BIBLE, ART, GALLERY

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edited by

Martin O'Kane

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INTRODUCTION

One of the best kept secrets is the wealth of biblical art to be found in galleries and museums in cities and towns throughout the United Kingdom, outside of London. Several contain remarkably fine paintings and sculptures inspired by biblical characters and scenes that draw the viewer into their colourful and imaginative world, many presenting challenging and unconventional interpretations of the biblical texts they depict. One only has to glance through the catalogue of the Royal Academy of Arts 1998 exhibition *Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections*[1] to see that biblical subjects formed the backbone of this exhibition of paintings and artefacts drawn from galleries across England, and be persuaded that the hidden gems of biblical art they contain surely deserve much more attention than is currently bestowed on them.

This volume has evolved from study days held in two English galleries, organized with the assistance of a grant from the British Academy: the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham and the Manchester Art Gallery. Both galleries contain a stunning array of biblical art and their collections complement each other, the focus in the Barber Institute centring on their collection of Italian and Dutch Old Masters paintings, while the paintings in the Manchester Art Gallery reflect the intense interest in the Bible displayed by artists in the Victorian period.

The contributors to this volume formed part of an interdisciplinary team of scholars brought together during these study days to explore a number of biblical paintings in the two galleries and interpret them from different perspectives: biblical, literary, philosophical, art-historical, sociological and musical. The shared methodology in this interdisciplinary endeavour was informed by Gadamer's theoretical approach to hermeneutical aesthetics and, more specifically, by two of his key ideas that were found to be most relevant and applicable.[2] The first of these,

1. Richard Verdi (ed.), *Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1998).
2. For a more extended treatment of the relevance of Gadamer's approach to interpreting visual culture, see Nicholas Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', in Ian

in relation to appreciating a work of art, is his distinction between re-presentation (*Vorstellung*) and presentation (*Darstellung*): while *Vorstellung* implies simply an attempt to re-present something 'objectively', the notion of *Darstellung* for Gadamer is altogether different and concerns how an image occasions the *coming forth* of the subject matter it depicts, facilitating its epiphany, its coming into appearance. Gadamer is particularly concerned with the role of the viewer in appreciating a work of art and with the perspective that the viewer brings to the painting. His second emphasis relates very much to the first: an 'objective' description of a painting, Gadamer argues, can never do justice to it and no single interpretation of a painting can ever be adequate or claim to be the last word. Similarly, a single art work can never exhaust all the possibilities of the subject matter it depicts; there is always more to be discovered, more to be expressed and engaged with. Gadamer makes a distinction between the *broad* subject matter of a work (for example, the deception of Isaac in Genesis 27) and the very *particular* way a painting interprets it (for example, Mattias Stom's interpretation of the scene, now in the Barber Institute); the subject matter an art work brings to mind is *larger* than what is shown and, at the same time, reveals the individuality of a work, its *particular* way of contributing towards its expression. The subject matter that a painting expresses can never be exhausted by its particular exemplifications; it always remains more than any individual expression of it and is always susceptible to extension by further interpretation so that no individual art work can ever do full justice to the visualization of the subject.[3]

These primary and essential Gadamerian distinctions facilitated several different and rewarding ways to interpret the biblical paintings in the two galleries we visited. First, they underline the role of the artist as a reflective interpreter of biblical subjects and not simply as passive illustrator of biblical scenes; second, they encourage a range of interpretations of the same biblical painting from different academic perspectives and third, they call for a comparison with paintings of the same subject by other artists, as a means of engaging with quite different visual expressions of the same biblical subject. Finally, and most importantly, Gadamer's emphasis on the role of the viewer demands that we look for the questions and contradictions that the artist clearly perceived were implicit in

Heywood and Barry Sandywell (eds.), *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3-30, and Martin O'Kane, '*Wirkungsgeschichte* and Visual Exegesis: The Contribution of Hans-Georg Gadamer', *JSNT* 33 (2010), pp. 147-59.

   3. See Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', pp. 14-17.

the corresponding biblical text itself. This volume, although it can only provide a flavour of what took place during the two study days, nevertheless includes a representative sample of different approaches to specific biblical paintings.

In the first chapter in this volume, Nicholas Davey illustrates the relevance of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in appreciating how effectively art can present and interpret biblical scenes and how the depiction of such scenes can impact powerfully on the viewer. He explores how the viewer is 'addressed by a work of art', how a biblical painting does not present us with a riddle to be undone or a problem to be solved but rather how it can make something suddenly apparent to us and forcefully communicate a particular reality to us. Yet, the subject matter of a painting is always more than its particular expression and he takes the example of Jan de Beer's *Nativity* (1515–20) in the Barber Institute. He explores how this painting communicates quietly and delicately, as do all profound new beginnings. Its subject matter, the birth of Christ, is indisputable. Yet the meaning of nativity—what is held within in a beginning—remains fundamentally a matter of both wonder and mystery and is hence open to numerous interpretations. Thus the address of an artwork may be immediate but the content of that address is not; it does not stand before us in its full completeness awaiting disclosure by a correct method of reading. It is, instead, a matter of using hermeneutical enquiry to inquire into what speaks directly to one. Meaning is, in other words, not so much uncovered as moved towards. Philosophical hermeneutics, Davey illustrates, is associated with the process of trying to get to grips with what addresses one and to move towards a fuller understanding of that address. He makes a comparison with the experience of listening to music: one might, for example, be completely taken by Schubert's song-cycle *Der Winterreise*, and sense its weight and depth, but its full poignancy can never be captured. It is, paradoxically, a work which, like all great art, has to be returned to constantly with the hope of ever moving forward to a fuller understanding of its import.

In his chapter, art-historian John Harvey explores how the context of the art gallery and the juxtaposition of paintings influence the way we interpret those paintings and often determines the impact they have on the viewer. He argues that interpretation is 'an approximation of meaning based upon the confluence of several modes of mediation'. In his chapter he looks at three examples of mediation: *commentary*, *context*, and *composition*. *Commentary* deals with ways in which Nonconformists converted biblical art into sermons; *context* examines how the location

and presentation of biblical art conditions both its relationship to other types of art and the spectator's response; and *composition* discusses the function of pictorial organization in the mediation of biblical narrative. Together, they represent complementary approaches to 'framing' the biblical text and art: in the first instance, of turning works of art into words about art; in the second, of surrounding art with words and within walls; and in the third, of arranging the word as art.

Having established the theoretical framework in the first two chapters by Davey and Harvey, the following chapters present 'readings' of specific biblical paintings found in the two galleries. The Manchester Art Gallery possesses a number of biblical paintings that offer depictions of the desert, but perhaps the most striking is William Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* (1854). David Jasper, in his chapter, uses Holman Hunt's painting to reflect specifically on the relationship between the letter and the image, and on the relationship between the narratives and theology of the Bible and Western depictions in art of the desert country of the Near East in the nineteenth century – all aspects that touch upon and inform Hunt's *The Scapegoat*. Jasper shows how, in such paintings, mid-Victorian artists in the age of the quest for the historical Jesus and the growth of the science of archaeology were driven by the urge to give authentic voice to religious scenes from first-hand experience. The habitats for the lions of Landseer and Riviere, however, were entirely constructed, while Holman Hunt and the slightly later Edwin Long were anxious to draw their factual details from Middle Eastern geography itself and never more so than in Hunt's *The Scapegoat*, with its obsession with actual details of the salt flats of the Dead Sea landscape and harsh, seemingly almost crude, yet utterly authentic, colours.

In her chapter, Cheryl Exum explores a number of issues relating to the depiction of biblical women in art, taking as her point of departure two works of art from the Manchester Art Gallery, both from the second half of the nineteenth century: Frederick Richard R.A. Pickersgill's *Samson Betrayed* (1850) and J.R. Spencer Stanhope's *Eve Tempted* (1877). These paintings, whose subjects are immediately recognizable, reinscribe the bad reputation Delilah and Eve have acquired over centuries, Exum argues. Exum explains how she approaches a biblical painting: she 'reads' biblical paintings as if, like the text, they have a story to tell, and her interest lies, in particular, in how the story they tell relates to the biblical story. Questions about composition and style, and the artist's historical circumstances and the influences on the artist's life, though admittedly interesting and potentially illuminating, are of less importance to her. Thus, when she looks at a biblical painting, her first

question is, what part of the story does it represent and what is the artist's attitude to it? A painting of a biblical scene or story is more than a simple transposition of a text onto a canvas. The painting itself is an interpretation of the text, visual exegesis, to use Paolo Berdini's term. Exum explores, through these two Victorian paintings of Eve and Delilah, how artists can be keen textual interpreters, intentionally or unintentionally drawing our attention to textual tensions or problems or possibilities or depths not immediately apparent to readers of the text. In some cases, art may even bring to light what the biblical writers are at pains to suppress. In rendering a biblical scene visually, an artist must consider any number of questions, such as what the characters look like, how they should be dressed (in contemporary garb or however the artist imagined people in biblical times would have dressed), where the scene takes place and, most important, what to show, what aspects of the scene or story to emphasize and what to underplay or leave out. Exum suggests that in analysing a biblical painting we might, therefore, want to ask what specific textual clues an artist picks up on in order to present a particular interpretation and whether an artist's interpretation might help us see something meaningful, or troublesome, in the text that we might have missed.

A fascinating but often overlooked aspect of many biblical paintings is the inclusion of musical instruments. Taking as her starting point Baschenis's *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, in the Barber Institute, Siobhán Dowling Long explores the purpose and effect of musical instruments in some well-known biblical paintings. Baschenis's *Still Life with Musical Instruments* depicts musical instruments in a state of abandonment as represented by the dust that covers them; they appear forgotten and broken, as indicated by the broken strings on the violin and mandola. Dowling Long argues that when we unlock the symbolism of these instruments, we realize that this painting contains explicit references to the human body and its potential for sin, as based upon the account of the Fall from Genesis 3. To appreciate this, she argues that we need to know a little about the construction of musical instruments in particular, and their symbolism in biblical paintings in general. From a musical perspective, violin makers and musicians describe the component parts of string instruments in human terms, as having a body, belly, back, neck, and ribs. Baschenis used instruments in this painting to symbolize the human form; in music iconography, the long phallic appearance of woodwind instruments and the voluptuous bodies of string instruments symbolize the sexual parts and nature of men and women. The Barber *Still Life* painting, she concludes, is a powerful allegory based upon Genesis 3, outlining the essential tragedy of the human condition.

While Exum concentrates on two Victorian images of biblical women, John Sawyer offers a contextual reading of a male figure, the Man of Sorrows, van Dyck's *Ecce homo* (1625–26), one of the most treasured paintings in the Barber Institute. Sawyer shows how, in representations of Christ's Passion, writers and artists divide the gospel narrative into a series of discrete scenes such as the Crowning with Thorns, the Mocking, the Flagellation, Pilate Washing his Hands, *Ecce homo* and Christ carrying the Cross. Van Dyck's *Ecce homo*, painted in Genoa towards the end of the artist's travels in Italy, is one of a number of *Ecce homo* images in which theological and devotional aspects of the scene are so central that Jesus is shown almost, if not entirely, alone. The other characters referred to in the text, the soldiers, the chief priests, the angry crowd, and even Pontius Pilate himself who utters the words, have faded into the background. The focus on the words *Ecce homo* and on the suffering figure of Christ, to the virtual exclusion of all the other characters in the narrative, is a late development in the history of artistic representations of the scene. Sawyer draws out the distinctiveness of van Dyck's painting by comparing it to other examples from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries which show Pilate, often in a sympathetic light, presenting Jesus to a group of mocking Jews.

Nicholas Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia* (1634) at the Barber Institute is based on Tasso's poem *Gerusalemme liberata* (1851) but the figure of Erminia is often associated with Mary Magdalene. Poussin, regarded as one of the greatest artistic interpreters of the classical and biblical canons, often imbued his paintings with Stoic principles and Keith Tester, in exploring this painting, argues that we should 'read' Tancred and Erminia as an allegory that enables Poussin's painting to begin to reveal many of its layers. *Tancred and Erminia,* Tester suggests, is a vehicle for a reflection of the Stoic principles of life to which he was deeply committed. According to Stoicism, life ought to be lived according to nature and reason and with rigid control of the passions. Nature and reason are linked through the *logos* that is the natural law of reason that animates the universe. Such a life will enable the individual to be virtuous. Virtue was understood in Stoicism to be the only absolute good and it was a means by which the individual could achieve the ability to withstand the assaults and challenges of Fate. Through a life that is virtuous the individual can be patient and tranquil in the face of necessity. These are abstract philosophical ideals, but *Tancred and Erminia* can be interpreted as an exercise in rendering them visible, Tester concludes.

The subject of the final chapter in the book takes as its starting point a painting by Mattias Stom depicting the deception of Isaac by Jacob and Rebekah, a key episode in the biblical narrative of Jacob and Esau, and now occupying a commanding position in one of the galleries of the Barber Institute. Martin O'Kane uses the painting as his starting point to invite the viewer to reflect again on Esau and his identity and to reassess the undeserved reputation he has acquired in tradition. Studiously interpreted in Jewish and Christian tradition and imaginatively reincarnated in literature, music and art, the identity of the twin brothers has been a subject of heated debate among theologians and a source of inspiration for artists through the centuries. Invariably, however, attention is focussed on the identity of Jacob, the chosen son who inherits the birthright, becomes a prototype for Christ and later represents both Church and Synagogue. But what about Esau? Who is he and what does he stand for? Why has he become such a thoroughly maligned figure in the history of tradition and why has he been given a reputation totally unjustified, based on the few details we know about him from the Bible itself? Starting from Stom's painting in the Barber Institute, O'Kane explores a number of artistic interpretations of the character of Esau.

There are many outstanding examples of biblical art in galleries across Britain. The essays in this volume provide only a snapshot of artwork in two galleries in Manchester and Birmingham and suggest some of the ways we can engage with the interpretations they represent. The volume illustrates how an interdisciplinary approach to biblical art can illumine very different aspects of the painting and can help us see something new or meaningful in the corresponding biblical text.

Finally, I express my thanks to the British Academy for making possible the study days in the Manchester Art Gallery and in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham and for their assistance in publishing this volume.

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HERMENEUTICS, AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, AND RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

Nicholas Davey

No one who is at all serious about life can remain indifferent to religion.[1]

1. *Introduction*

Aesthetics, religion and hermeneutics share a vital feature: their insights come to life only in 'application'. 'Application', Thiselton remarks, 'relates to the everyday *particularities*, appropriation, engagement, and formation, and often features patient and *attentive* listening'.[2] In this chapter, I will outline the features of a patient and attentive of human life and exists only in relation to concrete forms of life'.[3] Biblical hermeneutics, he argues, explores 'levels of meaning, strategies of reading, historical distance *looking* in relation to hermeneutic theory. Biblical and other religious artworks will be discussed though not exclusively so. For Hans-Georg Gadamer, the leading twentieth-century exponent of philosophical hermeneutics, it is not religious iconography *simpliciter* which makes for religious significance but whether a work occasions an aesthetic experience which achieves a fresh orientation towards religious questions.

Achieving a new and vivifying orientation towards religious questions implies a movement within understanding. In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer speaks of such movement as the life of the spirit[4] and in his essay, 'Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference', he also remarks on the centrality of movement within aesthetic contemplation:

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1. Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 148.
2. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. xx.
3. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, p. 4.
4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 10.

> In the puzzling miracle of mental wakefulness lies the fact that seeing some-
> thing and thinking something are a kind of motion, but not the kind that
> leads from something to its end. Rather, when someone is looking at some-
> thing, this is when he or she truly sees it, and when one is directing one's
> thinking at something, this is when one is truly pondering it. So motion is
> also a holding oneself in being, and through this motion of human wakeful-
> ness (*Wachseins*), there blows the whole breath of the life-process, a process
> that ever and again allows a new perception of something to open up.[5]

This suggestive passage, to be returned to later, expresses the primary
subject matter of this chapter. The relevance of philosophical hermeneu-
tics to both aesthetics and theology lies in its claim that formative
experiences of disclosure and revelation in aesthetics not only offer a key
to visual hermeneutics but also open the way to a phenomenological
approach to religious experience.

Gadamer's hermeneutics reveals pertinent links between the under-
standing of religious texts and the understanding of artworks. Consider in
this respect that all movement in understanding is temporal. Aesthetic
understanding is not only in time but *takes* time. Indeed, the contempla-
tive nature of 'truly seeing', as Gadamer calls it, is a salient reminder of
how the lighting conditions of modern galleries distort the experience of
looking by promoting an optimal norm. However, the qualities of a
painted surface, of incised stone or the translucency of worked marble
change with the passage of natural light. Such photo-temporal changes
bring alterations in the substance of what is perceived. Temporality is
crucial to any understanding of how the divine or the artwork reveals
itself. Temporality is the medium of creative unfolding.

The temporal movement inherent in profound aesthetic and religious
experience emphasizes the participatory nature of Gadamer's conception
of understanding. It is not a question of experiencing external states of
affairs but one of being moved and swept up by subject matters, themes
and motifs intrinsic to an individual's sense of a meaningful existence.
Gadamer's *The Relevance of the Beautiful* makes clear that contempla-
tive perception involves a participating in, and a being taken up into,
the 'play' of an event. Aesthetic contemplation is far from passive or
detached. Aesthetic 'seeing' is not merely a 'reading off' of neutrally
observed features but an interpretative engagement with what is brought
into presence in our experience of art. Aesthetic looking and religious

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5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference', in
Richard E. Palmer (ed.), *The Gadamer Reader* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University
Press, 2007), pp. 356-71 (367).

contemplation are conceived as openings to the movement within the objects of their reflection.

The purpose of this chapter is to suggest that a hermeneutical approach to both art and aesthetics is particularly relevant to a phenomenological appreciation of religious understanding. To demonstrate this, we shall first establish what philosophical hermeneutics both is and is not in relation to the broad tradition of hermeneutics and, secondly, we shall show why such a clarification is important for exploring the question of religious understanding. The first section of this chapter analyses what separates philosophical hermeneutics from other forms of hermeneutics. Different approaches to aesthetic experience will elucidate the distinction. The second section considers the substantive claims of philosophical hermeneutics and illustrates them in relation to the artwork. Finally, the third section explores the common ground between a hermeneutical approach to aesthetic and religious experience.

2. What Philosophical Hermeneutics is Not

Philosophical hermeneutics is not decipherment. Traditional textual hermeneutics orientates itself for the most part to the question of deciphering what the signs of a text mean, what the actions of an agent imply or what an image signifies. The underlying supposition is referential: signs point beyond themselves. This is an assumption of Platonic pedigree. The visual image or written sign are re-productions (imitations) of physical objects or actions: the spoken word or the language of gesture re-produces a prior thought or mood; only thought is purely present to itself as *idea*. Philosophical hermeneutics decisively alters the sequence of representation intrinsic to decipherment and counteracts the enormous cultural and political weight attached to it. This weight should not be underestimated. If a text is esteemed as the 'divine word', the task of seeing in it a guide to making fateful decisions concerning the governance of a community becomes critical. Interpretation as methodological decipherment certainly was for many a theological scholar a serious business. On it apostasy or martyrdom could depend.[6]

It is important to understand why philosophical hermeneutics does not offer a method of decipherment. The arguments against decipherment reveal the distinctive basis of how philosophical hermeneutics approaches the experience of art. This, in turn, uncovers the distinctive approach of

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6. Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), pp. 4-32.

philosophical hermeneutics to the 'religious' content of art. The principal issues are these. Decipherment implies representation (*Vorstellung*). Philosophical hermeneutics, however, offers a presentational (*darstellen*) account of meaning.

   Adherents of the representational position propose that signs function by being a sign for something else: they are, in effect, essentially self-negating. Their meaning is referential, always pointing to other signs or objects. This conceptual framework places the hermeneutics of decipherment within a classical tri-partite framework. For Aristotle, spoken words are the signs (marks) of affections or 'impressions of the soul' whilst written words are the signs of spoken words, an ordering distinctly Platonic in character. The 'idea', self-present in mute-reflection, has ontological primacy. The spoken word as the bodily 'appearance' of the silent impression in the soul is secondary whilst the written word is the appearance of the 'idea' but at two removes. Though deeply suspect philosophically, the influence of this tri-partite sequence has been pervasive. In various forms, hermeneutics is depicted as trying to discern in the written document (signs), the intentions of the speaker, and to see in those intentions the order of ideas that structure the speaker's world. Gadamer resists decipherment. He denies that the text or painting are to be understood by identifying what they point to: the visual or literary artwork is not a 'stand-in' for the object of reference. As presentations, their content does not exist apart from them but comes to presence in them.

> Indeed, a literary text does not refer back to an original expression of something…it does not point back to the repetition of some primordial act of oral utterance.[7]

> I have long accepted that the relation between language and writing is not to be understood in terms of two givens: a primary and a secondary. Certainly it stands to reason that writing is not a copy of the vocal sounds. Quite the other way around, writing presupposes that one lends a voice to what is read.[8]

We will discuss Gadamer's critique of 'representation' shortly: what matters is not what words and images refer or defer to but what they *say*, what their performance 'brings forth' or makes happen. The notions of 'presentation' and, more important, of the *Vollzugscharakter* (bringing to fruition) of art are, we shall argue, key to understanding the relation of art, hermeneutics and religion in philosophical hermeneutics.

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   7.   Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Text and Interpretation', in Palmer (ed.), *The Gadamer Reader*, pp. 156-91 (181).
   8.   Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Hermeneutics Tracking the Trace (On Derrida)', in Palmer (ed.), *The Gadamer Reader*, pp. 372-408 (389).

Gadamer's self-distancing from hermeneutic decipherment is metho-dologically important for two reasons. First, hermeneutic decipherment pre-supposes the procedural distanciation of the interpreting subject from the object of interpretation. Decoding a text does not presuppose that the interpreter participates in what the text communicates, only that the interpreter has a methodological competence in reading a body of signs. The methodological distanciation of the interpreter from his or her text sits uneasily with philosophical hermeneutics and religious art: both require phenomenological-involvement-with rather than a phenome-nalist-distanciation-from their subject matter. Dialogical participation in the address of a work is demanded, not a spirit of analytic detachment. Second, hermeneutic decipherment presupposes that the signs requiring decipherment stand for meanings or points of significance beyond themselves. This assumes that texts and religious objects can be treated as decipherable phenomena, the intelligible meaning of which lies in an external *explicandum*. For religious art this pre-supposition is doubly problematic: first, it reduces religious art to a socio-cultural practice and thereby dissolves a significant aspect of its religious status and second, by deciphering religious art as indicative of an *explicandum* external to the art, the status of such works *as art* is compromised.

The treatment of religious art as a social phenomenon has its advan-tages. Religious iconography becomes subject to cultural comparison, and religious belief can be analysed as a social practice rather than as an epis-temic claim. The thorny matter of artistic intention can be replaced with studies of the social production of art and the mechanisms of patronage. By-passing the subjective valences of religious art work avoids notorious difficulties certainly but only at the cost of ignoring those subjectively perceived qualities of interiority or quietness which make the work a religious work. Hermeneutical decipherment only succeeds in decoding religious art works as cultural phenomena. It does not touch the inward intensities of either the aesthetic or religious experience of those works. Philosophical hermeneutics insists, to the contrary, that if religious art-works are to be treated as communications of meaning, they must be regarded as addressing the spectator directly. Hermeneutic decipherment, however, disregards the revelatory capacity of religious art works and, arguably, renders their religious dimension inexplicable.

Deciphering art as an expression of religious, social or historical mean-ing, reduces artworks to bearers of non-aesthetic meaning. A work is not important for its intrinsic aesthetic merit or quality but because of what it stands for, that is, a certain extrinsic religious or ideological commitment.

The artwork or religious practice is explained reductively as a representation of external agencies. To put it at its most extreme, art is regarded as visual propaganda for an intellectual or spiritual commitment. In summary, viewed from within the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of decipherment has serious methodological shortcomings. Its disregard of the inwardness of experience renders much religious experience inexplicable whilst the reductive treatment of an artwork as a cultural phenomenon diminishes the specific aesthetic autonomy of a work.

The objections of philosophical hermeneutics to the hermeneutics of decipherment are well taken but they betray two troubling methodological presuppositions of their own. Defending the interrogative capacity of an artwork to address the spectator directly suggests a privileging of subjectivity. Furthermore, upholding the artistic autonomy of a work such that it loses its historical or social grounding, hints at a questionable aestheticism. It may be said in response that philosophical hermeneutics certainly emphasizes the role of the subject in artistic experience but this does not reduce Gadamer's philosophy, as we shall see, to an apologetics for subjectivism. It is also undeniable that philosophical hermeneutics energetically defends the autonomy of the artwork. Yet, this does not imply that the artwork stands on its own and is deprived of any external (especially) transcendent reference. How philosophical hermeneutics avoids both the subjectivist and aestheticist traps will be discussed below. Having suggested what philosophical hermeneutics is not, what must now be considered is what it substantially is.

3. *Philosophical Hermeneutics: The Guiding Question*

Philosophical hermeneutics is not concerned with arriving at the definitive meaning of a text as if the latter could be determined by the 'correct' method of interpretation. To the contrary, it starts with the assumption that we are immediately addressed by a work of art. It does not present us with a riddle to be undone or a problem to be solved. Rather, the work makes something suddenly apparent to us. Something is forcefully communicated. Gadamer is, above all, concerned with the artwork's ability to communicate with effectiveness and consequence. He takes verbal communication as particularly poignant:

> When I took the experience of art as my starting point in *Truth and Method*, it was in order to show the wide compass of hermeneutics in my topic, and to place it within the universal meaning of *Sprachlickeit*.[9]

The point here is straightforward. An artwork communicates effectively when we undergo the experience of 'something being made clear to us' while we stand in its presence. This transmission of meaning is effectively indistinguishable from the experience of something coming to mind whilst we are involved in a conversation. We become aware of what is meant. Something shows itself to us that we did not anticipate. The experience of an artwork's address is as (phenomenologically) straight-forward as suddenly realising that we are presently subject to someone's glance. It is not a question of a subject deciding what is initially meant by a communication but a question of the subject being subordinate to what is communicated. This is why Gadamer insists that our response to artworks is not subjective. The artwork communicates its subject matter objectively. A sceptic might retort, 'If the communication of an artwork is direct, then why the need for interpretation? Is not all revealed in the sudden insight? Why ask questions about what communicates directly?' Here the analogy of the glance is helpful. I understand that a person is glancing at me. I might be flattered, embarrassed or charmed. The experi-ence of the glance might be memorably clear, but its meaning may not be. Was it a lure, an invitation or a simple acknowledgment? Philosophi-cal hermeneutics contends that in the experience of art, a meaning *presents* (*darstellen*) or, better, announces itself to the spectator. Meaning is not arrived at by decipherment but comes forth of itself.

