not only reflects but also forms culture.

Great art lives on not because it is timeless but because it remains timely... (M)usic has

such wide appeal that discussion of challenging musical works may provide one of the best

focal points for meaningful dialogue on the various sorts of issues raised by these

works." (Marissen, viii)

Both Moore and Marissen left me wishing they had taken their work a step further in

answering their question: Where now...today? However, their failure to do so may be

precisely where the strength of their work lies. By presenting us with these early Christian

efforts to more faithfully express the innermost truth about Jews and Judaism, they

challenge us to make the connections and to become personally involved in spelling out the

answer.

