

**J. Ross Baughman, *Lessons from the Mirror: 500 Years of Anabaptism, Morgantown, Pennsylvania, Masthof, 2024. 249 pp. \$20.00 USD. ISBN: 978-1-60126-9-683.***

The five-hundred-year anniversary of the Anabaptist tradition is a time to remember the martyrs—and the perfect opportunity to make Thieleman van Braght’s *Bloody Theater* more accessible to a new set of readers. Of course, increased accessibility was precisely the point in 1685, twenty-five years after van Braght’s Anabaptist-themed martyrology first appeared, when an unnamed editor secured the services of Jan Luyken to illustrate van Braght’s text. Over a hundred of Luyken’s copper etchings made their way into the 1685 edition, which in time became known as *Martyrs Mirror*. These expertly crafted illustrations, arguably the most famous feature of *Martyrs Mirror* in contemporary Anabaptist life, constitute the heart of this new volume from Masthof Press, which begins with two context-setting essays (by historian Mary S. Sprunger and journalist J. Ross Baughman) and concludes with a bibliography of *Martyrs Mirror*-related resources.

If all this sounds familiar, it may be because the artist Jan Gleysteen assembled a similarly structured volume at Anabaptism’s four hundred and fiftieth anniversary, in 1975. Titled *The Drama of the Martyrs*, Gleysteen’s collection began with three essays before turning to reproductions of Luyken’s 104 etchings (and 11 more that weren’t in the 1685 edition), each with a short caption. Given that the most readily obtainable version of *Martyrs Mirror* in 1975 was Herald Press’s English edition, and given that this edition contained only 55 of Luyken’s etchings, Gleysteen’s collection was a gift to those who wished to see the full range of Luyken’s artwork. “Here for the first time since 1780,” when an illustrated German-language edition of *Martyrs Mirror* was published in Pirmasens, Germany, “these fine prints are available once again for study and reflection,” wrote Gleysteen.

We live in a different age, of course, when a quick Google search leads to websites full of Luyken scans, including one produced by Bethel College’s (North Newton, Kansas) Mennonite Library and Archives<sup>1</sup> over a decade ago. By clicking on the Bethel website’s thumbnails, one can view the Luyken images in fine detail, images that can be further enlarged by another click or two. A link that accompanies the images takes viewers to the Kauffman Museum’s “Mirror of

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1 Mennonite Library and Archives: Martyrs Mirror Images, Bethel College (North Newton, KS) website, accessed June 26, 2025, <https://mla.bethelks.edu/holdings/scans/martyrsmirror/>.

the Martyrs” exhibit,<sup>2</sup> which connects to other resources for understanding the Anabaptist martyrs and their memorialists.

Why, then, the need for this new print collection of Luyken’s images? The most obvious answer to this question points to the Masthof Press customer base, which is much less likely to jump on the internet than the readers of, say, *Anabaptist Witness*. It’s not that plain Anabaptists don’t have access to computers and smartphones—some do, some don’t—but generally speaking they prefer reading texts and viewing images on the printed page. *Lessons from the Mirror* puts all the Luyken images in a format that can sit comfortably on a desk, table, or bookshelf. The images are clear and large (much larger than the originals), and the paragraph-length explanations of the images hit the readerly sweet spot—more informative than a short caption would be and easier to navigate than the stories in *Martyrs Mirror* itself. Whatever one thinks of adults introducing children to gruesome martyr accounts, it’s easy to imagine parents and teachers in conservative Anabaptist communities getting good use out of this volume.

And what are the “lessons from the mirror” this volume purports to offer? The answer to this question is less clear, mostly because the two introductory essays spend the bulk of their time in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, informing readers about the early Anabaptists and the work of later Anabaptists to memorialize their predecessors. Sprunger’s essay, “The Historical Context of the *Martyrs Mirror*,” provides a brief but enlightening overview of this memorialization process; in fact, it is hard to imagine a better essay to introduce people to the contexts that gave rise to Anabaptist martyrological writings.

Baughman’s essay, “A Contemplation of the Engravings of Jan Luyken,” is both less readable and less historically reliable, conflating Luyken’s imagery of pre-Reformation martyrs with that of the Anabaptists (9) and later claiming that two nineteenth-century North American editions of *Martyrs Mirror* (the 1814 Ehrenfried edition and the 1837 English translation by I. Daniel Rupp) contain Luyken’s imagery, when, in fact, they do not (13). The most evocative part of Baughman’s essay is his inclusion of the frontispiece from the Ephrata *Martyrs Mirror*, a German translation published by the Ephrata communitarians in 1749. But even then Baughman doesn’t explain the rich imagery of the frontispiece other than to say that it illustrates “the necessary steps toward salvation” (12).

In the end, readers are left to decide for themselves what lessons the sixteenth-century martyrs offer their North American descendants, whose encounters with persecution are largely imaginary. The phrase “spiritual inspiration” appears at one point in Baughman’s essay (5), though it’s never articulated what the martyrs’ five-hundred-year-old witness should inspire us to do. Stand up for truth? Turn the other cheek? Deprecate infant baptism? Call the Pope a devil?

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2 Kauffman Museum Exhibit, “The Mirror of the Martyrs,” accessed June 26, 2025, <https://kauffman.bethelks.edu/martyrs/>.

Those are all lessons one could derive, and in fact have been derived, from *Martyrs Mirror*, which is why the book is both treasured and dismissed in contemporary Anabaptist circles. More explicit reflections on this complicated question would have helped *Lessons from the Mirror* deliver more fully on its title.

That said, the refusal to provide an answer is sometimes the best way to invite readers to generate their own. I could imagine my own church community having a lively conversation on the question of the martyrs' relevance as we ponder a tradition we claim to embrace—and as we lament the way many white American Christians allege “persecution” to guard privileges they’ve long enjoyed. This book would provide a visually rich starting point for that important conversation.

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