Jan de Beer's *Nativity* (1515–20) (fig. 1), communicates quietly and delicately as do all profound new beginnings. Its subject matter is indisputable. Yet the meaning of nativity—what is held within in a beginning—remains fundamentally a matter of both wonder and mystery and is hence open to numerous interpretations. The address of an art-work may be immediate but the content of that address is not. Gadamer argues that though the address may be immediate, its meaning is by no means immediately given. It does not stand before us in its full com-pleteness awaiting disclosure by a correct method of reading. It is instead a matter of using hermeneutical enquiry to inquire into what speaks directly to one. Meaning is, in other words, not so much uncovered as moved towards. Philosophical hermeneutics is associated with the

9. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Artwork in Word and Image', in Palmer (ed.), *The Gadamer Reader*, pp. 192-226 (203).

process of trying to get to grips with what addresses one and to move towards a fuller understanding of that address. One might, for example, be completely taken by Schubert's song-cycle *Der Winterreise*, sense its weight and depth but its full poignancy can never be captured. It is, paradoxically, a work which, like all great art, has to be returned to constantly with the hope of ever moving forward to a fuller understanding of its import.

Figure 1. Jan de Beer, *The Nativity* (1515–20)
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

Philosophical hermeneutics commences, then, with the fact of a work's immediate and undeniable address. This does not demean academic approaches to art but it is to insist that a purely academic approach which ignores the subjective apprehension of that address entails a form of aesthetic alienation. The point here is twofold. First, to study art as a cultural phenomenon is to approach the artwork as a sign of something extrinsic to it, as evidence for socio-ideological forces which

bring the work into being. To have regard only for seventeenth-century Dutch Interiors or still-life paintings as evidence for the domestication of European painting is to silence or repress one's response to the address of those works. Gadamer's complaint is similar to those commentators who would have us believe that spirituality is a proper subject of academic study only if it is delimited to its outward manifestations in institutional practices. Yet to study spirituality in behavioural terms alone is to miss its subjective force. The second point is more critical and echoes Nietzsche's dictum that knowledge should serve life. Academic approaches to the experience of art gain their weight and direction precisely when they explore and probe what addresses us. They gain their proper dignity not as objective exercises carried out in their own right but as a critical means to moving closer to the meaning of what has found its point of private purchase within us. For Gadamer, theory is at its best when unfolding the applicative moment of art's address. There is always more to our experiences than we are capable of articulating at one time. For philosophical hermeneutics the value of theory lies in its efforts at the clarification of experience. Indeed such articulation changes and deepens the understanding of a subject matter after it has announced itself in the moment of hermeneutic address.

Gadamer is far from privileging subjective responses to art over other scientific modes of enquiry. His argument is that the marginalization of subjective responses to art has negative consequences. Undervaluing these responses deprives us of our initial orientation to an artwork. The subjective response is, in effect, the moment of an artwork's direct address: it announces itself. It is, paradoxically, the purely academic approach to art that can be accused of epistemological subjectivity; the interrogative aspects of art's address are refused in favour of only those questions that suit a given methodological agenda. The key point remains: despite the intensely personal aspects of being addressed by an artwork, Gadamer never reduces the experience of that address to the subjective alone. Philosophical hermeneutics always insists that subjectivity is informed by that which transcends it and that, furthermore, without subjectivity we lose access to what objectively transcends it. The matter is stated succinctly in *Truth and Method*:

> All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pre-given, what with Hegel we call 'substance' because it underlies all subjective actions and intentions…the aim of philosophical hermeneutics…is…to discover in all that is subjective the substantiality that determines it.[10]

10.   Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), p. 302.

The claim is that subjective consciousness is informed by contingent psychological *a priori* linguistic and cultural practices and that, without the formative guidance of such practices, subjective consciousness could not orientate itself within its environment. Subjective consciousness has a directionality without a specific direction. It is not that our subjective responses to an artwork are logically pre-determined, only that we are historically and culturally susceptible or pre-disposed to certain themes and subject matters. Gadamer argues that being open to the question of God is a case in point.[11] We may have considerable doubts about the existence of transcendental deity. Yet to be open to the question of God is in an uncanny way to be responsive already to what is held in that question. Such responsiveness brings us into the region wherein and whereof that question speaks. Faith is not a matter of doxological incantation but an acknowledgment of our vulnerability to the question of God and what that question can summon from within us. Intellect may impel us to reject the notion of a jealous God but such a rejection does not undermine (indeed, it may strengthen) sensitivity to the transcendent. The transcendent is here understood as that sense of being dependent upon what embraces us and yet is always 'more than us' whether this 'more' be conceived as language, a cultural tradition, a community of others or, indeed, the historical dimensions of existence.

   The argument is, then, that analysing art solely as a phenomenal symptom of a given cultural discourse is misconceived because the world is not given to us simply in a neutral fashion. It is simply not a bland realm on to which meaning and value are projected. The notion of a phenomenal world of objects existing prior to interpretation is an abstraction. Such a world is a secondary world, abstracted from a prior world of experience in which meanings are embedded in tools, gestures, and artefacts. Such embedded meanings shape and yet transcend subjective consciousness. The task of philosophical hermeneutics is to engage that transcendent realm by using interpretative devices to penetrate the substantialities which, though beyond an individual's horizon, nevertheless shape it. Without a prior embedding in horizons of values, our disposition towards cultural artefacts would be disabled. This indicates a pattern of retrieval within philosophical hermeneutics. It is not implied

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11.   'It is enough to know that religious texts are to be understood only as texts that answer the question of God. [Such texts presuppose] that human existence as such is moved by the question of God. This presupposition is obviously held only by someone who already recognises the alternative of belief or unbelief in the true God' (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 332).

that aesthetic experience returns one to a latent set of commitments but rather to an underlying question. By returning to such a question, one's understanding of it is potentially expanded.

The question of the question is of considerable significance for philosophical hermeneutics. Artworks may convey central ideas but these address underlying questions. Gadamer argues:

> Such a work…can be understood only if we assume its adequacy as an expression of the artistic idea. Here too, we have to discover the question which it answers if we are to understand it as an answer. This is an axiom of all hermeneutics.[12]

The retrieval is not of some hidden dogmatic meaning but of the question that is at the core of each subject matter. The value of confronting ancient and contemporary artwork is not just that they present different and unusual approaches to a subject matter but that the exposure to such perspectives reminds us of forgotten or overlooked aspects of that subject matter. Interaction with an artwork is, for Gadamer, a matter of dialogical relationships. The interrogative address of a work unsettles or inspires the spectator precisely because he or she is ontologically already vulnerable to the field of questioning (subject matter) the artwork displays. This raises a salient point.

If hermeneutic engagement with an artwork only involved understanding an artist's grasp of a subject matter, understanding would collapse into pliant acceptance or rejection. Yet by promoting the notion that a subject matter as the object of an artwork's address, Gadamer establishes the ground of hermeneutical engagement between artist, work and spectator. A dialogical relation is established, focussed on the subject of that address. Each perspective can supplement, challenge and expand the understanding of all participants. This engagement initiates a movement of understanding which Gadamer likens to the life of the spirit.[13]

The notion of a subject matter in hermeneutics provides the ontological basis for the claim that engagement with an artwork involves a response to terrains of meaning which transcend subjective consciousness. This supports the argument that aesthetic experience is indeed cognitive. What then lies in the claim that subject matter is the ontological under-pinning of hermeneutical engagement with an artwork?

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12.   Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 370.
13.   'The essence of what is called spirit, lies in the ability to move within the horizon of an open future and an unrepeatable past'(Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 10).

Gadamer is an astute Plato scholar and his doctrine of the subject matter represents a subtle reworking of Plato's notion of universals. Many readers will be familiar with Plato's view that universals, forms or ideas have the following characteristics: (a) ideas are the uncreated metaphysical archetypes of any given class of entities. They are the forms of things whether physical or abstract; (b) as such, ideas or universals have no genesis and are not subject to change; (c) unchanging eternal forms can never be exhausted by their finite instantiations. No matter how complete, no drawing of an equilateral triangle will be adequate to the concept of triangle. Differently put, a concept will never be exhausted by a historically-revealed conception. In relation to its conceptions, then, a concept is always transcendent; (d) Plato famously held that in relation to their grounding concept or universal, conceptions are mental appearances of an original concept and as such diminish it; (e) just as Plato presents a particular flower or tree as a derivative corruption of an archetypal form, so a representational work which depicts natural forms in relation to universals is an appearance of an appearance. When the representation is persuasive, it is indicative for Plato of being deceived, of mistaking the representation (the copy or the imitation) for the real thing. Within Plato's dialectic, it is important to pass from the representation of an object to an intellectual intuition of the underlying form of the object perceived.

By contrast, the notion of subject matter (*Sache-selbst*) in philosophical hermeneutics is given, in Gadamer's hands, an overtly Hegelian and Heideggerian character. Although they are transcendent objects of consciousness, subject matters have a historical origin. They do not precede humanity but evolve as the consequence of processes of concept formation. The natural tendency in language is to generalize and abstract from particulars. As the ontological basis of thought, subject matters form a significant part of the cognitive infrastructure in which an individual's thought is nurtured. Like Plato's forms, subject matters are transcendent, not metaphysically but ontologically: no finite rendition of a subject matter can ever exhaust that subject matter. A subject matter always remains 'more than' or in 'excess' of its instances. Given that subject matters have a historical origin, they are subject to historical change: their historical being can be expanded and enriched. Artworks add to the being of their subject matter by increasing the historical effectiveness of its content. In clear contrast to the Platonic view of artworks as corrupting an original form, artworks in the view of philosophical hermeneutics increase potentially the being of their content. Gadamer argues:

> A work of art belongs so closely to what it is related to that it enriches the
> being of that (subject matter) as if through a new event of being.[14]

Aesthetic appearance is not a veil placed over reality but an epiphany:
it is the event of something 'coming forth'. A work can become a key
reference point in how a specific motif is treated. No one appearance is
definitive: the greater the variety of ways a subject matter appears, the
greater our knowledge of its content. The dissociable nature of a subject
matter from its mode of appearing is the ontological basis of Gadamer's
claim that art does indeed communicate a form of knowledge. It allows
the content of a particular subject matter to come to light and in so
doing has hermeneutical consequences.

Bringing a subject matter to light does not happen in a context-less
vacuum. We will have a previous acquaintance with it and be in deep
cultural association with its content. A new rendition or approach not
only adds to the historical effectiveness of that subject matter but it can
remind the viewer of something forgotten or overlooked. In this respect
Gadamer's account of our aesthetic experience echoes Plato's doctrine of
anamnesis. We do not recognise a pure form which is the subject of an *a
priori* intuition but have brought back to mind aspects of a subject matter
which are integral to the cultural horizons we have been shaped by. This
further supports the claim that our experiences of art are cognitively
charged: they reflect and summon up from consciousness the subject
matters which structure our life-worlds. Finally, though subject matters
are not metaphysical objects, they remain for Gadamer transcendent
entities. Though they transcend a given epoch, they do not transcend
history. Thus, with regard to any one subject matter, there is always more
to be said, more to be revealed. The subject matter is always in excess of
its interpretations. This is of some consequence for art theory.

If a subject matter transcends its rendition in an artwork, it does not
diminish the individuality of the artwork by subordinating it to some-
thing exterior to the work. To the contrary, grasping that the subject
matter is always more than appears in a specific work allows us to ask of
that work what its special contribution to the realisation of that subject
matter is. Far from diminishing the individual status of the work, the
argument particularizes the work by placing it in a wider horizon of
renditions. The ability of an artwork to light up its subject matter and
point to what transcends its particular status, returns us to a salient
feature of human knowledge and religious consciousness: though never

14. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 147.

beyond all understanding, there is always something that surpasses present understanding.

4. *Hermeneutics, Art and the Question of Spirituality*

The complex relationships between Gadamer's philosophical herme-neutics and modern European theology are not the subject of this chapter. These have been addressed in other studies and Gadamer, too, has written about the Classical roots of Christianity.[15] It is also clearly the case that Gadamer's aesthetics is not specifically concerned with the iconography of Christian art though his imaginative distinctions between sign and symbol have immediate implications for the ontology of art and the study of its images. The purpose of my concluding section is to make some philosophical proposals concerning the explicit connections between Gadamer's exploration of aesthetic experience and our under-standing of religious experience. Gadamer is not a theologian and this is not the place to debate the significant impact of his thought upon theological debate. We propose that Gadamer's phenomenological description of aesthetic experience offers an insight into a possible phe-nomenology of religious experience. We take as our lead his remark that 'a work of art always has something sacred about it'.[16]

In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer reminds us that 'we should never underestimate what a word can tell us, for language represents the previous accomplishment of thought'.[17] In its Latin root, the word 'religion' is related to a sense of obligation, to a feeling of being bound to or in someway dependent upon something that transcends one's imme-diate being. The word is also connected to the notion of being bound to a 'way' of living, or to a 'rule' which defines a community of spiritual or religious practice. Both senses of the word have distinct resonances within philosophical hermeneutics. The latter is acutely aware of how human consciousness is both shaped and dependent upon transcending linguistic and cultural horizons. Philosophical hermeneutics also impli-citly advocates a certain ethical practice: a way of looking at, or rather, of being open to, how the world comes forth in aesthetic experience. Gadamer is a vehement critic of what he takes to be the hedonistic sub-jectivism of Kant's aesthetics which proclaims that the aesthetic object has qualities that can be enjoyed in and for themselves independent of

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15. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
16. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 150.
17. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, p. 12.

any historical or cultural circumstance.[18] As has been argued, an onto-logical condition of a subject matter addressing us is that the spectator be submerged in a linguistic and cultural horizon from which the subject matter can speak. The hermeneutic disposition to aesthetic seeing or hearing therefore involves not a suspension of our ontological horizons (that would render subject matters silent, if not invisible) but a suspen-sion of our immediate prejudices or preferences in order to be open to the unexpected, the unfamiliar and the new. The hermeneutic disposition therefore entails a concerned detachment which although highly committed to certain subject matters has, nevertheless, developed a disciplined practice of looking and hearing which is never closed but always open to how the seen and the heard are always hemmed by the unseen and the unheard. At the same time, Gadamer's hermeneutic disposition inasmuch as it entails the clearing of an attentive space in which something can come forth, exhibits the influence of the German Idealist and Romantic tradition which explicitly venerates the ontologi-cal power of the 'spontaneous': the coming forth from out of the numi-nous of a subject matter. Kant saw the emergence of the categories of reason from numinous nature as an expression of the 'spontaneous' (i.e. causally inexplicable) creative powers of nature. Hegel also speaks of the spontaneous in terms of the 'magic power' (*Zauberkraft*) of *Geist* objecti-fying itself in external forms. Heidegger venerates the spontaneous but, for him, it is not the productive power of subjectivity or *Geist* which is significant but the expressive power of Being itself, able to show itself not in the things that it creates but in the *creating* of those things. Gadamer's celebration of the eventual nature of art, its bringing forth from a subject matter, is equally indebted to philosophies of spontaneous productivity, all of which celebrate the epiphanous emergence of Being. The parallel with theology is explicit.

The notion of an epiphanous emergence attributes to the artwork an eschatological structure. The address of an artwork is comparable to an event of annunciation: the address is intelligible in that we understand what is said but it is not fully comprehended in that the meaning of what is said may only become apparent later. Macbeth understood what was said when he was told that he had nothing to fear from a man born of woman but he did not understand that the prophecy excluded those born by caesarean procedure. Art, the word and history require that not everything be shown or said at once and yet the very act of an intelligible

18. Gadamer's specific objections to Kant's aesthetics can be found in *Truth and Method*, pp. 42-81.

address promises more to come for, as we have seen, all images and words are in excess of themselves, that is, allude to what has yet to be said or shown. Gadamer's equivalent of the *eschaton* is his notion of the ideality of meaning which is implied by and implicit in every meaningful utterance. Given that every meaningful utterance is made within a linguistic horizon which is always more than what is said, the utterance carries within itself the promise of all that has yet to be said and revealed by a work. Indeed, the task of interpretation, according to philosophical hermeneutics, is not so much to recover a lost or forgotten meaning but to bring a work's subject matter to greater realization, that is, to bring the hermeneutical *eschaton* ever nearer. In other words, the ability of art to promise an ever more complete view of its subject matter is inherent in the hermeneutical structure of aesthetic experience itself. The religious shading to aesthetic experience and especially its revelatory, if not apocalyptic, ability to suggest a final truth is not missed on thinkers such as Ernst Bloch or Theodor Adorno. However, an informative objection can be made here.

The commitment of philosophical hermeneutics to an ideality of meaning suggests a totality or wholeness of meaning by means of which the full truth of a work comes to light historically. There is a clear parallel with the Christian doctrine of the final judgment in which the full truth of a person will be shown. The inconsistency for philosophical hermeneutics is this. An end to history means the end of interpretation: the passage from one aspect of interpretation to another, which is the very movement upon which changes in and expansions of understanding depend, would cease. Indeed, it is the very incompleteness of understanding which allows us to understand 'more'. However, does this suppose that for philosophical hermeneutics, the *eschaton* is outside time? Gadamer's notion of the ideality of meaning does not pre-suppose this. The significance of the symbol for Gadamer is not that it refers to something outside itself but rather to a fullness of meaning held within it, a fullness which is immanent, though only discernible in temporal fragments. The redemptive power of the religious symbol lies not in the fact that it has an external reference but rather that it can always mean more. Openness to the power of the symbol is not a patient waiting for what has yet to come (a deferred event) but an openness to what is endlessly present within in it, that is, the constant invitation to become more ourselves *now*.[19]

    19. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology, Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2000), pp. 56-57.

There is a profound corollary between the object of our experience in art and aspects of religious experience. Both invariably focus on the experience of mystery. Respect for the aesthetic particular and for the special nature of every individual is always edged by what reaches beyond the distinct or singular. This is not the place to debate the specifics of doctrinal content but what is presently assumed is that a prevalent characteristic of religion is its attempt to navigate the question of first and last things, to ponder the mystery of human existence and to relate individual existence to what transcends it. Similarly, the operations of philosophical hermeneutics are logically and ontologically dependent upon a commitment to transcendence, but the transcendent is not conceived as some other metaphysical world, but as the actual linguistic and cultural world in which human beings live, a world whose subject matters transcend the individual existences they inform and shape. The arguments of philosophical hermeneutics suggest that both aesthetic and religious experience attune themselves not to that which lies *beyond* existence but to the transcendent structures which sustain individual existence. Central to these structures are subject matters, clusters of key questions and concerns which surround such themes as duty, sacrifice and belonging.

These areas of cognitive sensitivity may be likened to mysteries. The questions they pose are unlike technical problems in that they are not amenable to technical solution. Technical problems for which answers have been found permit the discourse halted by the emergence of a problem to continue. In the case of subject matters and mysteries, however, the discovery of a definitive answer would destroy the discourses that keep their key questions open. Gabriel Marcel puts the point well:

> A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up and whose essence is therefore not before me in its entirety… A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined, whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique.[20]

Once again we find within the commitment of philosophical hermeneutics to the subject matter an echo of Marcel's reference to a mystery as an object that cannot be 'before me in its entirety'. The characterization of mystery fits the subject matter as an entity whose nature is always partially hidden within the withheld. Returning to the central

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20.   Marcel quoted by John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension, Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 159.

point, mysteries call for the appropriate dialogical response. It is not so much the answer given to a question that is important but what comes to mind in the interaction whilst seeking to give an answer. The sudden insight which conversation occasions inadvertently allows something to be better, though never completely, understood. Indeed, it can be argued that our very sense of what it is to be human is intimately related not only to finding ourselves within an environment whose typography is shaped by the mysteries of love, death and redemption but also by engaging in formative and transformative conversations about those subject matters. Subject matters and mysteries are open in precisely the way that an artwork opens to what is withheld within it. The significant point relates to the following.

We have established that mysteries have the same open ontological structure as subject matters. We are also contending that the specific value of philosophical hermeneutics in the present debate is that through its analysis of aesthetic experience, it offers an understanding of what aesthetic and spiritual experience share. The key point that can now be established is this: not only do aesthetic and spiritual experience involve an experience of a transformed understanding of a subject matter but also a heightened experience of its mystery. Its boundaries suddenly open, bringing with it an enhanced appreciation of the extent to which our understanding is dependent upon networks of meaning and association whose presence we can discern but which transcend our cognitive grasp. This brings aesthetic and spiritual experience within one of the meanings of religious experience given above, namely, that the religious awareness is an awareness of how human consciousness is dependent upon powers and influences that transcend its individual being.

5. Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter it was proposed that the substantive link between philosophical hermeneutics and religious thought is not that they share the same objects of study but rather similar modes of attentive practice. The objects of shared reflection turn out to be less important than the experiences occasioned by common practices of attentiveness. Let us return to a previously cited passage from Gadamer:

> In the puzzling miracle of mental wakefulness lies the fact that seeing something and thinking something are a kind of motion, but not the kind that leads from something to its end. Rather, when someone is looking at something, this is when he or she truly sees it, and when one is directing one's thinking at something, this is when one is truly pondering it. So motion is

also a holding oneself in being, and through this motion of human wake-
fulness (*Wachseins*) there blows the whole breath of the life-process, a process
that ever and again allows a new perception of something to open up.[21]

The key remarks in this quotation are: (a) 'when someone is looking at
something, this is when he or she truly sees it' and (b) 'motion is also a
holding oneself in being, and through this motion of human wakefulness
(*Wachseins*) there blows the whole breath of the life-process, a process
that ever and again allows a new perception of something to open up'.
Gadamer's invocation of human wakefulness suggests a practice of
attentive looking whose features immediately invite comparison with the
ancient stoic and early Christian practice of *prosoche*: 'attention to
oneself and vigilance at every instant'.[22] In Gadamer's case, this mode of
looking is not to be understood as a wilful looking-at-the-world from
within the blinkers of one's immediate subjective purposes. His appeal to
aesthetic attention has a certain resemblance to Kant's account of
aesthetic judgment which implores us to take an aesthetic interest in an
object, independent of whatever practical purposes that object usually
serves. For Kant I can take an interest in the well-designed symmetry of
an object independent of the purposes the object is designed to fulfil.
Kant speaks of aesthetic objects having a purposeful appearance without
a directly attributable purpose. Gadamer, however, strongly distinguishes
himself from Kant's position. He agrees with how an aesthetic attitude
must be distinguished from our everyday 'interest-guided' attitude to
objects. However, whereas Kant identifies the aesthetic object as those
sensuous attributes of a phenomenon which we delight in, irrespective of
culture or tradition, Gadamer regards the aesthetic object as essentially a
cognitive object and not merely as a phenomenon to be enjoyed. The
aesthetic object is a subject matter that addresses us and imposes a mean-
ingful claim upon us. The cognitive dimension of the aesthetic object
firmly places it in the horizons of culture and language, that is, into those
cognitive horizons which shape our reflective practices. This explains (a)
the capacity of an aesthetic object to address us: it is an object imbued
with cognitively charged signs and symbols; (b) why Gadamer is so
resistant to Kant's reduction of aesthetic experience to the purely
sensuous: it effectively deprives the aesthetic object of the power to
address us, and (c) why Gadamer insists that aesthetic experience is not
reducible to the subjective alone: it is the artwork—not us—that speaks.
Indeed, the artwork can address us in ways that directly conflict with

21. Gadamer, 'Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference', p. 367.
22. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 130-32.

what we customarily think of as our interests. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer remarks, 'Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation'.[23] This clears the way to the principal point: philosophical hermeneutics enables us to understand aesthetic attention as a form of *kenosis*, the practice of clearing one's mind and stilling one's will in order to become receptive to what comes forth from within a subject matter. Clearing the mind is not understood in Cartesian fashion as an emptying. Following Heidegger, Gadamer is committed to the view that there is no such thing as pure consciousness or a mind equivalent to a *tabula rasa*. Consciousness is always an awareness of *something* and inasmuch as consciousness is aware of an object, actual or virtual, the latter will always be given within a linguistic and a cultural horizon. Consciousness is always shaped by its external relations: it is, in effect, always more than it knows itself to be. Although we may not be aware of it, the existence of consciousness within a wider set of cultural and historical relations means that we are already pre-disposed or attuned to being sensitive to certain issues: the beautiful, justice, love, dignity or individuality. Clearing the mind is, then, not a question of emptying it of its contents but of preparing it to be attentive. Everyday issues and immediate projects are suspended so that the mind can become receptive to what emerges before it. Like certain spiritual practices, aesthetic contempla-tion seeks to release the observer from inattentive entanglements in the world, not in order to escape the world but rather to achieve a cultural space for developing an enlarged sense of the subject matters that shape our cultural being.[24] Aesthetic attention is in effect a form of spiritual practice directed towards developing both the ability to receive what comes to address us and the willingness to concentrate on and follow the import of such annunciations.

There is another aspect that Gadamer refers to as 'truly seeing' and 'pondering it', that is, the subject matter. The grammatical reference to an 'it' implies a fixed object or essence but of course there is nothing fixed about a subject matter. It is rather an historical accumulation of themes and motifs which cluster around common concern or pre-occupation. The subject matter of death has associations with release and liberation, just as it also invokes negativity, finitude and loss. A subject matter is, properly speaking, a cluster of ideas rather than a fixed concept. A subject matter can therefore only show itself in its aspects, never in its

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    23. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 356.
    24. See Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 187.

completeness. The ontological characteristics of a subject matter, in effect, underwrite the appropriateness of Gadamer's notion of aesthetic attention as a practice of openness and clear focus. The development of such a meditative discipline allows the spectator to remain focussed upon a subject matter not only as it comes forth but also as it shows different aspects of itself. The developed patience of attentive looking is also a cognitive practice: it is the hermeneutical practice (rather than method) by means of which one can comprehend through tangible experience how a subject matter always becomes more. As we shall see, the emphasis on tangible experience links Gadamer's account of aesthetic attention to the question of spiritual practice.

The second important motif in the passage cited above concerned the claim that 'motion is also a holding oneself in being, and through this motion of human wakefulness (*Wachseins*) there blows the whole breath of the life-process, a process that ever and again allows a new perception of something to open up'. This remark implies that aesthetic attention, from a hermeneutic perspective, is interactive or, to use Gadamer's metaphor, dialogical. Gadamer's focus upon the subject matter as something that is historically effective and as something that comes forth before the spectator perhaps inevitably distorts the argument by seeming to place the emphasis on the *object* of aesthetic experience. However, as we have just argued, no object will be perceived in a vacuum. All seeing will be shaped by our ontological horizons. Aesthetic experience is the event of two horizons engaging: the horizon of the subject matter itself and the horizon of the spectator. The spectator will bring to the event a whole range of expectancies, associations and memories of a given subject matter. Meeting a subject matter as an immediate object of experience initiates a responsive re-arrangement of all the hermeneutic expectancies brought to that event. Indeed, such collisions of hermeneutic frameworks have the effect of prompting us to see and think about our world differently. This moment of hermeneutic application must not be thought of as an alien object being simply assimilated within a dominant horizon or conceptual perspective. It is much rather that the framework of our horizon is configured and perceived differently as a consequence of our encounter with the artwork, its subject matter and its hermeneutic framework. The historically effective work is one which effects a transfer or translation of structure: we see our world hermeneutically re-structured, as if its primary characteristics had been re-organized by the logic of the work, so much so that we begin to see or hear our world according to the visual logic of a Rembrandt or the sound structures of a Beethoven.

To return to Gadamer's notion of *Wachseins,* the 'directing of one's thinking at something, when one is truly pondering it', is a being open to what comes forth from within the work's subject matter. A novel emergence in itself is insignificant. It is the emergence which is truly transformative that matters for Gadamer, the emergence which re-structures the very horizons of understanding one takes to the work. Of course, we are never fully aware of what we take to a work: there is always more to our experienced selves in any one moment than we are capable of articulating at one time. The discipline of aesthetic seeing is thus to create opportunities not just for a subject matter to come to mind but for both our pre-understanding to be probed and challenged and for our horizons to be re-configured in transformative and unexpected ways. In certain respects, Gadamer echoes Kant's aesthetics here. In ordinary instrumentalist understanding, imagination understood as an association of ideas is limited by the task in hand to only operating with those asso-ciations necessary to the fulfilment of the task. When I write with a pen I must associate the activity with paper, ink and blotter. However, when I contemplate the pen as an aesthetic object, my imaginative associations can enter 'free-play' independent of any task: in the pen's ink chamber I can sense the presence of novels, poems and articles yet to be realised. Such 'free-play' is, for Gadamer, not about imaginative day dreaming but disengaging the practical gearing of one's hermeneutic expectancies, to free them from habit, precisely in order to open them to the challenge of what comes forth in the act of attending to a subject matter. Aesthetic attention emerges within philosophical hermeneutics as a form of spiritual practice, a deliberate holding of oneself in readiness for the transformative moment when the horizons of subject matter and specta-tor meet. As Gadamer argues, 'motion is also a holding oneself in being, and through this motion of human wakefulness (*Wachseins*) there blows the whole breath of the life-process, *a process that ever and again allows a new perception of something to open up*'.[25]

Aesthetic attention is a form of transformative practice in which the task of interpretation is not so much to elucidate a text or artwork but to facilitate a change of understanding, to seek out those 'turning words' or images that are able to open the work and our understanding of it in a revealing way. Attentive reading and looking renounce subjective inten-tion and prepare, in the manner of *kenosis*, a receptive opening within the spectator such that when a 'turning word' or image appears, it can do

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25.   Gadamer, 'Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference', p. 367.

its work of transforming the interpreter's understanding.[26] Philosophical hermeneutics understands aesthetic attention as the preparatory practice of allowing the subject matter in an artwork to do *its* work upon on us.

This offers an insight into why Gadamer talks of the encounter between an artwork's subject matter and the aesthetic spectator as dialogical. Conversations have an unpredictable dynamic. Neither the encounter nor what it discloses are the subjective achievement of the viewer. Nevertheless, the point remains that the encounter is facilitated by an attentive practice in which the spectator opens herself to the unexpected and awaits disclosure to the occasion of an insight, which though duly prepared for, comes of its own accord. The notion of encounter also indicates something distinctive about philosophical hermeneutics as opposed to earlier modes of interpretation. The movement of interpretation, as Gadamer conceives it, does not move backwards towards grasping the putative experience of the artist behind the text or painting—to the contrary: interpretation moves forwards towards that space of reflection which opens the encounter between work and spectator.

Gadamer's appeal to attentiveness or watchfulness is conceptually congruent with his earlier defence of *theoria,* an attentive spectatorship that allows the subject matter of a work to come forth and show itself. It is the doctrine of *theoria* which reveals the mutuality of looking at and reflecting on an art work in Gadamer's thinking. More important, *theoria* does not involve a detached observation of a subject matter but an involved participatory looking so much so that it affects the realization of the subject matter under contemplation. For Gadamer, any clarificatory articulation of a work's subject matter increases the effective being of that subject matter.[27] Thus, in relation to the artwork, aesthetic attention is not set apart from the being of a work's subject matter but participates in it and enhances its being. What can be said of aesthetic attention also applies to spiritual attentiveness. Daphne Hampson suggests that 'attending' is 'a way of being in the world':

> Attending…is closely allied to what it might mean to have a spirituality. It involves listening to and watching both oneself and others. It can also involve allowing oneself to be affected by art or great literature, or being observant by nature. By being attentive one is able to grow and change and so make

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26. See Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, p. 103.
27. Charles Taylor says of the moral rather than the aesthetic subject matter, 'An articulation of this object makes it something different from what it was before.' See his paper, 'Responsibility for Self', in G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 111-26.

appropriate response when response is called for. Attending involves not being
swallowed up by circumstances but keeping a critical distance, while also being
deeply involved, in the sense of caring for that to which one attends.[28]

There is therefore a quality of 'calm abiding' within aesthetic and spiri-
tual attentiveness, a lingering or dwelling with the subject matter of the
reflection. Such practices involve what I have called elsewhere a 'herme-
neutic poise'.[29] The poise holds together, sustains and renders serviceable,
a critical tension between the different elective affinities within aesthetic
attentiveness. This can be outlined as follows.

We have said that aesthetic attentiveness demands deep involvement
with—an opening up to—the subject matter of an artwork. According to
Gadamer, as we have seen, it is the address of the artwork that calls to us.
Such being drawn into the subject matter is of course the precondition of
it working on our understanding. And yet this drawing-in is also a
distancing, for the more we come to understand a subject matter, the
more other aspects of it withdraw from our grasp. The fact that key
aspects of a work will always recede in what Heidegger termed the 'with-
held' has led some commentators to judge the hermeneutic enterprise as
a futile exercise. In the eyes of some, Gadamer's claim that the profundity
of a great work resides in its ability to remain enigmatic and resist
complete theoretical capture is no compensation for the fact there is no
end to interpretation. Foucault, for one, believes that hermeneutics
therefore dooms us to an endless task.[30] But this is to miss the point
profoundly. Aesthetic understanding and spiritual enlightenment are
never states of affairs to be achieved or arrived at. True, or rather reflec-
tively self-aware, understanding has come to *know* that understanding is
always on-going. The ontological conditions which render understanding
incomplete are the same ontological conditions which open understand-
ing to become ever more complete. In a similar way as Wright argues, the
hermeneutic insight into the finitude and historicity of all culture gives
rise to the realization 'that a conception and practice of "ongoing
enlightenment" is superior to "static" conceptions of enlightenment.
"Ongoing enlightenment"…is a process without end'.[31] This suggests
then that in the case of both aesthetic and spiritual understanding,

28. Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2002), p. 260.

29. Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2005), p. 247.

30. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. xix.

31. See Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, p. 205.

ongoing attentiveness to deepening our current conception of under-standing is perhaps the most enduring and important dimension of 'enlightenment'.[32] Here we come to the final parallel between Gadamer's account of aesthetic and spiritual experience. Intense aesthetic and spiritual experience may be termed as boundary or limit experiences.

One of the arguments that Gadamer uses against the subjective account of aesthetic experience is that art can often address us contrary to our interests and expectations. In this respect, profound aesthetic experience reveals what he terms the 'negativity' of deep and formative experience. Expectations are challenged. Yet the fact of coming up against provocations to the normal or customary is not the significant point. It is rather that these countering experiences expose our short-sightedness with regard to what we thought we had understood. With the emergence of a new way of looking at things comes a transcendent awareness of the withheld, that is, a consciousness of what we have failed to understand in what we thought we understood and what we have, as a consequence, yet to understand. This awareness Gadamer describes as a 'religious experience':

> Insight is more than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive…learning through suffering… What a man has to learn through suffering (the nega-tivity of experience) is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight…[33]

The term 'religious' is not used in a doctrinal sense. It is deployed in precisely the sense of the religious described above, namely, that aware-ness which human beings have of being bound to and sustained by something much larger themselves. That something is not necessarily conceived as a deity but more as the transcendent aspects of history, language and culture upon which the existence of human beings depend. This insight into the excess or, in other words, the withheld that sustains our being is common to the account which philosophical hermeneutics gives of both aesthetic and spiritual experience. In turn, this reveals what Gadamer means by that epistemologically notorious phrase 'the truth-claim' of art. The truth of art, religious or otherwise, does not lie in the verisimilitude of any depiction or in any verifiable correspondence between the world and how it is pictured. Its truth (in the sense of what an artwork authentically *does*) lies in its ability to turn us towards

32. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, p. 205.
33. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 357.

unexpected horizons of meaning along with the promise of more to be revealed from within what remains presently withheld from our understanding. In doing this the true artwork reveals the 'truth' of our predicament. Of course, the artwork also reveals an aspect of its subject matter but in so doing it also reveals the limitations of our previous, perhaps all too human, understanding. In this respect it reveals how human understanding stands on, is nurtured and is always potentially transformable by what lies beyond it, i.e. the infinite possibilities for meaning within the horizons of language. The ability of the true artwork to disrupt our understanding reveals what might even be described as the weak and perhaps sinful side of human existence, namely the tendency to become closed off to the transcendent horizons of meaning beyond us. In conclusion, we claim that the substantial value of philosophical herme-neutics and its approach to aesthetic experience is not that it provides a 'theory of art' but that it demonstrates precisely how our experience of art constantly and tirelessly reveals and returns us to the complex and multi-layered spiritual dimension of our very human existence.[34]

34.   The reader may refer to other publications in which I discuss philosophical hermeneutics, aesthetics and religion. These include: 'Twentieth Century Herme-neutics', in D. Moran (ed.), *Twentieth Century Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 693-736; 'Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Transcendence', in Martin O'Kane (ed.), *Imaging the Bible: An Introduction to Biblical Art* (London: SPCK, 2008), pp. 191-211; *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); 'Between the Human and the Divine: On the Question of the In-Between', in A. Wiercinsk (ed.), *Between the Human and the Divine: Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2002), pp. 88-97; 'Signs of Faith: Gadamer on Authenticity, Art and Religion', in S. Kemal (ed.), *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 66-94 and 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', in Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (eds.), *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3-30.

2

FRAMING THE WORD:
COMMENTARY, CONTEXT, AND COMPOSITION

John Harvey

1. *Introduction*

'Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who in this land is fairest of all?' When it answered, the vain Queen was contented, because she knew the mirror could speak nothing but the truth.[1] No other mirror possesses the same obligation or capacity. Outside the Grimm brothers' tale, mirrors return our likeness with a faulty honesty at best—flattened, dimmed, and inverted. In the Graeco-Roman world, it was an even less reliable device, consisting merely of a convex metal disk that reflected light off its highly polished surface. It is to the manifest imperfections of the mirror that the apostle Paul refers: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly' (1 Cor. 13.12). The reflection is an enigma—partial and unclear. Paul's realization is itself a reflection upon the epistemological endeavour: this side of heaven, we cannot see things as they really are. And this is as true for the study of artworks as it is of the Bible and its interpretation.

A mirror is a mediator that shows only a version of the true. Likewise, interpreters of art, such as art historians, museum curators, artists, and (now) biblical scholars and theologians, mediate meaning, but, in so doing, proffer unavoidably selective, limited, and sometimes prejudicial attributions of significance. Their interpretation is incomplete in another sense. For the meaning and the spectator's experience of an artwork is in a measure also mediated by the context of its display. This is why seeing an artwork 'on the wall' of a gallery ('face to face', as it were) is a qualitatively and significantly different experience to seeing it reproduced in a book—where it is often drastically reduced in scale, compressed into two

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1. J. and W. Grimm, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (trans. L.L. Weedon; London: Ernest Nister, 1898), p. 2.

dimensions, devoid of surface qualities (like a reflection), and imperfectly rendered in other ways. The artwork, too, contributes and mediates meaning: it refracts the represented subject through the medium of the artist's intent and subjective bias, the materials of the artwork's manufacture, the way it is displayed, and the conventions and mechanics of representation, to present (like the mirror) a version of the true.

Interpretation is, thus, an approximation of meaning based upon the confluence of several modes of mediation. This chapter looks at examples of three: *commentary*, *context*, and *composition*. *Commentary* deals with ways in which Evangelicals converted biblical art into sermons; *context* examines how the location and presentation of biblical art conditions both its relationship to other types of art and the spectator's response; and *composition* discusses the function of pictorial organization in the mediation of biblical narrative. Together, they represent complementary approaches to 'framing' the biblical text and art: in the first instance, of turning works of art into words about art; in the second, of surrounding art with words and within walls; and in the third, of arranging the word as art.

2. Commentary: The Homiletic Icon

Protestant Evangelical ministers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries adapted Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian art as a basis for preaching. This section examines the ways in which the minister acted as the intermediary between the artworks and their congregation, interpreting images (like a talking mirror) in spiritual and moral terms in order to serve as religious exemplars and edifying illustrations. In so doing, I want to draw attention to two theories, or methods, of exegesis which elucidate not only the historical interaction between Evangelicalism and art, but also the spectator's response to artworks in a gallery and church. These theories, known as typology and reception, are applicable to the study of both the Bible and art.

Typology, in the biblical context, is an interpretative strategy that establishes couplings and continuities between the Old and New Testaments by reconciling what are called types and antitypes. A type is a person, thing, or event in the Old Testament that stands as an example of a person, thing, or event in the New Testament. For instance, the scapegoat mentioned in Leviticus 16, which the high priests drove into the wilderness with the sins of Israel on its head, is, in Christian theology, a symbolic prefiguration of Christ bearing upon his own head the sins of humanity at the crucifixion (Jn 1.29; Heb. 9.11–10.13). The

scapegoat is the type (or the shadow), while Christ is the antitype (or the real). The Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) made two paintings of a goat. The smaller version of *The Scapegoat* (1854–55), in the collection of Manchester Art Gallery, shows a highly realistic rendering of an animal which he began in situ, on the salt plains of the Dead Sea, and finished at his studio in the east end of London (fig. 1).

Figure 1. William Holman Hunt, *The Scapegoat* (1854–55),
Manchester Art Gallery

Hunt makes a connection between his representation of a specific goat, painted in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the concept of the scapegoat in Old Testament history, principally through the painting's title. In the larger version of the painting, at the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool, the artist took a belt-and-braces approach to secure the association. In addition to the title, he had inscribed upon the frame two verses which press home the typological analogue of the scapegoat and Christ: 'And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness' (Lev. 16.22); and 'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted' (Isa. 53.4). The Jewishness of the theme is further underscored by two emblems: the menorah and the seven stars of David. These ancillary textual and visual

references serve to compensate for the picture's inability to make the connection explicit on its own. (This limitation is shared by other religious pictures whose subject is not obviously or unambiguously biblical.) The frame is a device that both contains and forms its most immediate context, and through which we view the picture both literally and, I shall argue, metaphorically. The frame of *The Scapegoat* mediates the subject and directs our level of perception so that we comprehend the picture of a goat in a landscape, not as an example of the genre of animal painting principally, but more importantly, as a historical and a specifically biblical work.

Another mode of transformation from a mundane to a biblical subject, again involving a fated animal in the wilderness, is exemplified by Edwin Landseer's (1802–73) *The Desert* (1849), which is also in the collection of Manchester Art Gallery. In this example, neither the picture's title nor its frame mediates the biblical allusion. The elevation of subject occurs, rather, when we encounter the image, or something very much like it, in an appropriated form; and, like Hunt's painting of a goat, with the addition of a biblical text and motif. The appropriated form is the familiar emblem of Lyle's Golden Syrup, which refers to the incident when Samson returns to a lion he had killed previously, and notices that a swarm of bees had formed a honeycomb in the carcass (Judg. 14.5-18). Landseer's painting and Lyle's emblem have a typological relationship, one that is both biblical and visual. Visual typology is a systematic classification of representational types that have characteristics or traits in common. The painting (representing the type) resembles and foreshadows Lyle's emblem (the antitype), and for this reason they can be classified together. As in biblical typology, the connection between the two images, once established, is difficult to undo. Once the—albeit conjectural—association between the painting and the emblem has been grasped, the spectator's response to the former, ostensibly portraying any dead lion in a desert, will thereafter be suffused with biblical overtones.

The study of how spectators respond to artworks, how their response may change, and the meanings and significance images may have for them, is the subject of reception theory. It is a theory of interpretation that emphasizes the spectator's response to an artwork, or a reader's reaction to a literary text, such as the Bible, rather than the artist's or writer's intent. Baldly speaking, the theory proposes that an artwork is not passively or straightforwardly assimilated by the spectator. Rather, they see the artwork through, metaphorically speaking, a mediating or interpretive frame. On it is inscribed: *commentary* (what the spectator has heard or read about the images); *cognizance* (their exposure to and aware-

ness of other images); *culture* (their beliefs, presuppositions, values, class, gender, and ethnicity); and *context* (where and under what conditions the artwork is viewed). In essence, the meaning of an artwork is relative and contingent.

The application of reception theory to the study of Pre-Raphaelite painting and Evangelical preaching involves two mediating frames: that through which the preacher saw the artwork, and that through which the spectator sees both the artwork and the preacher's mediating frame. Important though this is, it is only the plumbing. We need to turn on the tap and to turn from theory to history.

British Evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century was predominantly Calvinistic in its theology. The Nonconformist or Free Churches were conspicuously so in regard to art. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), the Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–64) wrote that paintings and sculptures representing biblical events could be legitimately employed as a means of religious education. This was with the proviso that they were neither set up in churches and worshipped nor used as a substitute for preaching and the sacraments. Art, Calvin believed, was of value as a didactic tool but only when used in subservience to the written and spoken word of Scripture.[2] It was in this spirit of conditional acceptance that Protestant Evangelicals pressed high art into the service of preaching and teaching. Images were intended to be secondary to and dependent upon the authority of the Bible, their message was to be always construed according to an understanding of Scripture, and their value was deemed to be in proportion to their faithfulness to God's word. The Bible was, in effect, the mediating frame through which Evangelicals saw artworks. For this reason, artworks and other images reproduced in the printed literature of Evangelicalism were rarely seen without the appendage of a biblical verse or reference, or a preacher's interpretive commentary.[3]

This is particularly evident in the way in which high art was pressed into the service of preaching. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of Evangelical ministers adapted famous paintings to serve as sermon illustrations. Due to the religious and moralizing content of Pre-Raphaelite painting and the Victorian narrative genre, they were easily adapted to this purpose. The work of G.F. Watts

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), I, pp. 120-21.

3. A broader discussion of this topic is included in John Harvey, *Image of the Invisible: The Visualization of Religion in the Nonconformist Religion* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

(1817–1904), Holman Hunt and John Martin (1789–1854), among others, were frequently conscripted. In 1885, the Revd David Davies delivered a series of sermons at Regent's Park Baptist Chapel, London, illustrated by works of fine art. The addresses were published as *Sacred Themes and Famous Paintings* (1885). In keeping with Calvinist doctrine, reproductions of the paintings were not brought into the chapel, but neither were they printed in *Sacred Themes*. However, the paintings he chose as the basis for the sermons, having been popularized in the form of photogravures, would have been familiar to many in the congregation. The paintings were mediated conceptually: translated from an image into a spoken and written text, thus into the same medium as the scriptures, and exegeted in the manner of a biblical passage. For his purposes, the objectness of the painting (that is, its attributes of style, form, material, and dimensions) and its habitual context of display (in a gallery or museum) were immaterial in both senses of the word.

The service that art could render to Christian teaching, Davies believed, was as an aid to a clearer understanding of `the significance of Scripture narrative or truth'.[4] Davies, like many Evangelicals of his day, favoured the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites whom he considered to have redeemed Christian art from the lies and improprieties perpetrated in the works of the Italian artists, both before and after Raphael. Hunt's *The Shadow of Death* (1869–73) in the collection of Manchester Art Gallery, in particular, was commended for its 'reverent fidelity to the recorded fact of our Lord's life', for focusing the spectator's 'vision on Christ [rather than on the Virgin Mary, whose back is turned to the spectator]…and upon the cross', and for its adoption of a 'pure symbolism'[5] (fig. 2). That is to say, the divinity and work of Christ had been conveyed by means of natural rather than contrived devices. In traditional Christian art, a nimbus or halo designating Christ's divinity was represented by the artifice of a golden disk or luminous circle. In *The Shadow of Death*, a nimbus is intimated by the placing of the arch of a window behind Christ's head. Similarly, the premonitory emblem of the crucifixion is formed by natural means: its shape is created by the shadow of Christ's outstretched arms cast on to the rear wall of the workshop.

The painting's popularity with preachers was also due to its typological character. The subject is itself a representation of prefiguration. It shows both the shadow and the real, metaphorically and literally. However,

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4. David Davies, *Sacred Themes and Famous Paintings* (London: Alexander & Shepherd, 1885), p. 7.
5. Davies, *Sacred Themes*, p. 39.

here, unlike in biblical typology, it is the substance or the antitype, that is, Christ, which casts the shadow. The usefulness of such works of fine art could be enhanced, Davies said, by 'the co-operation of the Christian minister'.[6] In the context of his sermons, this was expressed as a spoken exegesis of each painting's content, and took the form either of constructing a narrative around its figures and accessories or else of reading into the painting scriptural principles and ethical lessons. For the congregation and readership, the sermons provided a mediating frame—one which constrained the spectator to view the work within the boundaries of a decidedly Evangelical Christology and utility, and not in any other way.
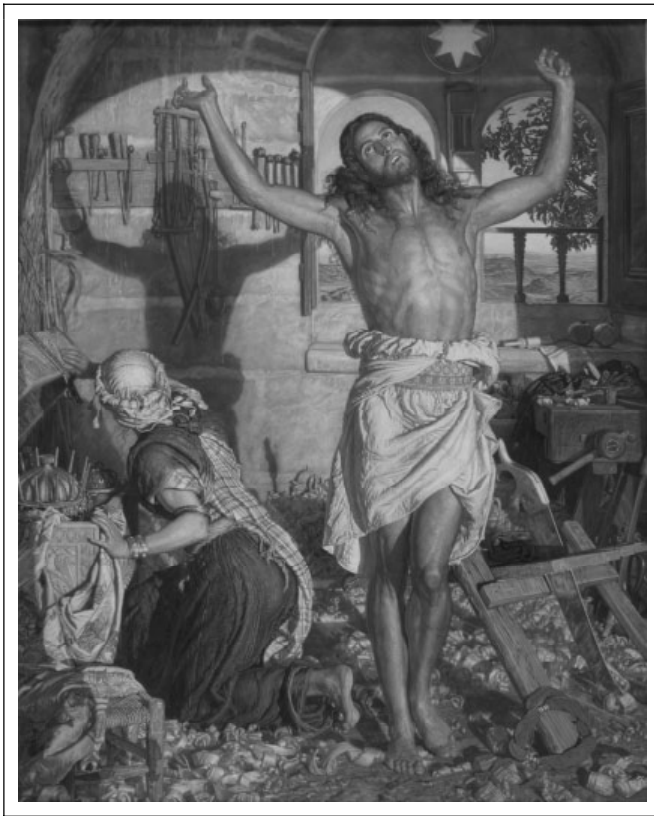
Figure 2. William Holman Hunt, *The Shadow of Death* (1869–73),
Manchester Art Gallery

6. Davies, *Sacred Themes*, p. viii.

Hunt's *The Light of the World* (c. 1852), a small version of which presently hangs next to *The Shadow of Death* in the Manchester Art Gallery, was among the paintings most often chosen as the basis of sermonic interpretation. Its popularity was due, in part, to the eminent Victorian art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), who had provided preachers with an oft-quoted typological decoding of its themes and incidents. Following in this vein, the Rev. James Burns commented that the door was a type of entrance to the heart, and that it appeared not to have been opened for a long time, which signified the mystery of sin— the heart shut up against goodness and Christ. The weeds that choked the door was a visual symbol of 'neglect', reminding the spectator 'of the law which holds in the things of the soul as well as the things of nature'. The absence of a handle on the door taught that it could be opened only from the inside (an observation designed to invoke a personal spiritual response to Christ's imprecations).[7]

Clearly, there was as much occasion for 'reading in' as for 'reading out' meaning from such paintings. Burns readily acknowledged the criticism that in such cases the interpreter 'puts more into the work than the author meant to convey'. He nevertheless believed that it 'in no way invalidates the truth of the interpretation. In the work of those who see visions there is always more in the vision than they understand, and all the prophets speak better than they know'.[8] Another minister, Robert Downes, had written, similarly, in 1895, emphasizing that the perceived meaning was proportional to the spiritual stature of the spectator: 'a picture flashes out a message which all may read, though he who is greatest will see most on the canvas'.[9] In Downes's ill-considered response theory, excess of message was merely proof of an elevated spiritual sensibility.

Such flights of exegetical fancy had been the blight of biblical typology since the middle ages. Reading the scriptures in this way depended merely upon a facility to discern expedient analogies and patterns (either intended or imagined), which were often applied in the absence of any other delimiting principle of correspondence. This analogical method of sermonic interpretation was used to frame not just bona fide Christian art but any representation with a vaguely spiritual or moralizing content. Secular artworks were baptized with biblical significance, as demon-

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7. James Burns, *Sermons in Art by the Great Masters* (London: Duckworth, 1908), pp. 85-88.

8. Burns, *Sermons in Art*, p. 5.

9. Robert Downes, *Pure Pleasures* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1895), p. 139.

strated with tiresome regularity in relation to Watts's *Hope* (1886). In this allegorical painting Hope is figured as a blind lyrist seated upon a globe. She plays the instrument's one unbroken string. Her head is bowed as she strains to hear its barely audible sound. The image's capacity to accommodate a variety of interpretations derives from its emblematic character and the generality of the painting's title. Consequently, one preacher confidently pronounced: 'The unbroken string is Christ. He is the world's hope. Through Him the world will recover its lost heritage'.[10] Watts intended a less pronounced optimism, which was humanist rather than specifically Christian. The general mood of the painting is forlorn; it is a picture of despondency rather than of hope.

The concepts of hope and Christian perseverance were, likewise, emblematized by a hermeneutic transfiguration of the *Laocoön*. The sculpture was discovered in Rome in 1506 and depicts an event described in Virgil's (70–19 BCE) *Aeneid* (c. 29–19 BCE). The story conveyed by the sculpture is of Laocoön, the Trojan hero and priest of Apollo, and his sons vainly resisting strangulation by the serpent that encoils them. Christianized, its meaning became: 'Life is so encoiled, and the conflict is long protracted, only to end, however, under Christian courage, in conquest for parent and child'.[11] The appropriation of secular art in these ways is not dissimilar to Lyle's adaptation of Landseer's lion. The text placed below the lion on the can of syrup served to transform and emblematize the image. Like the captions on the frame of Hunt's *The Scapegoat*, the biblical reference below the lion directs the level of our perception beyond the genre of animal painting to establish an association with the Samson story, which is endorsed pictorially by the addition of a signifier for bees. However, in the case of the *Laocoön*, the supplementary text is not inscribed upon the artwork, but was spoken and written about.

This adaptive practice not only constituted an Evangelical assimilation and colonization of secular art but also reflected a broadening of the concepts of religious art and biblical art. The idea that Christian art could be conceived other than in the mould of traditional religious iconography and biblical subject matter was also being pursued very deliberately in mid-nineteenth-century painting. The two most notable examples, painted in the same decade, are *Work* (1852–65) by the Pre-Raphaelite Ford Madox Brown (1821–93) (fig. 3) and *The Angelus* (1857–59) by the French Realist Jean François Millet (1814–75).

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10. Evan Williams, 'Picture Talks to Boys and Girls: "Hope", by G.F. Watts', *Baptist Record* 3.28 (1915), p. 126.

11. Evan Williams, 'The Lacuna of Life', *Baptist Record* 14.8 (1928), p. 18.

The former depicts a group of labouring navvies, the latter two peasants praying at the close of their labour. Both paintings were considered to be among the most religious artworks produced in the nineteenth century.

Figure 3. Ford Madox Brown, *Work* (1852–65),
Manchester Art Gallery

Today we may be incredulous that *Work* can be construed as religious to any degree. This is because the mediating frame through which we see the painting is not the same as that through which mid-nineteenth-century spectators perceived it. In the absence of this framework, the picture's meaning may remain, for us, defiantly mundane. We may feel more sympathetic to assertions made about *The Angelus*. It does, after all, possess an evident religious subject: not a biblical scene, but a scene of peasant piety. However, in the late nineteenth century, the spiritual dimensions of the painting were interpreted as running far deeper, and to be resonant with biblical allusions too.

Henry Wallis, writing in *The Times* in 1875, said of *The Angelus*: 'For expression of devotion equally genuine, we must go back to the works of the early Italian masters'.[12] The interpretive frame through which Wallis viewed the work comprised a typological and a socio-political outlook.

12.   Henry Wallis, 'The Late M. Millet', *The Times* (23 Jan. 1875), p. 12.

The juxtaposition of worship and peasant labour created many layers of possible meaning, providing Evangelicals with a pliable pictorial text capable of sustaining a variety of homiletic readings. By applying a typological approach, preachers exegeted the covert religious significance and applied its spiritual lessons to the lives of their readers. The essence of the painting, Henry Naegely interpreted, was its representation 'of those primitive emotions which link us with nature, and with humanity, and with God'. In respect to nature, the painting evoked for him a sense of man's primal origins, his kinship with the soil, and his mortality, echoing the biblical pronouncement, 'for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return', which describes humankind's destiny to struggle with the anathematized and recalcitrant ground (Gen. 3.19).[13] However, there is nothing in the painting's denoted significance to suggest the Genesis allusion. One could conjecture that, for Naegely, the reference was evoked by an association of the man and woman with Adam and Eve; in other words, he conceived of the peasants as antitypes of the biblical characters, while the earth on which they stand acquires the connotation of fallenness by a typological relation to the blighted ground after the Fall. For James Burns, the painting was also a visualization of man's religious nature and his dependence on God: the man and woman exemplify a simple and trusting faith. He also read the juxtaposition of labour and piety as signifying the consecration of toil.

Like *The Angelus*, Brown's *Work* was read as a profoundly religious painting, but not by virtue of traditional Christian subject matter or symbolism. As in the case of the final version of Hunt's *The Scapegoat*, it is the picture's frame that helps to summon the biblical association. Those portions of the biblical text included in Brown's quotation are italicized in the following verses: '*Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings*; he shall not stand before mean men' (Prov. 22.29); '*Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail day and night*' (2 Thess. 3.8); '*I must work* the works of him that sent me *while it is day: [for] the night cometh, when no man can work*' (Jn 9.4); '*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread*, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return' (Gen. 3.19). The texts extol the virtues as well as the concomitant drudgery of work, while the painting exemplifies work in both these generalized senses.

In contrast to *The Scapegoat*, *Work* does not obviously illustrate a biblical type. Nor do the navvies appear to connote, like the peasants in

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13.   Henry Naegely, *J.F. Millet and Rustic Art* (London: Elliot Stock, 1898), p. 74.

The Angelus, antitypes for biblical characters. So, in what sense can we speak of *Work* as a biblical painting and of these labourers as religious characters? The concept of work as a spiritual endeavour was closely allied to the Reformation emphasis on the biblical idea of vocation, in the original theological sense of a person's work being a divine calling. The Rev. Evan Williams applied the lessons of *The Angelus* to the working class, interpreting the painting's association of work and worship in terms of the union of sacred and mundane, thereby dignifying common people and common toil: 'The man and woman are serving God by digging potatoes as much as the priest who conducts the service in the distant church'.[14] This correspondence between labourer and religious officiary restated Martin Luther's (1483–1546) contention against, what he considered to be, the erroneous mediaeval distinction between clergy and laity: 'A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops'.[15] Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) advocated the ennoblement of labour and labourers and their identification with holy persons in *Past and Present* (1843). However, Carlyle saw work not in the Protestant sense of purposeful effort sanctified by faith, but rather as an alternative religion, by which a man could purify himself of base desires, fulfil his earthly destiny, and rise to heroic stature and saintliness. This ethic of redemption through labour was visualized by *Work*.

Like *The Angelus*, *Work* was commonly understood as a profoundly religious painting not by virtue of traditional Christian subject matter or symbolism but, as John Linton asserted in 1916, because, like many other examples of recent religious painting, it revealed 'the inner spiritual significance of common things and common happenings'.[16] In contrast to Millet, Brown exemplified the virtues of labour not in the form of the humble peasant type but in the depiction of navvies (navigators), here represented (as in many other Victorian paintings) as muscular and stalwart figures. The navvy was the urban counterpart of the rural peasant to whom Millet had imputed nobility, a figure of dignity raised to a position of social equality with the philosopher and the intellectual, the martyr and the saint. The labourer had thus become a religious archetype, albeit religion, as Herbert Furst described it, in the 'garb of budding socialism'.[17] The navvy stands upright, his legs straight and astride, with the resolute

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14.   Evan Williams, 'Picture Talks to Boys and Girls: "The Angelus", by J.F. Millet', *Baptist Record* 3.29 (1915), p. 14.

15.   Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), p. 17.

16.   John Linton, *The Cross in Modern Art* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1916), p. 6.

17.   Herbert Furst, 'Christian Art Now', *Apollo* 28 (1938), pp. 277-81 (279).

expression and arrogant strength of Michelangelo's (1475–1564) *David* (1501–1504). Like *David*, Brown's navvy is also an ideal conception of manliness, perfect in surface and proportion, his skin and clothes unsullied by the earth and grime of his occupation. The overshirt he wears shines brightly in the sunlight like the white robes of the redeemed. (In the Carlylean theology of work this is precisely what labourers were.)

The practice of sermonizing art depended for its continuance on a steady stream of Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian painting with a religious or moralizing content. The arrival of European Modernism in Britain during the first decades of the twentieth century was the undoing of both preaching and painting in this respect. Modernism advocated the emancipation of art from any ulterior purpose, whether moral, political, or religious. Art's chief end was no longer as an instrument for affecting ethical and spiritual improvement, but rather as an object of disinterested contemplation, to be apprehended by feeling in response to form. Since Evangelicals were enamoured of only those aspects of art that overlapped with their interests, and since preachers could no longer turn pictures into words and words out of pictures, they had no further use for art.

2. Context: 'Chambers of his imagery'

The artworks described in the preachers' discourses had to be visualized by the congregation and readers as pictures in their mind's eye in either the chapel or the home. Thus, the artworks were 'seen' outside of their habitual situation in galleries and churches, divorced from other artworks and the paraphernalia of worship. In the nineteenth century, the decontextualization of artworks was also furthered through the agency of mechanical reproduction. Processes such as steel-plate engraving and photogravure enabled artworks to transcend both their embodiment as unique artefacts made in a specific medium and the restriction of exhibition. For example, by means of engraving, Hunt's *The Light of World* was mass produced, reduced in size, translated into black-and-white and a different medium, reframed, and placed against the backdrop of domesticity or in ecclesiastical settings other than those in which two of the original versions were to be found.

The relationship between an artwork, its location, and the spectator's experience of the artwork in that location can be expressed using three interconnecting terms: *situation*, *reception*, and *perception*. Here, *situation* denotes the context in which the artwork is experienced: the building or enclosure in which it is installed; the function or identity of the building; the height at which the artwork is hung; its distance from the observer;

the space and the other artefacts that surround it; the illumination under which it is seen; and the acoustics and temperature of the environment. *Reception* describes how the spectator takes the artwork to themselves: the way in which they assimilate and appropriate it perceptually, intellectually, and emotionally. There are different intensities and modes of reception.[18] For instance, a person may view the artwork either concentratedly or half-heartedly; either focally or peripherally; and with either commitment or indifference. Moreover, a spectator may engage the artwork either singularly (that is, in isolation) or in the company of other artworks; and either singularly (in the sense of, once only) or repeatedly. *Perception* is the act of seeing that leads to understanding. Perception, in this sense, is to looking what listening is to hearing: a disciplined and determined act. It can occur only when the spectator's reception is concentrated and committed. But perception need not be fixed or absolute. For example, a spectator's first encounter with an artwork (singular) will be significantly different to their subsequent encounters (repeated). Perception is also changed by knowledge and commentary. Here, knowledge, which may be mediated through commentary, refers to information about works of art and how art works. It may also denote the spectator's familiarity with the background related to an artwork.

In order to appreciate how knowledge changes perception, look at figure 4: this is perception. The illustration shows a photograph, taken in November 2005, of a broken marble tile of the type used to floor the concourse of shopping centres and railway stations: this is knowledge. Now observe how your perception of the photograph alters in the light of this additional knowledge: the tile lies in Lower Manhattan, New York, in the basement of the former World Trade Centre Metro station. It is one of the few remains of the buildings still in place and in use which bear the scars of the atrocity on 11 September 2001. This supplementary, situational knowledge transforms perception. What seemed ordinary is made extraordinary; the tile becomes a relic—with all the connotations of something that has survived when the rest has been destroyed, and of something preserved as a remembrancer for the dead. The formerly anonymous object of disinterested attention is suddenly inundated with human, historical, and heroic significance. The innocent eye has given ground to the informed eye.

18. For a background to reception theory in relation to the visual arts, see Peter U. Hohendahl, 'Introduction to Reception Aesthetics', *New German Critique* 10 (1977), pp. 29-63; Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (trans. Michael Shaw; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

Figure 4. *Broken Floor Tile*

Biblical art has many 'situations'. It can be seen in, for example, a gallery, a church, a home, or at the roadside. Galleries are secular environments. Here, 'secular' is used not as a pejorative but in order to denote the essentially non-religious nature of a gallery in contrast to an ecclesiastical context. But this distinction has not always existed. 'Gallery' is foremost an architectural term, which describes a long passage or room. In the context of art, the term refers to a room or series of rooms where artworks are exhibited. There is one reference in the Bible to a gallery in this latter sense (Ezek. 8.12). 'A room of pictures' is the Revised Standard Bible's translation of the Hebrew *behadre maschito*. In the King James (Authorized) Version, the phrase is rendered 'chambers of his imagery'. In the sixteenth century, the word 'imagery', as Calvin noted, was also translated to signify 'picture'. Thus, the conception of the chambers of imagery was one of a room full of pictures.[19]

19. John Calvin, *Ezekiel I: Chapters 1–12* (trans. D. Foxgrover and D. Martin; Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries, 18; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 206.

The 'gallery' in the biblical context was therefore a deeply religious setting (albeit, from the perspective of Ezekiel, profanely so). In a vision, God says to Ezekiel: 'Son of man, hast thou seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in his chambers of imagery?' What the elders did was to assemble and practise rites of an idolatrous character using imagery consisting of symbolic representations of beasts, reptiles, and nameless 'detestable things' (Ezek. 7.20; 37.23). The sin of the elders, quite apart from their idolatry, was manifest in a covetous acquisition of artworks, pride in their cultivated taste (their appreciation and refined sensibilities), and a damnable secretiveness—a selfish refusal to share the works with others.[20] Our contemporary concept of an art gallery derives from this biblical model, but only in part. In contrast, today's public collections are characterized by humility, responsibility, and magnanimity, expressed in the provision of an open access to artworks, gallery education, and a policy of broadening inclusivity. Ezekiel 8.12 is the only place in the Bible where the word 'imagery' is used. Significantly, it occurs in a diatribe against idolatry. Calvin, in his commentary on Ezekiel, used the text (not unsurprisingly) as a pretext to lampoon papist worship of images. He conceived of the chamber as being like a small private chapel in which the elders of Israel hid images because, he interpreted, they considered such pictures to be the mark of the greatest and rarest prudence.[21] This comment may also have been intended as a gibe at the conspicuous acquisitiveness of covetous cardinals and of his contemporary, Pope Julius II (1443–1513), whose substantial collection of artworks was to become the basis of the Vatican Museum.[22]

20.   Similarly, our contemporary concept of the museum has a religious origin. The etymology of the word 'museum' derives from the Latin *museum*, which in turn derives from the Greek *mouseion*, a place or temple dedicated to the Muses—the nine archaic goddesses of Greek mythology.

21.   Calvin, *Ezekiel I*, p. 206.

22.   Popes were not the only proprietors of art. Prominent Protestants, such as Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), collected for the nation works by leading Renaissance artists such as Mantegna (1431–1506), Raphael (1483–1520), and Titian (1485–1576) and, like many cultured Puritans, surrounded himself with works of art. So, at the same time as the iconoclasts invaded churches and despoiled paintings and sculptures believed to nurture superstition and idolatry, biblical art of a less problematic nature lined the walls of their private apartments. Among the less problematic works were those which Calvin classified as 'historic', in so much as they depicted scenes of biblical stories, people, and events. He conceded, somewhat reluctantly, that they were fit to serve as a pictorial backdrop or illustration to preaching or teaching on the proviso that they were not set up in a church. The upshot of iconoclasm, on the one hand, and collecting, on the other, was the simultaneous de-ecclesiasticization and domestication of biblical art. The

Biblical artworks operate in two spheres simultaneously: the world of the Bible, religion, and worship on the one hand, and the world of art, scholarship, and aesthetic contemplation on the other. There are times when these contexts, affiliations, and operations need to be differentiated in order to be understood. Galleries and churches are wholly different environments. Each in their distinct ways transforms the experience of seeing artworks and permits the spectator to focus on particular aspects of their form and function. Each represents the artwork's outlying frame, as it were: the broader surround that contains and protects it, and, like the immediate frame of Hunt's *The Scapegoat* and Brown's *Work*, contributes significance and understanding to the artwork.

Churches are not, principally, contexts for exhibition and art-historical rumination, although they can be that too. They permit the spectator to perceive the biblical artwork in action: bearing silent witness to the history, people, events and doctrines of faith, while providing consolation, hope, and an eternal perspective. Galleries, for their part, aim to present biblical artworks in a manner that is governed by a curatorial and art-historical rationale, rather than by any religious utility. In a bid to conserve artworks and make them accessible, the exhibition space maintains a steady temperature, and provides optimum illumination and appropriate viewing distances. The artworks are afforded perceptual breathing space—set against a comparatively neutral area of the gallery wall—and receive the spectator's undivided attention. Vistas and walkways designedly beckon the spectator forward, unhindered, towards a prospect which they see or recognize, at first, only at a distance. As such, their experience of artworks in galleries is often kinetic, telescopic, and changing, sometimes dramatically, as they close in on the object of their attention. And, as the spectators study it, they become aware of other artworks, in the distance or on the periphery of their vision, courting their attention. These dynamics are wholly absent when artworks are seen reproduced in a printed publication.[23]

shift represented the removal of biblical art from the sphere of the public and communal into that of the private and individual (Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 133).

23. For a background to the theory and discussions about museology, see, for example, Philipp Blom, *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting* (New York: Overlook, 2003); John F. Falk, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Association of State and Local History Book Series; Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2000); and Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 1996).
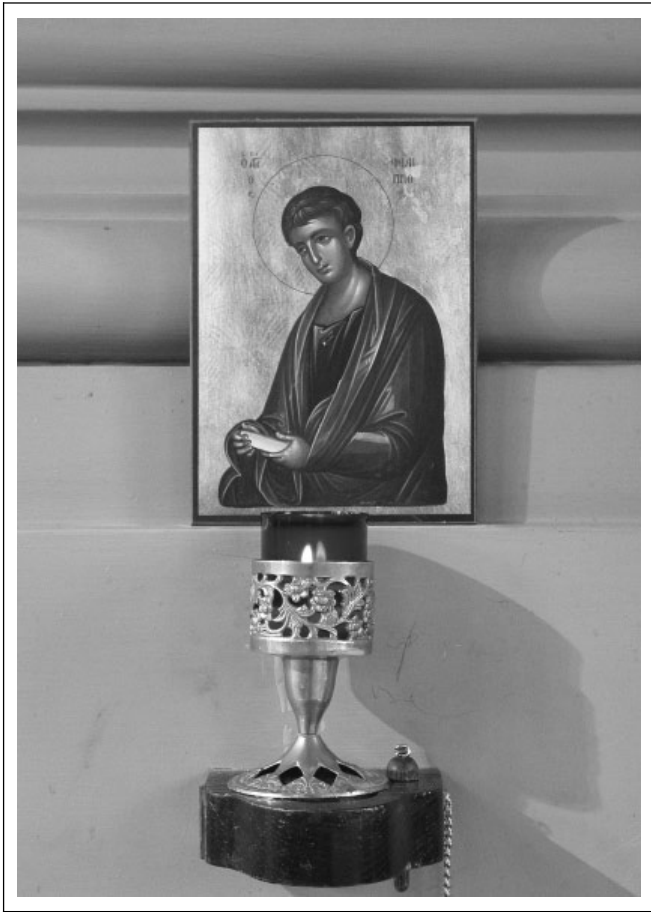
Figure 5. Icon of St Philip, twentieth century,
Birmingham Cathedral

The gallery enables the spectator to engage a biblical artwork—
unplugged from the socket of the sacred, and without regard for either
reverence or the claims of faith. In the context of a church, the specta-
tor's cogitations upon an artwork may not necessarily be inspired by its
aesthetic attributes and relation to art-historical tradition or by the
rationale governing its display. Indeed, the spectator may not consciously
engage the artwork as either art or the product of work. Rather, the
encounter focuses more on what the object does than on what it is—on
its capacity to mediate prayer, bring to mind and heart the represented
subject, and provide a tangible interface between the finite and the
infinite. In these respects, an artwork frequently does not act alone. It

may be only one very small but integral component of a more complex whole. For example, in Birmingham Cathedral, at the time of writing, a small icon of Philip, its patron saint, is placed in the ledge of a supporting column (fig. 5).

Unlike artworks on gallery walls, it is not dignified by a place of prominence. Its operations are humble and discreet. The artefact seeks to draw attention not to itself but to the person depicted thereby. The artefact is, in fact, an inexpensive reproduction of a painted icon, divested of the aura of an original that we associate with artworks in galleries and museums.[24] Below the icon burns the eternal flame—a visible symbol of, variously, Christ as the light of the world, the light of life and hope, and (metaphorically) the fragility of life itself. Beneath that are a pricket stand and votive candles—the enduring vestige of those who stood, looked, prayed, and illumined. As the spectator pans back and out, this group of objects becomes a minor detail lost among arrangements of flowers, plaques for the dead, stained glass windows, ranks of golden organ pipes, fluted columns, lectern, pulpit, pews, altar rail, emblematic symbols, and sacramental vessels.

A church is a public space for intensely private acts of contrition and absolution, praise and pardon; it is a domain wherein the issues of life and death, initiation and union, prevail. When removed from a church and placed in a gallery, an artwork inevitably loses not only its architectural context and relationship to other artefacts of liturgy and worship but also its native 'atmosphere'—the varying conditions of light that alter the complexion of the painting considerably and constantly, as well as the acoustic ambience caused by the church's spaciousness and, during services of worship, by the sound of prayer, preaching, reading, and music. These situational conditions form part of the artwork's surrounding 'frame' and inform the spectator's visual experience significantly.

Hunt's *The Light of the World*, perhaps the most famous biblical painting, and certainly the most celebrated Protestant artwork, of the nineteenth century, presents a unique case study of the ways in which the condition and context of an artwork influences the spectator's perception and reception. Hunt painted three versions of the subject: one is installed in a chapel, another in a cathedral, and a third in a gallery. They differ only in respect to size and certain representational details. The first, painted in 1851–53, hangs in a side chapel at Keble College Chapel,

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24. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zorn; London: Pimlico Books, 1999), pp. 211-44.

Oxford. The picture is approximately four feet high and positioned behind the communion altar, enabling spectators to view the painting as an artwork in its own right or in relation to the eucharistic setting. As they approach the altar to encounter the invisible presence of Christ in the bread and wine, they engage Christ visibly simultaneously. Faith and sight are conjoined.

A second version of *The Light of the World*, painted over fifty years later, hangs in the north transept of St Paul's Cathedral, London. In this context, the painting is not directly associated with a specific religious rite, although votive candles are sometimes placed beneath or near it. Here, Christ is pictorially 'present' to a subtly and significantly different degree than in Keble College Chapel. It is not that the artist has painted Christ any more realistically, except in one respect—he is rendered life-size. Christ stands before the spectator on the threshold of their world, on their scale and in their image, a principle at the heart of incarnational theology.

Another version, painted alongside and probably as a preliminary study for the Keble version, is held at the Manchester Art Gallery. It is roughly half the scale of the Keble version and about the same dimensions as a medium-sized icon. However, unlike an icon, this version points towards not only its represented subject, Christ, but also—and this is typical of preliminary studies—to the two larger paintings of *The Light of the World*. To use the theological term, the study serves as a type, the shadow or pattern, which prefigures the antitype, being the more 'perfect' and completed versions of the subject. The Manchester *Light of the World* is the only version to hang in a context other than a place of worship. In the gallery, the painting is an object not of faith and devotion so much as of art-historical interest and acquisition. It is displayed alongside other curatorial scoops, objects of benevolent bestowal and shrewd procurement, as one of some 2000 exhibited items of an internationally renowned collection which spans six centuries of British and continental fine and decorative art. A gallery's custodial and, increasingly, academic responsibilities are discharged through sometimes extensive research into the artwork's origin, provenance, authenticity, and constitution, and publications.[25] Keepers and curators engage in the processes of ascription and description, meticulous measuring, classification and cataloguing, dating and labelling. In the context of the gallery, a biblical artwork is

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25. See Victoria Poskitt (ed.), *Up Close: A Guide to Manchester Art Gallery* (London: Scala Publishers, 2002); Richard Verdi, *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts* (London: Scala Publishers, 1999).

presented variously: as an artefact of cultural, social, and historical significance; as a national treasure; and as a fit object of aesthetic contemplation. It may be arranged upon a wall, plinth, or the floor together with other artworks by the same artist, or alongside artworks by the artist's contemporaries, or according to subject, theme, genre, movement, and period, or in such manner as to illustrate a thesis or point of view. Indeed, a gallery installation is a creative, interpretive, and scholarly act that aims to establish a context for connections between narratives, persons, visual sensibilities and style, and so forth. These custodial activities further appreciation, enabling the spectator to see a biblical artwork not merely as an illustration to a story, person, or event in the scriptures, but also as an artefact—something made, somewhere, at some time, by someone for someone, in some way, and for some reason. The gallery, in this sense, constitutes the artwork's broader 'frame' of reference, upon which are (metaphorically speaking) inscribed, like the texts on the surround of *The Scapegoat*, information and instruction which direct the spectator's level of perception.

Artworks in galleries are grouped, ordered, suspended, and spaced very deliberately. As the spectator stands before them, they may experience a sympathetic resonance between artworks, or intuit a sense of their belonging one with another. These relationships, however, are neither fixed nor finite. The spectator may perceive associations that never occurred to the curator, which is one reason why visiting galleries can be such an enriching and vital experience. The gallery, too, is not an unvarying or a static but an organic space. For all the talk of permanent collections, the essential component (the viewing audience), necessary to complete the circuit of connection and make the artworks come alive, is impermanent and constantly changing and diverse.

Consequently, the reception of artworks will be, at some level, similarly mutable and varied, seen through a multitude of frames on which are inscribed a unique combination of each person's life history and temperament: prior exposure to and appreciation of other artworks and their history; aesthetic values, tastes, and interests; and, importantly in this context, their degree of familiarity with the Bible and religious convictions.

Many of the biblical artworks presently in galleries were originally installed in cathedrals, churches, or private chapels. When the artworks were relocated, something was lost or changed. A gallery is to biblical artworks what a zoo is to wild animals: specimens are removed from their natural habitat, sometimes in order to preserve the species, and placed in enclosures, tamed and framed. An altarpiece that knew the kisses of the

devout is, in the gallery, made untouchable—hermetically sealed within a perspex cage. In a zoo, creatures that are not ordinarily seen together in the wild are exhibited side by side with one another. Similarly in galleries, saints and salt-cellars are juxtaposed in the same glass casement like, to borrow Isodore Ducasse's (1846–70) oft-quoted simile for Surrealism, 'the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella'. There may be teasing and superficially odd conjunctions elsewhere too. For example, in the collection of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the time of writing, Jan Steen's (1662–79) *The Wrath of Ahasuerus* (c. 1671), the king Persia, is set next to Jean Varin's (1604–72) bust of *Cardinal Richelieu* (1585–1642), cast during the middle of that century. Steen illustrates a biblical scene not only to vivify the text but also to impart a salutatory lesson about intemperateness, treachery, exposure, pride and a fall. Varin honours the man. Both king and cardinal were formidable, portly, bearded men with a penchant for flamboyant clothes. Richelieu put down the Huguenots, while Ahasuerus tried to put down the Jews. But, perhaps, the connection is not only between the king and the cardinal. Whereas Richilieu was probably the world's first prime minister, Haman, seen cowering before Ahasuerus's wrath, was certainly the king's prime minister.

In the same collection another biblical scene, Paulo Veronese's (1528–1588) *The Visitation* (c. 1577) is presently, and quite literally, cornered on the gallery wall by a mythological scene by Dosso Dossi (c. 1490–1542), *Scenes from the Aeneid* (c. 1522). Historically and culturally, the biblical and the classical have hung side by side for millennia; their thought forms and (conspicuously) their visual forms have interwoven significantly, no more so than in the Renaissance period when these artworks were painted. It is not surprising therefore that, while the artworks respond to two very different textual sources and are separated by a metre of wall space, they are joined elsewhere. Veronese's biblical vision is essentially classicist, evident in the form of the architectural setting, the emphasis on draped forms, and the composition; each plane of the composition, from foreground to background, falls behind the other, parallel to the surface of the canvas, like the figures and settings on a classical Roman bas-relief. Dossi's rendering of an epic on a small scale includes a curious pair of figures suspended in the clouds, following the iconography of overseeing angels in Christian art. His spirited, poetic fantasy provides a contrasting foil for Veronese's sedate rendering of the two women's encounter—a visual interpretation that appears to be somewhat at odds with a reading of the story (Lk. 1.40-55). The visitation was, after all, an event that aroused a highly emotional response. Mary

enters the house of Zacharias and greets her cousin Elizabeth. In that moment, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit; as her baby (John the Baptist) leaps in her womb she pronounces a blessing upon Mary, who responds with the Magnificat. But Renaissance classicism, in keeping with its Graeco-Roman model, emphasized orderliness, poise, clarity, and rationality, qualities that were inimical to the expression of emotionalism.

In another of the Barber Institute's galleries, a scene of *The Crucifixion* (c. 1490) by Cima de Conegliano (1459/60–1517/18) is displayed flanked by two marble heads sculpted during the first and second centuries (fig. 6). The artefacts are intended to be seen independently and as a group.

Figure 6. Cima de Conegliano, *The Crucifixion* (c. 1490),
flanked by two marble heads,
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

Historically, over thirteen hundred years separate the painting from the sculptures. However, in their present setting, they are less than two feet apart and simultaneously present. Unlike the example of *The Wrath of Ahasuerus* and bust of *Cardinal Richelieu*, the spectator is not being presented with contrasting works in different mediums from the same century; or, as with the example of *The Visitation* and *Scenes from the*

Aeneid, a juxtaposition of works derived from radically dissimilar narrative sources and exhibiting contrasting emotional sensibilities. In most reputable collections, there is often an illuminating logic underlying even the most apparently bizarre arrangement of artefacts. The principal subject of *The Crucifixion* is itself a trio placed in a symmetrical arrangement, with the cross at the centre and two standing figures, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the disciple John on either side. As the spectator stands back from the painting he or she becomes aware of a comparable structural analogy: just as the cross is central to the painting's composition so the painting is the central feature of the display, which is similarly balanced. Moreover, just as the two figures stand below and on either side of the cross in the painting, so, too, do the sculpted heads on their plinths (connoting standing figures) in relation to the painting.

Having interpreted the curatorial arrangement of the three artworks we can turn to examine their relationship in terms of subject and history. No explanation is exhaustive. All three artworks originate in what is now known as Italy; *The Crucifixion* was painted in what was the Veneto region, while the heads were sculpted in Rome. But there is another, more profound, connection. Recall the illustration of the broken floor tile at Ground Zero. In the relation of the painting to the sculptures, there is another instance where knowledge transforms perception. The head on the right of the painting was fashioned in the same century as Christ was crucified. For all we know, it could have been made during Christ's lifetime. For all we know, too, the dignitary portrayed was under the governorship of Pontius Pilate, in the Roman province of Judea. Perhaps he saw Christ with those 'blind' eyes. These speculations cannot be substantiated. They are merely an imaginative, if nonetheless thought-provoking, projection inspired by the conjunction of these artefacts in the gallery. The crucifixion has passed and, Christians believe, the risen Christ has ascended into heaven, leaving no physical trace. But this now anonymous and battered mass of stone, representing the dignitary, has passed through the millennia like a comet through space. It is a biblical artwork, not because, like the painting, the sculpture represents the biblical world, but because it is an archaeological remnant of that world.

3. *Composition: Extrinsic and Intrinsic*

The curatorial arrangement of artworks in galleries, and their sometimes ad hoc display in churches, constitutes what may be termed their extrinsic composition. Intrinsic composition refers to organization of an artwork's internal parts to form a greater whole. It describes the disposition

of things (for instance, objects, people, and the scene) within, and in relation to, the bounding edge or frame of the picture format. In addition, the picture may be structured around a dominant compositional scheme based on geometric figures such as a triangle, cross, and circle; shapes such as the 'S' or serpentine curvature and zigzag; the relation of receding planes (foreground, middle distance, and background); perspectival recession; or a combination of these schemes. The function of pictorial composition is to enhance aesthetic effect and to facilitate the mediation of narrative.

Pictorial composition helps the spectator to 'read' the picture. However, 'reading' a biblical painting is not as mechanical as reading a biblical text, from left to right and from top to bottom. In Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's (1618–1682) *The Marriage at Cana* (c. 1672), based on Jn 2.1-11, the compositional scheme draws the spectator's eye to the principal subject of the biblical narrative, Christ, and, from there to the principle objects mentioned in the text—the stone water pots (fig. 7).

Figure 7. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Marriage at Cana* (c. 1672), The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

Thereafter, their eye is cast to a secondary subject, the servants who fill the pots and, finally, returns to the principal subject, taking in the tertiary subjects, the guests and the background, as it does so. That the spectator perceives the picture in this way has less to do with their intent than with the artist's talent. Their line of vision has been coerced by the force of the picture's compositional geometry: in this case an inverted triangle.

The apex of the triangle is at the base of one of the pots, which is placed at the centre of the composition, horizontally. A vertical axis moves upwards through the middle of the pot and passes through the bridegroom, establishing the visual fulcrum of the pictorial composition, vertically. The bridegroom's head is situated at the mid-point on the inverted baseline of the triangle. To his left and right are the heads of the bride and, possibly, 'the ruler of the feast' (v. 9). In this way, the triangle connects many of the principal characters and events described in the biblical account. While the movement of the vectors comprising the invisible figure, the triangle, is constant, it does not prevent the eye from roaming around the picture and alighting on minor or peripheral incidents and characters. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one such character. Murillo has placed her behind Jesus and against the vertical edge of the composition, in shadow and almost out of sight. However, in the biblical narrative she is the principal member of the cast, being mentioned before all the others, and the person who initiates the chain of events leading to the miracle by drawing Jesus' attention to the shortage of wine (vv. 1-3).

Similarly, if the disciples are among the guests, the artist has not distinguished them (v. 2). Rather, it is the servants who have the spotlight. They are positioned in the foreground and on the right-hand side of the composition, in a place of maximum prominence, with the three foremost servants and five of the pots standing on the baseline of another triangle, corresponding to the bottom edge of the canvas. In the text, the servants similarly occupy a privileged position: for they were the only ones to witness and confirm the moment when the water was transformed into wine. The servants also participated in the miracle: Christ commanded and they undertook. In the composition, the collaboration is underscored by the resemblance between Christ's outstretched arm and hand and those of the principal servant. It is as though Christ has cast his divine authority, like a ball, to the servant, who prepares to catch it. Christ's gesture communicates, inexplicitly and visually, what he, explicitly and verbally, commands in the biblical text.

Painting's inability to convey speech audibly necessitated the development of conventions by which text could be naturalized within the composition. In mediaeval and early Renaissance art, scripture was incorporated into painting typographically. For example, in scenes depicting John the Baptist, he is often shown holding out a scroll upon which are written the words *vox clamantis in deserto*, 'a voice crying aloud in the wilderness', taken from Isa. 40.3, and quoted by John the Baptist in his sermon in the wilderness of Judaea; or, *Ecce agnus Dei*, 'behold the lamb of God'—his proclamation prior to Christ's baptism (Mt. 3.3; Jn 1.29). The scroll, in this context, serves the same function as the speech bubble in contemporary cartoons. In Matthias Grünewald's (c. 1470–1528) *The Crucifixion*, the central panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece (completed 1515), the text is placed behind John, as though inscribed upon the backdrop to the scene, but at a height close enough to John's face (and more particularly to his mouth) to suggest the allusion of speech made visible. The text, in translation, renders the prophet's own words: 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (Jn 3.30). In the more true-to-life realism of Murillo's interpretation of *The Marriage at Cana*, such devices would seem contrived and out of place. Instead, the painting presents a static mime wherein speech has to be converted into a visible sign—a paralanguage comprising frozen motion, gestures, and facial expressions. However, in Murillo's painting, speech is represented, naturalistically, in the conversation between governor and a servant. But here the absence of sound does not seem strange, for their exchange would not, in any case, be audible above the clamour of the wedding guests.

A biblical painting is constrained not only by the conventions of representation and the limits of the medium but also the amount of narrative content it can bear. The principle of less is more applies; or, to adapt the Baptist's adage, pictorial integrity increases when the represented content decreases. Artists restrict content by focusing upon only one or more important incidents in the narrative and deploying the mechanics of composition. In respect to the latter, the picture is framed by the bounding edge or perimeter of the canvas which encloses the composition and seals out the rest of the world and of the story. The composition is itself a frame in another sense. To call to mind the technology of cinematography, the composition represents, as it were, a single still from a sequence of pictures which comprise the biblical narrative of the marriage at Cana. Murillo's 'frame' visualizes the events described in vv. 6-7 of the narrative only. It is instructive to note what, in so doing, the painting does not show. It does not portray the exchange between

Christ and his mother (vv. 4-5); or her address to the servants (v. 6); or Christ's command to draw out water (v. 7). All three incidents are expressed in the text primarily through invisible speech acts rather than by visible and therefore representable actions. Neither does the picture depict the servants' presentation of the wine to the governor of the feast, another action (vv. 9-10). However, there are other paintings of the story that do. Hieronymous Bosch (c. 1450–1516), in his *The Marriage Feast at Cana* not only depicts (as does Murillo) the incidents described in vv. 6-7 but also those of vv. 13-14. In so doing, Bosch combines incidents that are separated temporally in the biblical narrative as though they had taken place simultaneously: a servant pours water into the jar in readiness for the miracle, while at the same time, in the painting, the governor of the feast speaks to the bridegroom after the miracle has taken place and the wine has been distributed. In contrast, Murillo compresses time more subtly and unobtrusively by conjoining two contiguous, rather than remote, incidents: Christ's call to fill the water pots and, shortly after, the servant's response. In focusing on this episode, the artist also omits a later incident in the narrative: the governor's commendation of both the mysterious wine's quality and the bridegroom, again expressed as a speech act (vv. 13-14). This incident could not be rendered without either compromising the temporal illusion, namely that the scene is seen in more or less real time, or requiring a different compositional solution. Interestingly, the moment of the miracle is not recorded in the text. Even if it had been, the process of transformation would have been almost impossible to convey in a static image.

The Marriage at Cana is not a reflection *of* the text, but a reflection *upon* it; the painting, like the preacher, provides a commentary on, rather than a complete re-presentation of, the biblical scene. And, just as the painting vivifies the text, so the text facilitates an understanding of the painting. For the painting is no more a substitute for the text than the preacher's sermon was for the artwork. Moreover, the painting is dependent upon the text, inasmuch as the spectator cannot make sense of the represented scene without cognizance of the incidents, referred to in the gospel account, which took place before and after it. And, as has been shown, the significance of biblical art, in terms of both meaning and impact, is also dependent upon the context of its perception and reception, which may in turn be conditioned by the spectator's knowledge, which may in turn be influenced by ancillary information, such as textual inscription and spoken or written interpretation. Therefore, like the apostle's dark glass, biblical art in isolation is an incomplete rendering of the real: knowledge in part.

3

THE DESERT IN BIBLICAL ART:
WILLIAM HOLMAN HUNT'S *THE SCAPEGOAT*,
IN THE MANCHESTER ART GALLERY

David Jasper

The Manchester Art Gallery possesses a number of biblical paintings which offer depictions of the desert, but perhaps the most striking is William Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* (1854) (fig. 1). In 2004, when I published my book *The Sacred Desert*, I was not especially concerned with the theme of the desert in biblical art. The chapter in that book on visual artists was more concerned with the interiority of the desert, its abstractions and the issue of illusion; the issue confronted by the historian of photography Mounira Khemir in suggesting: 'The desert, placed in the centre of the image, raises the question of the visible and the invisible, and the veil, inseparable from the letter and the image'.[1] In this chapter, however, I will reflect more specifically on the relationship between the letter and the image, and in particular the relationship between the narratives and theology of the Bible and Western depictions in art of the desert country of the Near East in the nineteenth century—all aspects that touch upon and inform Hunt's *The Scapegoat*.

Edward Said begins his now classic work *Orientalism* (1978) with the statement:

> The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.[2]

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1. Mounira Khemir, 'The Infinitive Image of the Desert and its Representations', in Raymond Depardon, Mounira Khemir and Wilfred Thesiger (eds.), *The Desert* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), pp. 52-61 (61).
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 1.

Figure 1. William Holman Hunt, *The Scapegoat* (1854–55),
Manchester Art Gallery

In eighteenth-century Europe, this romance in the visual arts was lively, fed by curiosity for the sublime in nature, even while the authority of the Bible and its desert traditions was beginning to weaken. Thinking back to Voltaire, Said affirms the growing sense in the eighteenth century that 'it is a fallacy to assume that the swarming, unpredictable, and problematic mess in which human beings live can be understood on the basis of what books—texts—say'.[3] This was increasingly, for many, as true of the Bible as any other book. Nevertheless, the haunting memories lived on in a linking of the theology and spirituality of the desert, which begins in the Bible and continues through the Christian tradition[4] with the passion for landscape as found, for example, in some of the early biblical paintings of J.M.W. Turner, working under the influence of Poussin and Richard Wilson. In such later engravings as *The Wilderness of Sinai*

3. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 93.
4. For example, Bernard McGinn notes of Meister Eckhart, that he was 'particularly drawn to the language of the desert…using it a dozen times or more. The power of the "desert" to express experiences of disorientation and terror in the face of the unknown was also found in contemporary [fourteenth-century] Middle High German secular literature'. See Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2001), p. 48.

(1834), Turner combines the narrative power of Deut. 8.15, celebrating the Lord God 'who guided you through the vast and terrible desert with its saraph serpents and scorpions; its parched and waterless ground; who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock', with the religious connotations of the rock *Meribah* (the 'stone of Moses') from which water miraculously flowed, and the romance of the Bedouin encountered by the Western traveller. Turner's landscape is remarkable, but it is invented from a memory of the biblical tradition in which the desert becomes the symbol of God's enduring love for his people, when 'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, / the desert shall rejoice and blossom; / like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, / and rejoice with joy and singing' (Isa. 35.1-2).[5] Though enduring in art, literature and the religious imagination, that memory is at once challenged and curiously affirmed in new ways in the nineteenth century as artists and writers travelled to the ancient Near East, and as scholarship developed new methods of enquiry into the history and origins of Christianity.

The French theologian and orientalist Ernest Renan (1823–92), best remembered today for his celebrated *Vie de Jésus* (1860), written while on an archaeological mission to Phoenicia and Syria, determined to be a Christian, only now without Christianity—that is, with what he called 'la science laïque'.[6] Renan's post-Christian position arose primarily from the philological 'discovery' that the ancient sacred languages of the Bible, and above all Hebrew, were neither primordial nor of divine origin. What Michel Foucault describes in *The Order of Things* (1970) as the discovery of language[7] is in fact the secularization of the ancient religious concept of the divine gift of language to Adam in Eden. At the same time, Renan's first-hand experience of Palestine combined with an aesthetic recovery of the past to reinvent the biblical image of the desert based upon mimetic constructions with their own claims to truth, art participating in the seductive, if ultimately fruitless, quest for the historical Jesus. Famously, Albert Schweitzer summed up Renan's achievement in his *Vie de Jésus*:

> He offered his readers a Jesus who was alive, whom he, with his artistic imagination, had met under the blue heaven of Galilee, and whose features his inspired pencil had seized. People's attention was arrested, and they

5. See further, David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 14-18; Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 37-52.

6. See further, Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 133-35.

7. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), pp. 290-300.

thought they could see Jesus, because Renan had the skill to make them see
blue skies, seas of waving corn, distant mountains, gleaming lilies, in a
landscape with Lake Gennesaret for its centre, and to hear with him in the
whispering of the reeds the eternal melody of the Sermon on the Mount.[8]

Almost exactly one hundred years after the publication of Renan's book
(for which, so great was his scandal, he was removed from his post as
professor of Hebrew at the Collège de France), perhaps its most precise
visual realization in art is Nicholas Ray's film *King of Kings* (1961), of
which it was remarked that the role of Jesus was played by a figure who
was neither divine nor human—but the actor Jeffrey Hunter. But it does
undeniably couple the image of the landscape and the biblical religious
imagination so deeply ingrained on the European mind even while the
critical spirit was eroding ancient certainties.

Figure 2. Francis Frith, *Sinai, Mount Horeb* (c. 1860),
The Francis Frith Collection

Certainly from the middle of the nineteenth century, along with
archaeologists and philologists like Renan, European photographers like
Francis Frith were actually travelling to Egypt, Palestine and Syria and
constructing photographic images which Frith then published to illus-
trate passages from the Bible in an attempt to allow the reader of scrip-
ture to see things 'as they really were', even as they engaged with the

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8.   Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (trans. W. Montgomery, J.R.
Coates, Susan Cupitt and John Bowden; London: SCM, 2nd edn, 2000 [1913]), p. 159.

words on the sacred page. Between 1856 and 1860, Frith travelled widely in the Middle East, including crossing the desert of Sinai and reaching the Second Cataract of the Nile. Eventually he was to illustrate *The Queen's Bible* with fifty-six photographs from his travels. If we compare Frith's pictures with contemporary photographs of the desert by local photographers (and there are some extraordinary collections of these), we can see how in fact he was deliberately *constructing* a landscape to conform to a 'biblical' sense of the Holy Land and its geography (fig. 2).

Behind such work are two primary influences. The first is early nine-teenth-century reading and interpreting of the Bible, a critical exercise unknown to Turner, for its imperative was an empirical drive to recover the 'truth' such as to be seen and verified with our own eyes: the second, however, derives from Turneresque traditions of landscape, at once real and ideal,[9] Romanticism and its imaginary worlds dreamed about from little-explored landscapes and cultures without actual recourse to physi-cal dislocation. The biblical world and its geography thus acquired the enchantment of what Gaston Bachelard would call a 'poetics of space', having an emotional intimate immensity whereby the anonymous reaches of actual distance and space are converted into meaning and reconfigured in an imaginative, quasi-fictional geography.[10] But Frith and other photographers were, in fact, a second generation of travellers who, in the interests of authenticity in art, actually travelled to southern Spain and then on to the Middle East in order to record the desert landscape at first hand, though still with deeply Romantic and often 'biblical' over-tones. The artist David Roberts wandered widely in Egypt and the Levant from the 1830s, publishing a set of lithographs in six volumes from 1842 to 1849 entitled *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia*. Closely associated with Roberts was Frederick Goodall, an established artist of genre and biblical scenes, who travelled in Egypt and Arabia in

9. 'The impressions from nature that Turner inserted into the grander style of the old masters are, collectively, another essential component of his grand imaginative biblical inventions… In some of the sketchbooks he juxtaposes his realistic studies of nature with studies from historical landscapes of the old masters. The result is a lofty new conception of landscape' (Mordechai Omer, *J.M.W. Turner and the Romantic Vision of the Holy Land and the Bible* [Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, 1996], p. 24). Examples of this in Turner can be found in his watercolours of the 1830s such as *Ramah with the Building Called Rachel's Tomb* (1834), *The Dead Sea Jericho and the Mouth of the Jordan* (1934), and *The Wilderness of Engedi and the Convent of Santa Saba* (1834–35).

10. 'It is often this *inner immensity* that gives their real meaning to certain expressions concerning the visible world' (Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [trans. Maria Jolas; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994], p. 185).

the 1850s to give authenticity to his still deeply romantic vision of the orient and the desert.

Among these Victorian artist travellers was also, of course, William Holman Hunt, who made his first journey to the Middle East in 1854 (and further journeys in 1869 and 1873), giving the lie to Michael Ondaatje's suggestion in his novel *The English Patient* that there was little interest by the Western world in the desert until the beginning of the twentieth century (thinking, perhaps of hardy English romantics and wanderers from Gertrude Bell and T.E. Lawrence to the more recent Wilfred Thesiger).[11] Furthermore, Hunt, after the manner of the slightly later Ernest Renan and other more scholarly nineteenth-century seekers in the 'quest for the historical Jesus', was convinced that by painting biblical subjects while actually in Egypt and Palestine he could achieve true fidelity to the gospels.

But before we take a more considered look at Hunt's first great painting taken from first-hand desert experience, *The Scapegoat* (1854), we should not forget the popular Victorian genre of often loosely associated biblical paintings which these hardy travellers provoked, promoting a vague orientalism with highly emotional, if rather indefinite, religious resonance.

If Sir Edwin Landseer is the most celebrated nineteenth-century painter of sentimental animal subjects, his great canvas *The Desert* (fig. 3)—a painting of a dead lion in a desert landscape, now familiar to us from its image on every tin of Lyle's Golden Syrup[12]—is surely upstaged in leonine awesomeness by Briton Riviere's *The King Drinks* (1881) (fig. 4). Riviere, like Landseer and unlike Hunt, never travelled to exotic biblical regions but the pressure to create realist subjects led him to construct appropriate habitats for his genre paintings of animals, not to speak of his biblical scenes such as *Daniel in the Lion's Den* (1872, Liverpool, Walker Gallery). The rocky and desolate desert landscape of *The King Drinks* clearly draws upon Roberts's lithographs of the Middle East (with, perhaps, also wilderness overtones of Landseer's Scotland).

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11. 'There is, after Herodotus, little interest by the Western world towards the desert for hundreds of years. From 425 BC to the beginning of the twentieth century there is an averting of eyes. Silence. The nineteenth century was an age of river seekers. And then in the 1920s there is a sweet postscript history of this pocket of earth, made mostly by privately funded expeditions and followed by modest lectures given at the Geographical Society in London at Kensington Gore' (Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* [London: Picador, 1993], p. 133).

12. Where, with its accompanying swarm of bees, it is linked with Samson's riddle in Judg. 14.14 and the words, 'out of the strong came forth sweetness'.

Figure 3. Sir Edwin Henry Landseer, *The Desert* (1849),
Manchester Art Gallery

Figure 4. Briton Riviere, *The King Drinks* (1881),
The Royal Academy, London

In such paintings, mid-Victorian artists in the age of the quest for the
historical Jesus and the growth of the science of archaeology, were driven
by the urge to give authentic voice to religious scenes from first hand
experience. The habitats for the lions of Landseer and Riviere, however,

were entirely constructed, while Holman Hunt and the slightly later
Edwin Long were anxious to draw their factual details from Middle-
Eastern geography itself and never more so than in Hunt's *The Scapegoat*
with its obsession with actual details of the salt flats of the Dead Sea
landscape and harsh, seemingly almost crude, yet utterly authentic, col-
ours. The painting refers us back to two verses in Leviticus 16 informed
by the Evangelical conception of the Levitical types, in this case standing
typologically as a powerful and Christ-like meditative image of suffering
innocence:

> Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess
> over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all
> their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the
> wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear
> on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in
> the wilderness (Lev. 16.21-22).

Hunt brings to bear his developing theory of painting to a relentless and
distressing accuracy of physical detail, exemplifying the early Pre-
Raphaelite use of biblical typology as a basis for symbolic realism.[13] Intent
on becoming a great moral painter, Hunt transforms the heightening of
Pre-Raphaelite colour into a harshness which borders on the garish and
fantastic, but in fact captures precisely the bright and unforgiving evening
hues of the Dead Sea with the skeleton of an animal, indicating what the
fate of this goat will be. This is realism with a purpose. He picks up the
Pre-Raphaelite fascination with light to show us a landscape which
blinds us to the point of moving from one reality to another, even more
hellish. In a sense, Hunt is following Landseer's ability to give animals
quasi-human expressions, but without a hint of Landseer's mawkishness,
so that in the figure of the goat we see the terrible and actual implica-
tions of the biblical command. To see this painting is actually to see the
desolation of the sins of the people, the desert a hell, the red garland on
the goat's head a savage reminder of the transgressions that it bears.[14]

13.   For a detailed study of Hunt and typology, see George P. Landow, *William
Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism* (New Haven and London: Yale University
Press, 1979). In Holman Hunt's own work, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite
Brotherhood* (1905) he draws upon the way in which John Ruskin in the second volume
of *Modern Painters* described Tintoretto's use of typology to link the demands of realistic
technique with spiritual truth. See George P. Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian
Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art and Thought* (Boston and London:
Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 4.

14.   Timothy Hilton, in his book *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Thames & Hudson,
1970), waxes eloquent in his extreme dislike of *The Scapegoat*, and, by extension, Hunt
himself (whom he describes as a 'deeply tasteless character'): 'Hunt bought a white goat,

Hunt's image of life-in-death focuses on a recurrent theme of all desert literature—that is the merging of the stark exterior world with the mysterious interior in a landscape that provokes illusion, where to see is in fact to be blinded, light is darkness and the real and the dreamlike are merged into one. *The Scapegoat* is a tragic study of such intense interiority, the abstractions and illusions, yet deeply powerful in the religious imagination, with which I began this chapter, precisely because it presents with obsessive accuracy the very shore of the Dead Sea itself in all its ghastly surreality. It is what the modern American video artist Bill Viola, writing of his 1979 Saharan videotape *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, described as 'like being in someone else's dream', his intention being to photograph, through special telephoto lenses, what was 'not there' in the distorted light rays of the midday Saharan sun, where physical objects appear to the eye to float above the ground, and sharp edges become ripples and vibrations.

Through Viola we can see how Holman Hunt is actually doing the very opposite of the work of early Victorian photographers like Frith, who like Turner before them, set out to impose on the desert landscape their sense of the biblical stories. Hunt, on the other hand, draws from within the (for us) profound *surreality* of the desert landscape to paint at the same time an interior landscape of utter desolation. Viola's description of the dry salt lake Chott el-Djerid, echoes Hunt's Dead Sea hell in language redolent of much of the literature of the desert from all ages and cultures:

> I want to go to a place that seems like it's at the end of the world. A vantage point from which one can stand and peer out into the void—the world beyond… There is nothing to lean on. No references…You finally realize that the void is yourself. It is like some huge mirror for your mind. Clear and uncluttered, it is the opposite of our urban distractive spaces. Out here, the unbound mind can run free. Imagination reigns. Space becomes a projection screen. Inside becomes outside. You can see what you are… It is a harsh place. It is difficult to reach. It feels like it's at the end of the world. It is the edge.[15]

and took the unfortunate beast with him to his camp at Oosdoom, where the shallows of the Dead Sea become grey saline marsh… The goat died. One wonders if Hunt ate it, in his tent. He procured another and painted on… With what rapture Thomas Combe, at home in Oxford, unwrapped this horrid parcel, this dead letter this *grande machine infernale*, we cannot conjecture. Surely he saw the hard nastiness of Hunt's art? And yet it would seem that he did not, that he, like so many other Victorians, buried any consideration of the import of a painting in simple wonder at painting's capacity for mimesis' (Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, pp. 110-11).

15. Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings, 1973–1994* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 54.

Far beyond mere biblical *illustration* of desert scenes (which has always been more about how we read and have already interpreted the Bible than about the wilderness landscape itself), Hunt used art and careful observation to convey a world known to few but translated for us in theological writings, like those of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers who knew the desert intimately in their own lives, and in which every-thing tends towards its own opposite, heaven and hell—God and Satan becoming finally indistinguishable. It is a world finally unprotected by the religious romanticism grounded in words, not things or places, a romanticism of language and the pure imagination, not place, which is expressed by the novelist D.H. Lawrence in his 1928 essay, *Hymns in a Man's Life*, a lingering reminder of the rather vague biblicism that inspired Turner to explore the sublimity of nature in desert landscapes, but now, in Lawrence consigned to the imagination of the child of a more religious age which perhaps still inhabits some of us of the older generations, though deep down and usually unacknowledged:

> To me the word Galilee has a wonderful sound. The Lake of Galilee! I don't want to know where it is, I never want to go to Palestine. Galilee is one of those lovely, glamorous worlds, not places, that exist in the golden haze of a child's half-formed imagination.[16]

But, Lawrence goes on to say, it is not familiarity that breeds contempt, it is the assumption of knowledge. Now, perhaps, we are simply bored because we experience nothing, and we do so because the wonder has gone out of us. The first European artists and photographers who visited the strange desert lands of the Middle East saw, indeed, the externals of the landscape and culture, but located them firmly and wondrously within the predispositions of their biblical imaginations in a still power-ful visual amalgam. But the result too often was what Edward Said famously analysed as 'orientalism', a phenomenon that was at once both religious and political. But what is remarkable about Holman Hunt in 1854 is that he overturned this, realizing with painful acuity the deep interiority of the desert landscape as theology—a realization found also in the unremitting and harsh spirituality of the Christian Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fourth century as they *lived* the Bible, at once and at the same time in heaven and hell, lodged between earth and heaven.[17] It was

16.   First published in *The Evening News* (London), 13 October, 1928. Reprinted in D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism* (ed. Anthony Beal; London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 6-11 (6).

17.   The extraordinary impossibility of the lives of these men and women is described in the late fourth-century work, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: Historia monachorum in Aegypto*. Living lives of incredibly harsh spirituality, 'they do not busy

the artist, and perhaps, in some ways even more, the photographer, who gradually came to acknowledge how the desert, more than any other subject, raises the issue of illusion: that what we see is a mirage formed by the heat and dust of the land itself, and yet within the actuality of the illusion is realized a profound truth which may even take us back, with a feeling of odd, and sometimes perhaps guilty recognition, to the Bible itself and to its desert as the place where God reveals himself to mortals.[18] In the words of Mounira Khemir, who is, perhaps, more theological in her writing than she might care to admit:

> Any photographer fascinated by the desert sought to create more than a mere resemblance; he wanted to create an impossible image, as if reflected in a magic mirror. This mirror does not reflect a resemblance, but illuminates by a different light—a light that appears to come from elsewhere.[19]

Khemir in her essay draws our attention to a beautiful and carefully arranged photograph by Félix Bonfils of about 1875 entitled *The Well of the Samaritan* (fig. 5), an image of five figures in Arab dress in a vast empty desert landscape, the woman in the foreground bending with a water jar before a hollow in the ground containing a living tree, a reminder that Jerusalem was founded on a spring in the desert of Judea, and that the desert is always 'other', always contradiction.

   Immediately, then, we are drawn into the desert as a place, and perhaps the birthplace of theology. In Western and European conceptions the desert is a place of desertion, a place to leave since it supports no life that is not wild and aggressive, though some, like the intrepid and extraordinary Gertrude Bell in her incredible desert photographs of the early twentieth century, have seen it otherwise (fig. 6).[20]

themselves with any earthly matter or take account of anything that belongs to this transient world. But while dwelling on earth in this manner they live as true citizens of heaven' (Benedicta Ward in the Introduction to the volume *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: Historia monachorum in Aegypto* [trans. Norman Russell; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980], pp. 49-50).

   18.   'All the great religions were born between the desert and the steppe' (Carlo Carretto, quoted by Louth in *The Wilderness of God*, p. 37).

   19.   Khemir, 'The Infinitive Image of the Desert', p. 55.

   20.   Seven thousand of Bell's photographs are preserved in the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. She began her solitary travels in the deserts of the Middle East in 1900, returning repeatedly until joining military intelligence in Cairo in 1915, and later Basra. A member of the Royal Photographic Society, 'she carried two cameras wherever she went. One was a hand camera that took glass plates 6.5 inches high by 4.25 wide, the other designed for panoramic views. When she returned from her travels she used a technique adopted more recently by David Hockney to scan an entire horizon by combining five or six carefully angled shots' (Georgina Howell, *Daughter of the Desert: The Remarkable Life of Gertrude Bell* [London: Macmillan, 2006], p. 118).

Figure 5. Félix Bonfils, *The Well of the Samaritan* (1875),
University Art Museum, UC Santa Barbara.

Figure 6. The Caravan of Gertrude Bell Crossing the Desert, 1914,
from The Gertrude Bell Photographic Archive, Newcastle University.

But in the Arabic tradition, on the other hand, the desert is a place to be entered into, for at its heart there is life and always water to be found if you follow the almost imperceptible traces that are presented by the landscape. In the Hebrew Bible, if the wilderness is a place of wandering, trial and testing, it is also the paradise to which the Lord God will lead Israel 'and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope' (Hos. 2.14-15). It is this paradise that the first and greatest of the Desert Fathers, St Antony, sought in his interior mountain, in the solitude of the deep desert, reminding one of a beautiful Algerian saying: 'The desert is the Garden of Allah, from which the Lord of the faithful removed all superfluous human and animal life, so that there might be one place where He can walk in peace'.[21] One thinks also of Yahweh walking in the cool of the evening breeze in Eden before his peace was disturbed by the disobedience of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3.8). But this paradise cannot be represented by any sentimental or conventional images of desert oases and palm trees. Perhaps the greatest of Western desert artists in the twentieth century was the American Georgia O'Keeffe in her evocations, not of the ancient Near East but of the New Mexico desert. There is one image, an exquisite photograph by her husband Alfred Steiglitz of 1930, of the artist's hands probing the cavities of a horse's skull, her fingers between its still powerful though crumbling teeth.

It is both beautiful and terrifying—a portrait of life and death in a mutual caress, the hands lovingly and trustingly exploring the dry bone as if searching for the life that is no longer there, yet still a very real, though absent, presence.[22] For in the desert there is always life in death. Holman Hunt sees only the deep tragedy, the indifference of the desert landscape. The art critic, Timothy Hilton, reacts with utter negation to such art, saying:

> We are justified in resenting this. Sternly, dutifully, unswervingly, Hunt robbed paint of its power to please. And who can say that painting which makes no effort to be lovely is not impoverished?[23]

21.   Quoted in Gregory McNamee (ed.), *The Desert Reader: A Literary Companion* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), p. 103.

22.   More recent and remarkable photographs of desert bones can be found in Mark C. Taylor, *Mystic Bones* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Taylor prefaces his images with the words: 'In the desert, the unnameable approaches without ever arriving. You cannot know yourself until you venture into the desert *alone*, and then you learn that to find yourself is to lose yourself' (p. 7).

23.   Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 93.

But what are the demands of a voice that asks such a question? Wherein lies the cruelty of Hunt's painting? Whose is the sin? And what of the desert itself, in all its harsh, equivocal beauty, that is yet a door of hope, the Garden of Allah?

4

Notorious Biblical Women in Manchester: Spencer Stanhope's *Eve* and Frederick Pickersgill's *Delilah*

J. Cheryl Exum

What do people typically think of when they hear the name 'Eve'? The woman who brought sin and death into the world? The woman responsible for the loss of paradise? The woman who tempted Adam with the 'apple', and the rest is history? And what about the name 'Delilah'? Her name is synonymous with treachery and deceit—a temptress, a scheming woman, a *femme fatale* who betrays Samson by cutting his hair, leaving him weak and helpless, and who thus dramatically illustrates the danger women pose to men. I would venture to say that Eve and Delilah are, in popular culture, the two best known—most notorious—women from the Hebrew Bible. Of course, there are differences: Delilah intentionally deceives Samson, whereas Eve is tempted by the serpent, and—so the old argument goes—she is too weak or too gullible to resist. Delilah is tempted also—by money: the Philistine rulers offer her a bribe and she accepts it ('Entice him, and see by what means his strength is great, and by what means we may overpower him and bind him in order to humiliate him, and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver', Judg. 16.5). But whereas Delilah knows what she is doing, Eve, like Samson, is deceived, for the serpent does not tell her the whole truth about the effects of eating the forbidden fruit ('You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods [or 'God'], knowing good and evil', Gen. 3.4-5).[1] She does not

1. To what extent the serpent is lying is open to question. They do not die *on the day* they eat the fruit, as God had said (Gen. 2.17), but, indeed, they will die, since they will be expelled from the garden to prevent them from eating fruit from the tree of life (3.22-23). Their eyes are opened (3.7), and God acknowledges that eating the fruit has made them 'like one of us, knowing good and evil' (3.22). But they also know that they

betray or deceive Adam, who knows as much as she does, since he is present during the discussion between Eve and the serpent, an important detail often overlooked in popular versions of the story.

Figure 1. Frederick Richard R.A. Pickersgill, *Samson Betrayed* (1850),
Manchester Art Gallery

Although it would be unfair to describe Eve as a treacherous woman like Delilah, these two biblical figures have more in common than one might initially suppose. Two works of art from the Manchester Art Gallery, both from the second half of the nineteenth century, can help us see this. Frederick Richard R.A. Pickersgill's *Samson Betrayed* was painted in 1850 (fig. 1), and J.R. Spencer Stanhope's *Eve Tempted* not long after, c. 1877 (fig. 2). These paintings, whose subjects are immediately recognizable, reinscribe the bad reputation Delilah and Eve have acquired over centuries, and one of the questions I want to consider is, To what extent is this reputation deserved?

are naked (3.7), knowledge that they did not have before, and they are punished for their disobedience.

Figure 2. John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, *Eve Tempted* (c. 1877),
Manchester Art Gallery

Since I am a biblical scholar and not an art historian, I shall begin by
saying something about the way I approach biblical art. I 'read' biblical
paintings as if, like the text, they have a story to tell, and my interest lies,

in particular, in how the story they tell relates to the biblical story. Questions about composition and style, and the artist's historical circumstances and the influences on the artist's life, though interesting and potentially illuminating, are of less importance to me. Thus, when I look at a biblical painting, my first question is, what part of the story does it represent and what is the artist's attitude to it? A painting of a biblical scene or story is more than a simple transposition of a text onto a canvas. The painting itself is an interpretation of the text, visual exegesis, to use Paolo Berdini's term.[2] Artists can be keen textual interpreters, intentionally or unintentionally drawing our attention to textual tensions or problems or possibilities or depths not immediately apparent to readers of the text. In some cases, art may even bring to light what the biblical writers are at pains to suppress.[3] In rendering a biblical scene visually, an artist must consider any number of questions, such as what the characters look like, how they should be dressed (in contemporary garb or however the artist imagined people in biblical times would have dressed), where the scene takes place and, most important, what to show, what aspects of the scene or story to emphasize and what to underplay or leave out. In analysing a biblical painting we might, therefore, want to ask what specific textual clues an artist picks up on in order to present a particular interpretation and whether an artist's interpretation might help us see something meaningful, or troublesome, in the text that we might have missed.[4]

When I look at a painting of a biblical woman, I want to know something more. I want to know if the way the woman is treated in the painting is the same as the way she is treated in the biblical narrative or if it is

2. Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

3. For example, Hagar's point of view in paintings of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, or the father's guilt in the story of Lot's incestuous sexual relations with his daughters. See J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Accusing Look: The Abjection of Hagar in Art', *Religion and the Arts* 11 (2007), pp. 143-71; J. Cheryl Exum, 'Desire Distorted and Exhibited: Lot and his Daughters in Psychoanalysis, Painting, and Film', in Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley (eds.), '*A Wise and Discerning Mind*': *Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* (Brown Judaic Studies; Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2000), pp. 83-108.

4. Other questions we might ask include: Does the painting aim to represent the biblical story or does it, rather, reshape it to fit certain interests? Does the artist respond to a perceived gap in the text or to questions unanswered by the text? Does the artist add something to the biblical text? Does she or he, for example, magnify something that is not very important in the biblical version? Whose point of view does the artist represent and how does this compare to the biblical story? Does the artist involve the viewer in the painting? If so, how? Is the viewer invited to identify with a particular character or see a scene through a particular character's eyes?

different—and how similar, or how different. When artists depict women like Eve and Delilah as, say, devious, untrustworthy, seductive or threatening, are they picking up on clues in the biblical story, or are they reading their own culturally conditioned stereotypes into the story? They do both, of course. In neither *Samson Betrayed* nor *Eve Tempted*, for instance, is the stereotype challenged. Neither woman is nurturing, and neither is cast as a hero of the faith, like, for example, Jael or Judith.[5]

   Samson Betrayed, *Eve Tempted*. The titles of these paintings are interestingly similar: the name of a biblical character—Samson, Eve—and a passive verb: betrayed, tempted. These titles not unexpectedly reflect my point about the differences between the women: *Samson Betrayed* casts Delilah as the betrayer; *Eve Tempted* suggests that Eve is the victim, though she seems to me a rather complicit victim in Stanhope's version of the story. There is a more striking similarity than the titles of these paintings, however: the two women look very much alike; they are sisters in crime, so to speak. They both have the same red hair, parted in the middle, similar facial features, and the same body type. Not inconsequentially, both are naked, apart from Eve's long hair that oddly but conveniently twists around from behind her back to cover her genitals, and the similar role played by the brocade fabric around Delilah's legs. Although we expect Eve to be naked in paintings of the garden of Eden before the couple's expulsion (when God clothes them in animal skins), should we expect Delilah to appear without her clothes on?[6] The text says only that Delilah cut Samson's hair while he was sleeping 'upon her knees'.[7] Nothing is said about Samson falling asleep because he is exhausted from lovemaking but neither is anything said to discourage readers from drawing such a conclusion. Artists typically portray the scene as one in which it appears that passionate lovemaking has taken place, with Delilah provocatively attired, partially clad or disheveled, and Pickersgill is no exception. The promise of exposed flesh in Delilah's case

   5.   Even Jael and Judith, both *femmes fortes* in the artistic tradition, are unable to escape the reputation as *femmes fatales*; on Jael, see J. Cheryl Exum, 'Shared Glory: Salomon de Bray's *Jael, Deborah and Barak*', in J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu (eds.), *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp. 11-37; on Judith, see Ela Nutu, 'Framing Judith: Whose Text, Whose Gaze, Whose Language?', in Exum and Nutu (eds.), *Between the Text and the Canvas*, pp. 117-44.
   6.   As Margaret R. Miles (*Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* [New York: Vintage Books, 1989], p. 121) notes, 'Scriptural women, some of them minor figures whose recurring appearance in paintings is puzzling, are also [like Eve] repeatedly depicted as naked'.
   7.   A Septuagintal reading is *ana meson* ('between her knees'), which is more suggestive of a sexual encounter.

is more titillating than simple nakedness like Eve's. Eve's nakedness may suggest innocence, but Delilah's hints at something illicit.

But even in Eve's case, how innocent is nakedness? It is, is it not, a fairly common view that Eve was a temptress, and the forbidden fruit she offered Adam was sex? Whatever its other associations, female nudity in the art of the Christian West, as Margaret Miles argues, inevitably carries associations of sexual lust, shame, sin and guilt.

> Only when gender is engaged as a category of analysis do we begin to see that our impression of the positivity of religious nakedness must be revised to account for female nakedness presented as symbol of sin, sexual lust, and dangerous evil. In depictions of the naked female body, interest in active religious engagement, exercise, and struggle is often subordinated to, or in tension with, the female body as spectacle. Insofar as women and their bodies were assimilated to religious meanings, they 'became male'. But the female body ultimately and visibly resisted becoming male, and thus represented the fall of the human race into sin, sexual lust, acquisitiveness, and hunger for power. In short, although religious nakedness generally contradicted social meanings of nakedness, in the case of the naked female body, social meanings were reinforced.[8]

'Depictions of the Fall', Miles observes, 'focus visual interest on Eve and on her initiative in sin'.[9] This is certainly the case in Stanhope's painting, where Adam is not even present.

Each of our artists has chosen to represent the decisive moment in the story, the moment that seals the *man's* fate (even though it is only in *Samson Betrayed* that the male victim is depicted). Pickersgill shows us Samson's hair being shorn. The canvas is unusually large (243.8 × 306 cm) and dominates the room in which it is exhibited. It overwhelms the viewer with the spectacle of the scene, and, although we might get the impression that we could easily step into the frame, we would remain spectators distanced from the action, for none of the figures communicates with the viewer. Samson is asleep, as yet unaware that his strength and his god have left him. We know, of course, and most viewers know what will happen next: the Philistine soldiers will seize him, gouge out his eyes and take him to Gaza as a slave, to grind in the mill.[10] For the time being, Samson is the only one in the painting unaware that something momentous is taking place. The tension is palpable, with everyone

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8. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, pp. 81-82.
9. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 121.
10. Most viewers also know what will happen later: when he is brought to their temple for the Philistines' entertainment, Samson prays to God, his strength returns and he pulls down the temple, killing all the Philistines there and himself as well.

watching Samson expectantly, terrified that he might wake up before his haircut has robbed him of his strength.

When the painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy, Pickering was praised for his figures and his colouring, and also for his restraint: 'It is a subject so liable to coarseness and violence that we congratulate Mr Pickersgill on his complete freedom from these defects. Etty could not have been trusted with it.' (William Etty was the leading figure painter of the time, who exercised a major influence on Pickersgill.)[11]

In Pickersgill's version of the story, a man warily cuts Samson's hair, while his companion watches. Presumably they are Philistine soldiers, perhaps the ambushers Delilah had waiting in an inner chamber (16.9, 12), who often appear in paintings of the scene, for the man cautiously doing the shearing wears a coat of mail and holds a dagger by the hilt in his left hand. If one follows the Hebrew text, it is Delilah who cuts Samson's hair, just as she carries out the earlier procedures Samson describes for subduing him (binding him with fresh bowstrings, binding him with new ropes, and weaving his hair into the web on her loom). The matter is not entirely straightforward, however. The text reads, 'She made him sleep upon her knees; then she called to the man, and she shaved off the seven locks of his head' (16.19). Who is 'the man' and what is he doing here? It may be that the man is Samson himself, and Delilah calls to him to make sure he is deeply asleep.[12] Still, one must admit that the Hebrew is awkward. In what appears to be an attempt to make sense of it, some ancient versions make the man a barber and have him shave Samson.[13] This is the reading reflected in the King James Version, the translation Pickersgill would have been familiar with, where we read: 'And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head'. Thus we have two important and influential textual traditions, one that has Delilah cut Samson's hair and the other that has a barber do the cutting, both of which are firmly established in art.

11. http://www.manchestergalleries.org/the-collections/search-the-collection/display .php?EMUSESSID=4e586e7d346090096d333e2f03f17192&overview=1&r=1022465 304 (9 February 2009).

12. Jack M. Sasson, 'Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)', *Prooftexts* 8 (1988), pp. 333-39 (336-38); or, perhaps 'the man' is one of the ambushers lying in wait in the inner chamber (16.9, 12), although this does not relieve the awkwardness of the verse either.

13. One major Septuagint manuscript (Codex Alexandrinus) and the Vulgate specify a barber; another major Septuagint manuscript (Codex Vaticanus) has the 'man' do the shaving.

In a famous painting by Rubens, for example, a barber deftly snips off Samson's hair while Delilah watches. An old madam looks over Delilah's shoulder and holds a candle for him, its light illuminating the figures in the foreground as well a statue of Venus and Cupid in an alcove. Dressed in red, with her voluminous breasts exposed, Delilah appears as a prostitute in this rather tawdry, dimly lit brothel. Samson has fallen asleep with his head in her lap, apparently exhausted after spending his passion in fervid lovemaking. The intensity of their lovemaking is suggested by the position of Samson's body, the disheveled carpet and bedclothes, and Delilah's state of undress. Philistine soldiers wait somewhat apprehensively at the door (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah* (c. 1609–10),
The National Gallery, London

Another painting by Rubens, representing a slightly later moment in the story, depicts Delilah as the one who cuts Samson's hair. She still holds the scissors in her hand (fig. 4). Here, too, Delilah is depicted as

a prostitute with an old madam looking over her shoulder. It seems apparent from the positions of Delilah and Samson on the bed and their state of undress that they have recently made love. Instead of anxiety lest Samson should wake, so palpable in Pickersgill's painting, we experience the violence, as Samson, his hair shorn, is set upon by Philistine soldiers, who are actively gripping and pulling in their effort to subdue him.

Figure 4. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Capture of Samson* (1611),
Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Rembrandt too accuses Delilah, in a painting that has all the horrific violence that Pickersgill was praised for avoiding. *The Blinding of Samson*, painted in 1636, forces us to witness the very moment when Samson's right eye is gouged out (fig. 5). Samson is forcibly subdued by Philistine soldiers; blood spurts from his eye, and his teeth are gritted in pain. A man in oriental garb brandishes a spear, while Delilah flees, still holding Samson's shorn locks in one hand and the scissors in the other.

Figure 5. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Blinding of Samson* (1676),
Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt-am-Main

These two signs of Delilah's treachery arrest attention by virtue of being silhouetted against the one source of light in the picture.[14] Interestingly, however, Delilah is elaborately dressed, a far cry from the disheveled and partially clad Delilah of many paintings or from Delilah depicted as a courtesan, displayed for the visual pleasure of the (male) viewer, as in paintings by Gustave Moreau.[15]

   Having Delilah not only betray Samson to his enemies but cut his hair as well makes her more culpable than introducing a barber to share the blame. Distancing Delilah from the evil deed in *Samson and Delilah* (fig. 3) allows Rubens, for example, to humanize Delilah, to give her a

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   14.   Lovis Corinth's *The Arrest and Blinding of Samson*, modeled on Rembrandt's painting, dramatically renders the violence of the scene and has a brazen, naked, and thus more culpable Delilah looking down on the action; see J. Cheryl Exum, 'Lovis Corinth's *Blinded Samson*', *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (1998), pp. 410-25.

   15.   See, for example, his *Delilah*, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico, and *Samson and Delilah*, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris, both of which capture on canvas attributes of the *femme fatale*, whose image Moreau's paintings helped to shape (among his favourite subjects were Salome, Semele and the Sphinx): sensuality, excessiveness, temptation, shamelessness and excitement tinged with danger.

measure of interiority. She looks at Samson perhaps with regret, perhaps with fondness, and her hand rests almost tenderly on his back.[16]

In Pickersgill's painting, even though someone else does the cutting, it is easy to hold Delilah accountable. In her eyes there is fear, fear that Samson could wake up, not pity such as we might imagine in the case of Rubens's Delilah (fig. 6). She is pinned in, imprisoned by Samson's body on the edge of the couch beside her, and she raises her arms in the act of recoiling from him. Interpreting facial expressions is always a matter of individual judgment, and a look can have more than one meaning.

Figure 6. Pickersgill, *Samson Betrayed*, detail

16.   Culpability is not automatically decided by who does the cutting, but depends on other factors of the pose as well. Two paintings of this subject by Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) also follow the double tradition regarding who cut Samson's hair, but with Delilah's attitude seemingly the reverse of that in the Rubens paintings. In one, in the Dulwich Picture Gallery, Delilah, with her hand raised in front of her bare breasts as if cautioning quietness, looks on as a barber cuts Samson's hair. The procuress and another figure look over her shoulder, while the soldiers wait in the background. In the other painting, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Samson's hair has just been cut and the soldiers are seizing him, wrenching him as it were out of Delilah's arms. She holds out her arm as if reaching for him and their mutual looks of anguish suggest their attachment. But the scissors lie on the floor by the bed, where they appear to have fallen out of her hand—or perhaps she threw them aside. These variations show something of the wide range of feelings artists attributed to Delilah even when they depicted the same elements of the story. Reproductions of both paintings can be found in Dorothée Sölle, Joe H. Kirchberger and Herbert Haag, *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 144, 146-47.

As the focal point of the painting, Delilah immediately captures the viewer's attention, and, because she is such a point of interest, her expression invites other interpretations: disdain, scorn, hatred, perhaps tinged with desire or, possibly, something approaching regret or anguish ('What have I done?').[17]

From the biblical story we know why Samson told Delilah the secret of his strength: he loved her (16.4). In Pickersgill's painting, as elsewhere in the painterly tradition, Delilah appears as a temptress who has aroused Samson's lust and used it to trick him into revealing his secret. Her nakedness both communicates and explains Samson's desire.[18] In the biblical story, her ultimate weapon is not sex but *love*: 'How can you say, "I love you", when your heart is not with me?', she accuses him. Samson gives in to her and reveals to her the secret of his strength because she harasses him 'with her words', 'day after day', until he cannot stand it any longer.

> She said to him, 'How can you say, "I love you", when your heart is not with me? These three times you have mocked me and not told me by what means your strength is great.' When she harassed him with her words day after day, and urged him, he was vexed to death. So he told her all his heart, and said to her, 'A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I be shaved, my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man' (Judg. 16.15-17).

Delilah does not betray Samson so much as he betrays himself. He does not have to tell her that the secret of his superhuman strength lies in his uncut hair. Moreover, he should have learned from the three previous occasions when he lied to her about the source of his strength that this time too she would do to him exactly what he told her would weaken him (Judg. 16.8, 12, 14).[19]

Why does Delilah betray Samson? Greed, pure and simple? The acceptance of a bribe, which is all the biblical account reports, has

17.   When I viewed the painting with participants at the symposium on the Bible and Painting at the Manchester Art Gallery (22 September 2007), at which a version of the present essay was presented, we had a lively discussion about the significance of the look on Delilah's face. I have tried to indicate something of the variety of views here, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank again those present for their contributions.

18.   A point made by Miles (*Carnal Knowing*, p. 123) with regard to paintings of Susanna bathing, while the elders spy on her.

19.   For discussion of Samson's need to reveal his secret to Delilah, his wish to surrender himself to her, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), Chapter 3, 'Samson's Women', esp. pp. 82-84.

proved insufficient to clarify her motives to the satisfaction of readers over the centuries, and those eager to explain her behavior further have put forward numerous reasons, among them, avarice, patriotism, religious zeal, jealousy, and revenge.[20] Obviously Delilah does not love Samson enough to refuse to betray him at any price, but it does not necessarily follow that she feels no affection toward him. After all, capturing Samson is not her idea. She does not approach the Philistine rulers with a plan for subduing Samson and an offer to help them. Nevertheless, when they come to her with a tempting offer, she does not hesitate to accept. Most readers assume that Delilah is a Philistine, who cooperates with her compatriots to defeat an enemy of her people, 'the ravager of our country, who has slain many of us', as they put it (16.24). Another common assumption is that Delilah is a prostitute. This is how many artists portray her, and Pickersgill seems to be following suit.

Rubens, as we have seen, has a procuress looking over her shoulder, and the setting of his paintings is a bordello. Although the biblical text does not identify Delilah either as a Philistine or as a prostitute, it nevertheless subtly encourages these assumptions.[21] We might ask, what is achieved by construing Delilah as a Philistine prostitute? Among other things, identifying her as a Philistine would explain why she betrays Samson, for surely no Israelite woman would betray him, would she? Not even for a large sum of money? Moreover, if we take Delilah to be a prostitute as well, we are likely to assume from the start that she is morally reprehensible and to have less respect for her. A prostitute can be bought for betrayal as well as for sex; her nature is to dissemble. If we have less respect for Delilah, we can more comfortably place all the blame for Samson's downfall on her.[22] In Pickersgill's painting, Delilah wears a snake bracelet on her left arm. Is this an allusion to Eve and her association with the serpent, a reminder that woman is a source of trouble?

The biblical story does not specify the setting in which Samson's decisive betrayal takes place. Presumably in a room in Delilah's house, for

20.   An elaborate exploration of Delilah's motives is offered by Cecil B. DeMille's film *Samson and Delilah*; for discussion, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 204-11.

21.   See Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted*, pp. 184-88. On the way the text encourages readers to think the worst of Delilah and 'foreign' women in general, see Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 69-72 *et passim*.

22.   Not only does Samson betray himself, as I observe above, he is also betrayed by his god. It is not surprising that readers find it easier to blame the woman; see Exum, 'Lovis Corinth's *Blinded Samson*', pp. 415-21.

twice when she tries to subdue Samson by using the means he falsely claimed would weaken him, she has men waiting in an inner chamber to ambush him.[23] Pickersgill supplies a sparse but exotic outdoor backdrop, suggestive of the mystery and decadence of the Orient, as well as of the mystery and decadence of woman. There are mountains in the background, and the betrayal takes place in a colonnaded space, with heavy curtains draped over a beam supported by huge columns. The two columns prefigure the two columns that Samson will later grasp in order to pull down the Philistine temple, another popular subject in art. Samson lies on an ornate couch covered in what looks like red velvet. His head and upper body rest, as the text has it, 'upon her [Delilah's] knees', around which an elegant brocade fabric is loosely wrapped. Flowers lie discarded on the floor, a token of Samson's love, or flowers that have fallen out of Delilah's hair during ardent lovemaking. The latter possibility is suggested by the similar hairstyles of Delilah and the other woman in the painting, who has flowers woven into her hair.

In a significant departure from the biblical text, Pickersgill provides an unconventional audience. Two pale figures clutch each other, mesmerized by the scene unfolding before them. They balance the two dark-skinned soldiers on the left side of the painting. But who are they and what are they doing here? Their presence in this unusual boudoir, like that of the dusky soldier-cum-barber, contributes to the oriental atmosphere, and we may assume they serve Delilah or the Philistines whom Delilah herself serves. They appear to be entertainers; a tambourine lies before them on the floor. The description on the Manchester Art Gallery website identifies them as 'two semi-naked women [who] look back over their shoulders towards the action with horrified faces'.[24] One is clearly a woman, but the other, in my view, is a man, or, at the very least, the figure is androgynous. His physique does not look like a woman's; he seems to be supporting the other figure, who clings to him, grasping his shirt in her right hand, while he clutches her wrap with his left; and, most important, unlike the women in the painting, he is clothed. Assuming the figure is a man, Pickersgill has created a contrast between

23.   Delilah is not identified, as biblical women typically are, in relation to a man, usually their father or husband, and we are not told how it is that she has a house. Is she a foreign woman of independent means? A harlot, like Rahab? A wealthy widow with property, like Judith?

24.   http://www.manchestergalleries.org/the-collections/search-the-collection/display.php?EMUSESSID=4e586e7d346090096d333e2f03f17192&overview=1&r=102 2465304 (9 February 2009).

(protective) male and (dissembling) female behavior. A man seeks to shield a woman from danger, while the *femme fatale* Delilah hands Samson over to his enemies.

This man, his eyes wide open in fear (though we see only one eye), clasps the head of his companion in a protective gesture, but, though she is hanging on to him for dear life, she cannot help looking too. Although Pickersgill does not show us her face, he gives the viewer a tantalizing view of the white flesh of her back, buttocks and right breast. She thus provides a counterpart to Samson, whose face is also hidden from view and whose scantily clad muscular torso is exposed from the back. In addition, she balances the frontal view Pickersgill gives us of Delilah, the focal point in the painting, on whom the light falls and whose white skin looks iridescent.

The nakedness of both women in this painting, and especially of Delilah, is for the pleasure of the male viewer in particular. As John Berger points out:

> In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger—with his clothes still on.[25]

Berger's observation certainly holds true for Stanhope's painting of *Eve Tempted* (fig. 2). Painted for a decorous Victorian spectatorship, *Eve Tempted* could be described as *The Male Viewer Tempted*, with the viewer enticed by Eve as the forbidden fruit. Whether to resist or not, individual viewers will decide for themselves. It is not, however, a fateful decision, for the safety of spectatorship allows the viewer to give in to temptation without suffering the consequences.[26]

One might see Eve's nakedness as a sign of innocence, of her prelapsarian state, but Stanhope draws attention to the shame that results from eating the forbidden fruit by covering Eve's genitals with her hair. The artful way Eve's hair wraps around her body from behind in a serpentine way draws attention to the artificiality of her innocence. Because Stanhope's Eve is passive, her nakedness appears less threatening than the unsettling, potentially threatening nakedness of the larger-than-life

25. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 54.

26. On the Victorian nude, see the exhibition catalogue, *Exposed: The Victorian Nude* (ed. Alison Smith, with contributions by Robert Upstone, Michael Hatt, Martin Myrone, Virginia Dodier, Tim Batchelor; London: Tate Publishing, 2001).

Delilah, with dramatically exposed breasts, who virtually overwhelms the viewer of Pickersgill's painting.

Whereas Pickersgill adds characters to the story—the entertainers—Stanhope leaves out a character, and an important character at that. Unlike Samson, who is so glaringly undone by Delilah, the male victim of a Eve's 'wiles' is conspicuous in his absence (which makes him even less to blame for the outcome than the hapless Samson). If we ask, What part of the story does this painting represent?, the answer is, No part of the story at all. Instead, *Eve Tempted* reinforces a popular misconception about the story: the notion that Eve gives in to temptation, takes the forbidden fruit and then wanders around the garden in search of Adam in order to offer him a bite of it. In Stanhope's painting Adam is absent at the critical moment of the temptation.[27] This is not, however, the way the text presents the scene. Here is the King James Version translation that Stanhope would have known:

> And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat (Gen. 3.6).

Eve shares the fruit with Adam, 'who was with her'. For the biblical writer, Adam's presence during the temptation is important in order to show that the man and woman are equally guilty of failing God's test of their obedience.[28] Adam could have intervened to prevent Eve from eating. He could have told the serpent to mind its own business, or counseled Eve not to listen to perspicacious snakes, or defended God against the serpent's insinuation that jealousy is God's motive for not wanting humans to have knowledge that would make them, too, like gods (which appears, in fact, to be the case, Gen. 3.22-23). Adam passively disobeys the divine command 'you shall not eat' (he simply takes the fruit from Eve and eats it), whereas Eve considers the possibilities and chooses to disobey, and this too is important for the biblical writer, for it serves to justify the punishment that makes the active sinner subordinate to the passive sinner, and that places all women after Eve under the control of their husbands.

27. Perhaps we are meant to think of Adam as just outside the frame in *Eve Tempted*, but I doubt it.

28. For a compelling interpretation of the command not to eat as a test, see Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *The Eden Narrative: A Literary and Religio-historical Study of Genesis 2–3* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), pp. 49-64 *et passim*.

As Stanhope pictures her, Eve does not put up any resistance to the serpent's improper advance. Is she considering the possibilities: the enticingly edible fruit, its beauty and, not least, the god-like wisdom it promises? She has the vacant expression, the pensive stance, typical of Pre-Raphaelite women (one can clearly see the influence of Stanhope's friend Burne-Jones). Though not its inspiration, Burne-Jones's *Sibylla Delphica*, painted later than *Eve Tempted* (c. 1886), makes a suitable companion piece to it in the Manchester Art Gallery, where it hangs on the far right end of the wall balancing *Eve Tempted* on the left (figs. 7 and 8).

Figure 7. Stanhope,
Eve Tempted (1877)

Figure 8. Edward Burne-Jones,
Sibylla Delphica (1886)

As Mieke Bal has so well demonstrated, the placement of paintings in exhibitions exerts an influence on interpretation.[29] Here biblical and classical mythology meet to provoke associations between 'Fall' and redemption, for the Sibyl was said to have foretold the coming of Christ.[30] The women look in each other's direction, one naked, untamed as it were, one clothed, properly socialized;[31] one reaching for the fatal fruit, the other, holding up the laurel leaves on which her prophecies were written.

The setting of *Eve Tempted* is a garden, but with a Tuscan wall and well manicured grounds in the background. Eve stands on a carpet of colourful flowers, beneath the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, whose boughs are weighed down by an abundance of lush fruit amid luxuriant leaves. She leans languorously against the bank behind her, as she takes a piece of fruit from the tree almost absent-mindedly. The fruit does not look like an apple—which is a nice touch, since it is not an apple in the biblical text.[32] It looks more like an orange, to match the colour of Eve's hair. The serpent, whose unusually long, blue body is coiled intricately around the tree, has a human head. Giving the snake a human face is not an innovation on Stanhope's part. Often in art the serpent has a human face, and sometimes a human-like torso. Often, too, the face of the serpent resembles Eve's, creating associations between the serpent and the woman as source of temptation.

29.   Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996). In fact, as Bal observes, '…the subject matter of images can be totally subordinated to the visual effect of their combination' (p. 117). For an analysis of the influence of context on the interpretation of biblical art, see Martin O'Kane's discussion of 'Biblical Landscapes in the Israel Museum', in *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp. 160-95.

30.   Because they foretold the coming of Christ, sibyls were depicted in churches. Burne-Jones's painting began as a church window design. See http://www.manchestergalleries.org/the-collections/search-the-collection/display.php?EMUSESSID=da21ec5ec96e38a31f3299e509e35613&overview=1&r=512536361 (9 February 2009).

31.   Miles (*Carnal Knowing*, p. 144) argues that 'the unambiguously good woman is a clothed woman, a fully socialized woman'.

32.   In the biblical account, it is called simply 'the 'fruit'. Since it no longer exists (otherwise it would still be available to humankind), the Bible does not identify it. The similarity in Latin of the words for 'apple' (*malum* with a short a) and 'evil' (*malum* with a long a) is sometimes appealed to as the source of the identification of the fruit as an apple, but apples have a long history as love fruits in the ancient world. The Manchester Art Gallery website identifies it as an apple, probably under the influence of centuries of tradition (http://www.manchestergalleries.org/the-collections/search-the-collection/display.php?EMUSESSID=8957e13fb4fb291da1d95287755af1ac&overview=0&r=807724688 [9 February 2009]).

Figure 9. Masolino, *The Temptation* (c. 1427), Cappella Brancacci,
Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence

In this early fresco by Masolino (fig. 9), for example, the serpent's head and Eve's look very much alike. Unlike Stanhope's snake, however, this serpent's face is young and fair, like Eve's, deceptively non-menacing. Eve is not alone here, Adam is with her. With its head poised delicately above Adam and Eve, the serpent looks down almost peacefully on the pair, who have not yet tasted the forbidden fruit, and thus make no attempt to hide their nakedness. Each holds a piece of fruit, a fig, in their right hand, as they look into each other's eyes. Masolino captures the moment just before they eat. Perhaps Adam waits for Eve to taste first, but both are poised to sample the fruit and acquire the knowledge eating it will give them.
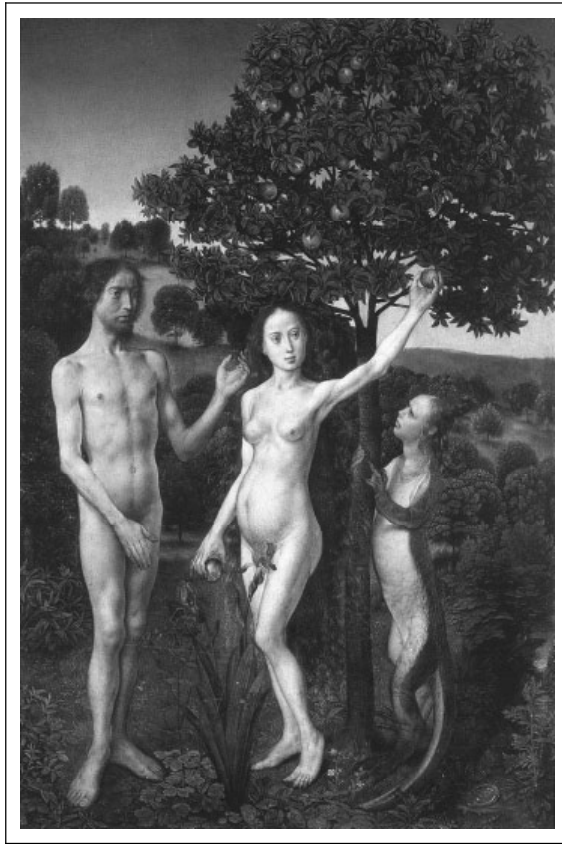
Figure 10. Hugo van der Goes, *The Fall* (1467–68),
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

In Hugo van der Goes's version of the temptation scene (fig. 10), the
serpent is aligned with Eve, who stands in the centre, between it and
Adam, creating a chain of guilt from the snake through Eve to Adam.
Eve takes a piece of fruit for Adam in her left hand and holds in her right
hand a piece of fruit from which she has taken a bite. Here the serpent,
whose face resembles Eve's and whose pose is similar to hers, is, like
Stanhope's serpent, a disquieting, menacing figure. Not yet cursed by
God to crawl on its belly, it boasts bizarre arms, legs and a tail. Adam and
Eve, in contrast, already bear witness to the consequences of their dis-
obedience, for they are naked and ashamed. Adam's genitals are covered
by his hand, while Eve's are hidden from view by a blue iris (symbol of
Mary, the second Eve, who will redeem humankind). She has the
rounded belly typical of women in fifteenth-century art, and it hints of

the many and painful pregnancies that will be woman's lot ('I will greatly multiply your pain and your childbearing', Gen. 3.16).

Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel depicts what seems to be a female serpent with flowing red hair like Eve's and a woman's breasts, underscoring the connection between female sexuality and sin (fig. 11).[33]

Figure 11. Michelangelo, *The Fall from Grace* (1509–10),
Sistine Chapel, Rome

Grasping the tree of knowledge and supporting itself with its massive tail wound suffocatingly around it, the serpent reaches out to Eve, who takes a piece of fruit, their hands almost touching. At the same time Adam reaches for a piece of fruit from the tree.[34] In the examples above, Adam

33. Michelangelo used male models; Eve's body is also rather masculine looking, especially in the companion scene of the expulsion from the garden.

34. There are also strong similarities between Adam and the serpent. For discussion of Michelangelo's subversion of conventional images of the temptation and an interpretation of the larger context of the scene, see Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of*

clearly shares Eve's guilt, but there is also a tradition in art where he is an unwilling or resisting accomplice.[35]

Why does the serpent approach the woman and not the man? Like the question why Delilah betrayed Samson, this, too, has long been a subject of fascination and speculation. Traditional answers have focused on female weakness, curiosity, gullibility and inferiority. A modern counter-argument is that the woman is more appealing than the man, more intelligent (since she, not the man, considers the advantages of eating the fruit), and thus more of a challenge to the serpent as a theological debating partner.[36] It is not fortuitous that the biblical author chose to have the serpent address the woman and not 'her husband who was with her' (Gen. 3.6). By showing that disastrous consequences follow when a woman makes a momentous decision on her own, the biblical writer is simply affirming the necessity of the subordinate position of women to men that was taken for granted in biblical times. The story teaches its readers that a woman who is not subject to male authority is dangerous and not to be tolerated, an encoded message the first-century-CE author of 1 Timothy recognized:

> I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent, for Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor (1 Tim. 2.12-14).

Is the snake in Stanhope's *Eve Tempted* male, and thus this is a *seduction* of Eve, who will later seduce Adam into eating the forbidden fruit? Is it female, to stress the close connection between Eve and the serpent, woman and evil, female sexuality and sin? Or does Stanhope want it to be ambiguous, leaving the matter for the viewer to decide? The face is hard, worn, sinister, the hair long and similar in colour to Eve's but darker, the eyes blue like Eve's. So strong is the similarity to Eve that we might wonder if the serpent is Eve's alter ego, and if Stanhope is showing us here the two sides of woman's nature, beautiful and lethal. The serpent's face seems to prefigure what Eve will become as a result of eating the fruit—wizened by the onerous consequences of knowing good and evil, aged and hardened by the toil of tilling the soil and the pain of bearing children.

Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 2-8, 111-14.

35.   For example, paintings by, among others, Tintoretto, Titian, Rubens.

36.   Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41(1973), pp. 30-48 (40); cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 110-13.

Figure 12. Stanhope, *Eve Tempted*, detail

The serpent's words, whispered in Eve's ear,[37] are represented in tangible form as a mist, a malignant mist, so to speak, while the closeness of its head to Eve's, its lips to her ear, has a kind of unholy intimacy about it that seems to strengthen the connections between female sexuality and sin (fig. 12). Julian Treuherz, in a catalogue of *Pre-Raphaelite Paintings from Manchester City Art Galleries*, describes the entire composition as 'slightly unnerving'.[38] The serpent is an unsettling figure, and by drawing attention to its guilt, *Eve Tempted*, like the biblical account, renders Eve less culpable.[39] Nevertheless, since Adam does not appear in Stanhope's painting of the temptation scene and we know he will eat the forbidden

37.   So even if we imagine Adam to be outside the frame, he could not hear the serpent's tempting words.

38.   Julian Treuherz, *Pre-Raphaelite Paintings from Manchester City Art Galleries* (Manchester: Manchester City Art Gallery, 1993), p. 119.

39.   The presence of the serpent, 'the wisest of all creatures the Lord God had made' (Gen. 3.1), who challenges God's command, enables the narrator to distance the woman and the man from direct responsibility while still holding them accountable for disobedience.

fruit, we can only assume that it is Eve, pictured here as sexually alluring temptress, who will lead Adam astray. Eve's nakedness, like Delilah's, is a signifier of male desire; it represents the temptation of female sexuality and carries with it a warning to men that giving into temptation can be fatal.

In choosing Eve and Delilah as their subjects, Stanhope and Pickersgill have not only taken advantage of the opportunity to paint a naked woman, they also convey a visual message not only about these women, whose nakedness accuses them of arousing male lust, but also, by association, about women in general. In blaming Eve for the 'Fall' and Delilah for Samson's downfall, Stanhope's *Eve Tempted* and Pickersgill's *Samson Betrayed* perpetuate the notion that women are weak, flawed, susceptible to error and temptation, like Eve, and even deliberately malign, like Delilah.[40] Are these reputations deserved? Samson, as I observed earlier, did not have to tell Delilah his secret and was a fool to do so. Adam could have intervened to defend the Law of the Father and prevent Eve from eating. This is not, of course, what happens in the Bible, where the women bear the brunt of the blame. Delilah betrays Samson for money (no other motivation is given, such as patriotism, for example). When questioned by God, Adam's defense is, 'The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate' (3.12).[41] God, in turn, chastises him for following her lead: 'Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree… the ground is cursed…' (3.17). The biblical writers see the subordination of women to men as necessary and natural, and they explain it, and justify it, as a consequence of woman's fickle, weak, or devious nature.

The bad reputations these two notorious women bring with them from the pages of the Bible to Manchester have been embellished and firmly established in centuries of cultural interpretation of the biblical story.[42] Eve and Delilah not only have a history that Stanhope's and Pickersgill's compositions do not challenge. *Eve Tempted* and *Samson Betrayed* embody as well the artists' own prejudices about women and those of the

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40. This is Miles's argument about representations of women's bodies in the Western artistic tradition (*Carnal Knowing*, pp. 120-21).

41. In addition to shifting responsibility to the woman, Adam blames God, whose idea it was to create the woman in the first place (Gen. 2.18).

42. On Eve, see Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, Chapter 3, 'Adam and Eve: Before and After', pp. 85-116; Jane Dillenberger, *Image and Spirit in Sacred and Secular Art* (New York: Crossroad,1990), Chapter 1, 'Eve, the Mother of All Living', pp. 15-27; Pamela Norris, *Eve: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); on Delilah, see Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, Chapter 6, 'Why, Why, Why, Delilah?', pp. 175-237.

Victorian society in which they lived.[43] As works of fine art displayed on the walls of a major metropolitan gallery, they represent and reproduce these prejudices for contemporary viewers.[44] And what are contemporary viewers to make of them? Are these stereotypes not still with us?

Interpretation takes place in the encounter between the work of art and the viewer. Do female and male viewers respond in the same way to these paintings and paintings like them (for the view of women encoded here is by no means limited to biblical paintings)? Although I think women and men do interpret such visual images differently (especially if what they are looking at involves the exposure of female flesh),[45] let me phrase the question differently, in a form that can more easily be addressed: what different claims do these visual images make upon female and male viewers?

Like the biblical stories, which, it is fair to say, were written by men for men, Stanhope's and Pickersgill's paintings align viewers with a male subject position, not only that of the male viewer, as Berger observes about paintings of the nude, but also that of the man who is 'undone' by a woman. To the extent that female viewers assume the male perspective these representations invite us to adopt, we are forced to read against our own interests and to accept a view of woman as a source of temptation that can bring about a man's downfall. Even if we do not identify with Eve and Delilah in these paintings, it is difficult to escape feeling impli-cated in the indictment of womankind that they represent.[46]

43.   Laws regulating obscenity in the visual arts were Victorian creations; see Martin Myrone, 'Prudery, Pornography and the Victorian Nude (Or, What Do We Think the Butler Saw?)', in Smith (ed.), *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, pp. 23-35 (25), with reference to M.J.D. Roberts, 'Morals, Art and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857', *Victorian Studies* 28 (1984–85), pp. 606-20.

44.   As Miles (*Carnal Knowing*, p. 10) notes, 'The social function of representa-tions…is to stabilize assumptions and expectations relating to the objects or persons represented'. Moreover, 'representations do not merely *reflect* social practices and attitudes…[t]hey also re-present, reinforce, perpetuate, produce, and reproduce them' (p. 11).

45.   Consider an example given by E. Ann Kaplan (*Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* [London: Routledge, 1983], p. 18: '…the sentence "A woman is undressing", or the image of a woman undressing, cannot remain at the denotative level of factual information, but immediately is raised to the level of connotations—her sexuality, her desirability, her nakedness; she is immediately objectified in such a discourse, placed in terms of how she can be *used* for male gratification. That is how our culture *reads* such sentences and images, although these meanings are presented as *natural*, as denotative, because the layering of cultural connotation is masked, hidden.'

46.   In this essay I am by no means suggesting that all male or female viewers will respond the same way, for, obviously, many factors, including sexual orientation and

In *Eve Tempted* and *Samson Betrayed*, as in the biblical text that inspired them, men control representation. What is represented is a man's view of women, not a woman's, and as such it tells us more about the men responsible for it and men's anxiety about women than it tells us about women.[47] Representations of the female body in the Western artistic tradition have a social function. They attempt to manage the threat women pose to men by seeking to capture the complexity of woman on canvas, according to Miles. 'Figuration works to displace threat in that women seem to be understood in advance of any relationship with a real woman.'[48] I have made similar claims about the portrayals of women in biblical literature: they serve to define women and keep them in their place, where their threat to men can be perceived as more manageable.[49]

To be sure, works of fine art in museums and galleries may not have much influence on contemporary society, but visual representations of these two notorious biblical women still persist and are still used to convey messages about women and woman's nature (figs. 13 and 14). Not surprisingly, as the image of Delilah holding Eve's stock-in-trade apple shows, the two women are easily conflated in the popular consciousness. An advertisement for DKNY's Red Delicious perfume announces, 'introducing Red Delicious, a new temptation in fragrances, for women, for men' (fig. 13). A woman, an apple and temptation immediately establish the association with Eve.[50] Although the ad mentions a

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sensibilities to difference (sexual, racial, class, etc.), will influence the way individual viewers and readers respond to works of art and texts. Rather my aim has been to critique, in particular, the (heterosexual) construction of gender these paintings assume. For an alternative way of looking, see Deryn Guest, 'Looking Lesbian at the Bathing Bathsheba', *Bible Interpretation* 16 (2008), pp. 227-62.

47.   Women are not alluring and threatening *in themselves* but *to men*. Since masculinity, like femininity, is a construct based on culturally conditioned assumptions about sex and sexual difference, gender roles and expectations, one way to dismantle the *femme fatale*, the trope of the woman fatal to man encoded in the biblical text and reinscribed in these paintings, is to ask what this image of women seeks to disavow or suppress about men. For discussion of the *femme fatale* trope in the story of Delilah and Samson as a means of masking male fears of inadequacy, see Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, pp. 221-28.

48.   Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 82.

49.   Exum, *Fragmented Women*.

50. For detailed discussion of Eve imagery in advertising and its power-through-sex message to postfeminist female consumers, see Katie Edwards, 'Sex and the Garden: Representations of Eve in Postfeminist Popular Culture', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2007, and *Admen and Eve: The Bible in Advertising* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, forthcoming)

tempting fragrance for men as well as for women, 'Eve' is the focus of attention here. 'Adam' is so wrapped up in her that he seems aware only of 'Eve', who is displayed provocatively atop a motorbike, symbol of male potency, and whose skimpy red dress—a colour associated in art with 'fallen' women—matches the flaming red of the bike and the irresistible Red Delicious apple-shaped bottle. She looks directly at the viewer, knowingly, tempting the female consumer with the promise of sexual power over men.[51]
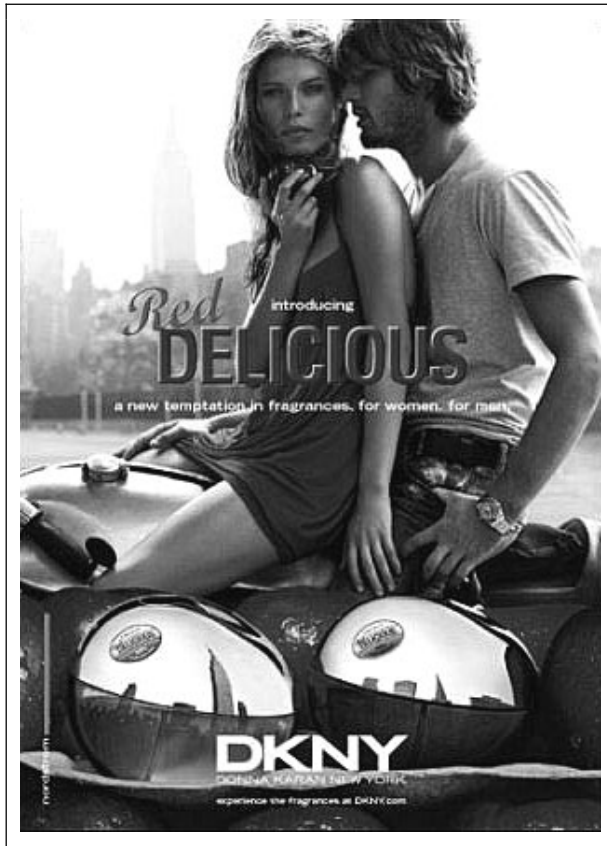
Figure 13. Advertisement for DKNY, Red Delicious perfume,
InStyle Magazine, August, 2005

51. The dynamics for men looking at the advertisement are different, and, significantly, as Edwards ('Sex and the Garden') points out, advertisements for the same perfume, whether for women or men, are markedly different in women's and men's magazines.

Equally effective in exploiting stereotypes for instant consumer recognition is this book cover (fig. 14), where all we need is the name 'Delilah' and the knife to know we are dealing with the familiar *femme fatale*, a woman, as the cover hardly needs to tell us, 'dangerous for a man'.[52] We are even offered a plausible motive for Delilah's betrayal of Samson, revenge, that can be read back into the biblical story.
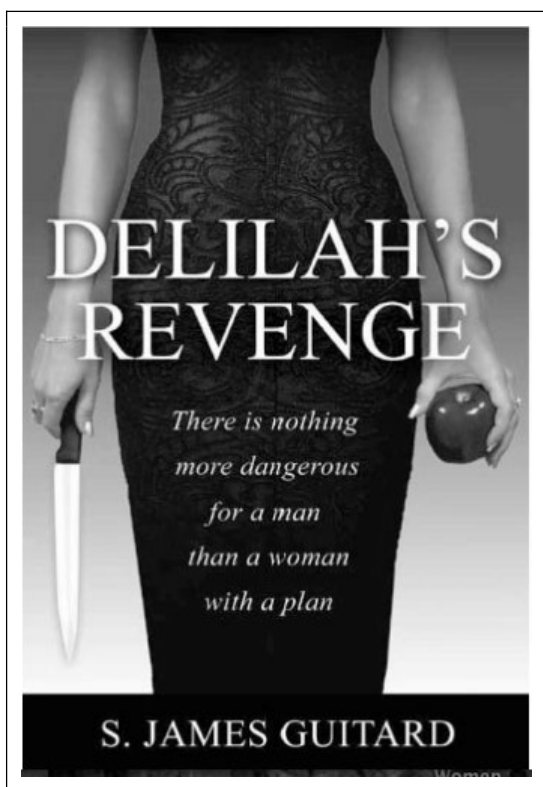

Figure 14. Cover of S. James Guitard, *Delilah's Revenge*
(Literally Speaking Pub. House, 2007)

Most likely Eve and Delilah will never escape the bad reputations they have acquired. But as consumers of visual images like these, whether consciously or unwillingly, we would do well to ask ourselves what encoded messages about sexual identities, gender roles and expectations these images give us and whether or not we wish to resist them.

52. For a popular take on Delilah, see Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), pp. 35-90. A blurb on the inside front page, from *Select* magazine, praises the book as 'the book that the Girl Power generation will take as their bible'.

5

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN BIBLICAL ART: EVARISTO BASCHENIS'S *STILL LIFE WITH MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS* (1660)

Siobhán Dowling Long

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher,
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity (Eccl. 1.2)

1. *Introduction*

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts acquired Evaristo Baschenis's (1617-77) *Still Life with Musical Instruments* (c. 1660) in 1987 (fig. 1), and to date, it is the only still-life painting by the artist held in a British public gallery collection. Hailed as one of the most original still-life painters of the seventeenth century,[1] Baschenis invented the unique genre of still-life compositions with musical instruments.[2] This painting belongs to the *Vanitas* tradition that originated in the sixteenth century during the Northern European Reformation following Calvin's ban on religious imagery in paintings. During the Counter-Reformation, the genre was popularized in Italy by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610),[3] in Spain by the *bordegone* painters, Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627), Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664) and Diego Velázquez (1599–1660),

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1.   Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Paris: Editions Pierre Tisné, 1953), p. 62.

2.   Since Baschenis gave every still-life painting with musical instruments the same title, I will preface the Barber's *Still Life with Musical Instruments* with 'Barber' to read Barber *Still Life*, to distinguish this painting from others of the same title.

3.   Caravaggio painted the Still Life *Basket of Fruit* (1599, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan), as well as incorporating still-life elements into *Sick Bacchus* (1593–94, Galleria Borghese, Rome), *Youth with Flower Basket* (1595, Galleria Borghese, Rome), *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (1595–1600, National Gallery, London), and *Bacchus* (1598, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence).

and in France by Jacque Linard (1600–72), Louise Moillon (1610–96) and Lubin Baugin (1611–63) among others. In general, artists of the *Vanitas* tradition depicted inanimate objects, familiar from everyday life strewn upon a table, and laden with symbolism to remind viewers of the transience of life, the passage of time, the futility of pleasure, and the certainty of death. The term *Vanitas* comes from the Latin translation of Ecclesiastes, *vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas* (1.2), and, in a word, captures the idea of the transience and meaninglessness of earthly existence that culminates in death and decay. *Vanitas* themes are inherently present in the composition and symbolism of objects present in Baschenis's paintings, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*.

Figure 1. Evaristo Baschenis, *Still Life with Musical Instruments* (c. 1660),
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

In the Barber *Still Life*, Baschenis depicts musical instruments in a state of abandonment as represented by the *trompe d'oeil* dust, forgotten and broken as indicated by the broken strings on the violin and mandola. When one unlocks the symbolism of the musical instruments illustrated, one realizes that this painting contains explicit references to the human body and its potential for sin, as based upon the account of the Fall from Genesis 3. To appreciate this, however, one must know a little about the construction of musical instruments in particular, and their symbolism in

biblical paintings in general. From a musical perspective, violin makers and musicians describe the component parts of string instruments in human terms, as having a body, belly, back, neck, and ribs. Baschenis used instruments in this painting to symbolize the human form; in music iconography, the long phallic appearance of woodwind instruments and the voluptuous bodies of string instruments symbolize the sexual parts and nature of men and women. The Barber *Still Life* painting, I would argue, is a powerful allegory based upon Genesis 3, outlining in no uncertain terms the tragedy of the human condition. This chapter discusses the possible artistic influences of Pieter Aertsen (1508–75) and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio on Baschenis's artistic style. It outlines the symbolism of the five instruments included in the Barber *Still Life* - the spinet, lute, mandola, violin, and shawm - as illustrated in other biblical paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and concludes with a discussion of the significance of books and musical scores in this painting.

2. Influences

Evaristo Baschenis, the third of four sons, was born on 7 December 1617 in Borgo San Leonardo, Bergamo to the merchant Simone Baschenis and his wife Francesa Volpi.[4] He was descended from a long line of painters noted for their fresco decoration of churches in the Northern Italian regions of Lombardy and Trentino–Alto Adige.[5] Of interest are frescoes (1470–97) based upon the life of Mary Magdalene from the Golden Legend (1265) in Chiesa di Santa Maria Maddalena, Cusiano, attributed to Evaristo's descendants, Giovanni and Battista Baschenis. Inspired by the vernacular version of Jacopo da Varazze's (c. 1230–98) Golden Legend, each panel depicts a scene from the Magdalene's legendary life prior to and after her encounter with Christ. The Baschenis brothers marked each panel with biblical annotations found written on books and leaves held by characters in the scene, along with inscriptions from Latin devotional texts derived from the Bible.[6] Although there are no references suggesting the Magdalene's musical talents in the Bible, Elena Ferrari-Barassi points out that artists and poets frequently imagined her

4. Enrico De Pascale, 'Evaristo Baschenis: Selected Documents', in A. Bayer (ed.), *The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis: The Music of Silence* (Milan: Olivares, 2000), pp. 66-71 (67).

5. Elena Ferrari Barassi, 'The Narrative about Saint Mary Magdalene in the Church of Cusiano, Italy', *Music in Art* 32 (2007), pp. 103-12 (103).

6. Barassi, 'The Narrative about Saint Mary Magdalene', p. 108.

dancing and playing musical instruments.[7] The Baschenis brothers, too, incorporated musical instruments in the cycle, illustrating a Wait[8] playing an S-shaped trumpet to announce the arrival of the Magdalene, Lazarus, and Martha to Marseilles, and a trio of angelic instrumentalists playing a treble shawm, an alto shawm and a rebec.[9] Evaristo Baschenis, too, like his ancestors, included an alto shawm in the Barber *Still Life*. The inclusion of a lute in this painting, not depicted by the Baschenis brothers, evokes, for reasons I explain later, the memory of Mary Magdalene.

   Baschenis's childhood was set against the background of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) and the Great Plague of Milan (1629–31), where he suffered the effects of the famine and plague at the age of thirteen, losing his father and two brothers, Domenico and Giacomo. In 1652, his elder brother Bartolomeo died leaving his orphaned daughter Dorotea in Evaristo's care. The ravishing effects of the plague decimated the artistic community in Lombardy, with the deaths of painters, Gian Paolo Cavagna, Enea Salmeggia, and Francesco Zucco,[10] and violinmaker, Girolamo Amati recorded around this time. Nicolò Amati, whose violin Baschenis painted for the Barber *Still Life* was the only member of his family to survive the famine and plague at Cremona. At the age of twenty-two, Baschenis served his artistic apprentice from 1639 to 1643 with artist Gian Giacomo Barbello from Crema,[11] where he learned the fundamental principles of painting done in foreshortening, a technique later incorporated into all his still-life paintings of musical instruments. Following this apprenticeship, Baschenis returned to the church of Beata Vergine dello Spasimo in Colonna to minister as a priest. Enrico De Pascale notes that Baschenis's duties were quite limited, and his only obligation to celebrate daily mass left him ample time to pursue a career as a painter.[12] From 1643 onwards Baschenis specialized in the still-life painting of foodstuffs and musical instruments. Despite the apparent differences in subject matter, Baschenis represents the theme of death in similar ways: in the kitchen scenes, through the representation of inanimate objects in his depiction of kitchen utensils, vegetables, and the

   7.   Barassi, 'The Narrative about Saint Mary Magdalene', p. 104.
   8.   Waits were medieval Watchmen who guarded the city walls against enemy attack. They played loud sounding instruments such as the mediaeval trumpet and the shawm to warn the townspeople of any imminent threat of danger.
   9.   Barassi, 'The Narrative about Saint Mary Magdalene', p. 109.
   10.   Enrico De Pascale, 'In Praise of Silence', in Bayer (ed.), *The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis* pp. 30-51 (31).
   11.   De Pascale, 'In Praise of Silence', p. 31.
   12.   De Pascale, 'In Praise of Silence', p. 32.

lifeless bodies of unplucked fowl and raw fish; and in the scenes of musical instruments, through the depiction of upturned, silent, dusty, and broken instruments. In his still-life paintings of kitchen scenes there is a notable absence of a cook to prepare the food and in the compositions of musical instruments, an absence of instrumentalists to play the instruments. Baschenis depicted objects from the two types of still-life paintings in a similar way, placed strewn upon a table, stacked atop, and jutting out over the table's edge.

Alberto Veca notes that Baschenis's choice of subject matter, foodstuffs and musical instruments are representative of the two roads leading to salvation, to the active life (*vita activa*) alluded to in the kitchen scenes, and to the contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) in the depiction of musical instruments.[13] Although Baschenis treats the active and contemplative lives separately in the two types of subject matter, they were often treated together in genre paintings from the sixteenth century. Flemish painters Pieter Aertsen (1508–75) and his nephew and student, Joachim Beuckelaer (1530–73), painted the active and contemplative ways of life together in their genre paintings of kitchen and market scenes. At first glance, these paintings appear to focus on secular subject matter, in a way similar to the treatment of subject matter in the still-life paintings of Baschenis, but a closer inspection reveals them as intensely religious works of art. Aertsen and Beuckelaer juxtaposed a kitchen or a market scene, depicting still-life features in the painting's foreground, with a biblical scene, such as the scene of Jesus's visit to the house of Mary and Martha (Lk. 10.38-42), in the background.[14] Numerous artists from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries painted this scene, and, in a way similar to Aertsen and Beuckelaer, represented Martha as a personification of the *vita activa* and Mary as the *vita contemplativa*. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat notes that kitchen and market still-life elements in the foreground symbolize the material goods of the world that push spiritual values into the background.[15]

Aertsen's genre painting, *The Cook* (1559, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique), is unusual in that it does not feature any biblical scene

13.   Alberto Veca, 'Days and Works: Reflections on Still Life Painting in Lombardy', in Bayer (ed.), *The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis*, pp. 24-29 (28).

14.   Joachim Beuckelaer, *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (1565, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique); Pieter Aertsen, *Martha Preparing Dinner for Jesus* (Musée de Toulon, France).

15.   Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, 'Disturbances in the Art of the Early Modern Netherlands and the Formation of the Subject in Pieter Aertsen's *Christ at the House of Martha and Mary*', *American Imago*, 57.4 (2000), pp. 387-402 (389).

in the background. To a contemporary viewer, this painting illustrates a rather voluptuous cook preparing a large cut of meat and fowl on a skewer for roasting over an open fire, surrounded by still-life elements of vegetables and kitchen utensils. Her gaze directs viewers' attention to an unseen part of the room. Although not explicitly included, sixteenth-century viewers would have recognized Aertsen's allusions to the biblical story of Mary and Martha taken from Lk. 10.38-42. Aertsen captures the moment when Martha, the cook, takes a moment from the busy preparations of the meal to glance over at Christ conversing with Mary. To understand this painting fully, viewers have to know the biblical story, and reconstruct the episode as seen by Martha in their visual imaginations. Véronique Bücken points out that the moralizing content of this painting warns viewers against the dangers of the pleasures of the flesh, *voluptas carnis*.[16] In the Barber *Still Life*, Baschenis, too, like Aertsen, alludes to biblical passages, Genesis 3 and Ecclesiastes 1–3, to warn against the pleasures of the flesh. As I explain later, the symbolism of the shawm and the lute in this painting call to mind the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15.11-32) and the legendary story of the singer and dancer, Mary Madgalene, who both lived sinful lives of pleasure prior to their conversions. As in Aertsen's painting, *The Cook*, the Barber *Still Life* warns viewers against living a sinful and conceited life.

   Charles Sterling notes the significant influence of Caravaggio (1571–1610) and his followers on Baschenis's still-life paintings of musical instruments:

> He painted many kitchen tables loaded with plucked chickens and fish. But it must have been Caravaggio's compositions that opened his eyes to the possibility afforded by musical instruments to the painter bent on making still life into an assemblage of fascinating forms. He elicited from viols and lutes an admirable plastic music. Their fully rounded bodies, smooth or grooved, their taut necks and curving scrolls all answer to each other through the half-light with echoes of arabesques and silky gleams.[17]

Francesco Rossi speculates that Baschenis may have been acquainted with the still-life paintings of flowers and fruit from his native Lombardy where Caravaggio first created his genre of still-life masterpieces.[18] Enrico De Pascale points out that Baschenis possibly saw the impressive still-life

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   16.   Véronique Bücken, 'Pieter Aertsen', in Eliane De Wilde (ed.), *Museum of Ancient Art: A Selection of Works* (Ghent: Snoeck–Ducaju, 2006), pp. 76-77 (76).

   17.   Sterling, *Still Life Painting*, p. 62.

   18.   Francesco Rossi, 'The Accademia Carrara of Bergamo: Outline of a Cultural Policy', in Bayer (ed.), *The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis*, pp. 18-23 (22).

representations of foreshortened musical instruments in Caravaggio's genre paintings on his many journeys to Rome.[19] In all, Caravaggio painted five significant genre paintings incorporating musical instruments.[20] In a second version of the *Lute Player* painted for Cardinal Del Monte (1596–97, Metropolitan Museum, New York), Caravaggio depicts a tenor recorder, a violin, and a spinettina on a table in front of a male lutenist, alongside an open score and a book. The viewer will notice the uncanny similarities between Caravaggio's inclusion of musical instruments placed upon a table beside an open musical score and a book, and Baschenis's inclusion and depiction of musical instruments, an open score, and books in the Barber *Still Life*. Musicologists have identified the musical score as a partbook from the Venetian edition of Jacques Arcadelt's *Primo libro a quattro voci* (1538). Although the madrigal in this painting remains unidentified, composers of sixteenth-century madrigals set music to the poetic texts of Francesco Petrarca (1304–74), Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), Torquato Tasso (1544–95) and Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538–1612). In particular, composers of madrigals liked to select poetic texts that contained sentimental and erotic imagery.[21] The significance of a madrigal in Carvaggio's *Lute Player* highlights to viewers the earthly pleasures of the flesh. An earlier version of Caravaggio's *Lute Player* (1595–96, Hermitage, St Petersburg), painted for Vincenzo Giustiniani, substitutes the tenor recorder and spinettina for flowers, fruit, and vegetables. This painting includes a musical score with a bass partbook open on the first page of the Madrigal, *Voi sapete ch 'io v'amo*, taken also from Arcadelt's *Primo libro a quattro voci* (1538). In this painting, the fruit in the basket shows evidence of decay and the lute reveals a crack to symbolize the brevity and brokenness of earthly existence as well as the certainty of death. In the Barber *Still Life*, Baschenis too, includes an apple with visible spots of decay, placed on top of the violin, as well as broken strings on the string instruments to suggest humanity's fall from grace, suggestive of Genesis 3.

The depiction of the sumptuous drape in the Barber *Still Life* is similar to the depiction of the red drape that frames the bed of the dead Virgin in Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* (1604–1606, Louvre, Paris). In this

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19.   De Pascale, 'In Praise of Silence', p. 33.

20.   *Concert* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art); *Lute Player* (Leningrad, Hermitage); *Amor Victorious* (Berlin, *Staatliche Museen*); *Lute Player* (New York, Metropolitan Museum), *Rest During the Flight into Egypt,* (Rome, *Galleria Doria Pamphili*).

21.   Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca (eds.), *A History of Western Music* (New York and London: W.W Norton, 2009), p. 246.

painting, Caravaggio presents a shocking portrayal of death in all its glory; the viewer observes the Virgin's swollen, dirty feet protruding over the bed and her death-ridden pallor illuminated by the light. There are four points of similarities between this painting and the Barber *Still Life*. First, the mood evoked in both paintings is very similar and reflects the silence brought about by death's arrival. This scene depicts the emotional effects brought about by death in the grief-stricken disciples on the left as they surround the Virgin's corpse, and in a grieving Mary Magdalene on the right whose task it is to wash the Virgin's body with water from the copper utensil placed in the painting's foreground. Caravaggio accentuates the emotion of this scene through the concealment of faces, most notably illustrated by the figure of Mary Magdalene and the two apostles to the left of the Virgin's bed whose faces remain hidden behind their hands. By comparison, the mood of the Barber *Still Life* is sombre and silent. Second, Caravaggio applied the principle of chiaroscuro to illuminate the Virgin's upper torso in the same manner as Baschenis applied the technique to illuminate the manuscript located on top of the violin. In both paintings, this technique highlights for the viewer the inevitability of death. Third, the Virgin's feet protrude over the bed in the same manner as the spinet, shawm and lute jut out over the table and project into the viewer's space in the Barber *Still Life*, to emphasize the fact that death awaits every mortal creature. Fourth, Baschenis, like Caravaggio, includes a sumptuous drape to represent the borderline between heaven and earth and the upward ascent of the soul's movement at death.

The construction of Baschenis's *Still Life* replicates the interior structure of a tomb: the elaborate curtain framing the objects creates the illusion of a tomb's portal. The viewer, now present in the tomb, through the act of viewing, sees the musical instruments that lie forever silent in the stillness of the dark interior. The light shining down on the musical score and onto each instrument is hopeful, for despite humanity's sinful nature as indicated by the symbolism of the instruments, it is suggestive of hope and life beyond the grave. The stillness of this painting is designed to evoke a meditative response in viewers, and encourage reflection not only on the inevitability of death, but also on the presence or absence of God in their lives.

3. The Symbolism of Musical Instruments in Art

Before I discuss the symbolism of the five instruments in the Barber *Still Life*, I want to discuss briefly the symbolism of instruments in general in paintings to illustrate how on the one hand they symbolized angelic

perfection and, on the other, represented humanity's fallen, sinful nature. From the middle ages artists featured angel instrumentalists performing music in praise of God, Christ and the Virgin Mary, rejoicing at the Nativity (Lk. 2.7), and in the announcement to the shepherds in the fields (Lk. 2.13-14).[22] Hans Memling's polyptych, *Christ as Salvator mundi among Musical and Singing Angels* (1487–90), depicts angel instrumentalists playing a variety of instruments in praise of Christ. Instruments played by angel musicians include a psaltery, tromba marina, lute, folded trumpet, and a treble shawm, a straight trumpet, folded trumpet, portative organ, harp, and fiddle. Memling surely based his angel concert on the biblical exhortation to praise God with all manner of instruments from Psalm 150.

From the fifteenth century, artists identified the same angelic instruments in the hands of human beings and demons with sin and sensuality. In the *Downfall of Rebellious Angels* (1562, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique), Bruegel the Elder depicts the archangel Michael's battle with the fallen angels based upon Rev. 12.7-9, a scene frequently illustrated by artists from the Middle Ages. Fallen angels, in various states of transformation into monsters and reptiles play loud shawms and long trumpets to symbolize their newly acquired carnal nature. In the right panel of the triptych *Garden of Delights* (1470, Museo del Prado, Madrid) (fig. 2), Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1560) depicts demons using musical instruments to torture sinners.

In this panel, based upon Isa. 14.11-12, demons crucify their victims to the neck of a giant lute, and across the expanse of a twenty-one stringed medieval harp. The lute rests on top of an open manuscript, revealing a four-line staff and neumes, to suggest the music of sacred plainchant. To the left of the oversized hurdy-gurdy, known also as a beggar's lyre, a demon choir sing their raucous music as a demon chorister points to the neumes of plainchant printed on the buttocks of a sinner crushed by the lute. To the right of the hurdy-gurdy, another demon with red, puffed cheeks plays a long trumpet as a group of sinners cover their ears to block out the loud, deafening sound of Hell's music. Adding to the frenzy and debauchery of this repulsive scene, a demon plays a continuous, pulsating beat on a blue drum that is home to a sinner incarcerated within its confines. To the right, another sinner balances on a folded trumpet as a recorder protrudes from his rear orifice, while he attempts to support a giant shawm held upright on his arched back.

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22.   Barra Boydell, *Music and Painting in the National Gallery of Ireland* (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 1985), p. 4.

Figure 2. Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Delights* (1470),
Museo del Prado, Madrid

At the top of the hurdy-gurdy, a blind beggar turns its crank, and, with the other hand, holds a bowl and disc as a symbol of his lowly status, as was required by the order of the Duke of Philip the Good.[23] The woman, who peers out from behind the instrument's keybox, just below the turning wheel, plays a medieval triangle characterized by a series of rings on the lower bar. The viewer not only sees the chaos and debauchery of Hell, but hears also the sound of its loud, screeching music, used so effectively by demons to torture unfortunate sinners. Baschenis, in a manner similar to Bruegel the Elder and Hieronymus Bosch, used the symbolism of musical instruments to highlight the effects of life without God. In paintings, the symbolism of instruments is double-edged, for an instrument in the hands of an angel has a very different meaning to the same instrument held in the hands of a human being or a demon. In examining the symbolism of the five instruments in the Barber *Still Life*, I will look also at the depiction of the same instruments in other biblical paintings to appreciate more fully the symbolism implied by Baschenis in his depiction of musical instruments.

a. *Spinet*

Baschenis depicts the spinet, a keyboard instrument, to the left of the painting, jutting out over the edge of the table. The spinet was related to other instruments of the harpsichord type, most notably the virginals, clavecin, and the clavicembalo. These instruments came in a variety of shapes and constructions: long winged (harpsichord, clavicembalo, clavecin, virginal), rectangular (virginal, spinet and spinetto), pentagonal (spinetto), and short winged extending diagonally (spinet). The sound from the spinet was produced by a plucking mechanism of the string, and this produced a delicate, non-resonant tone from the instrument. For this reason, the spinet was ideally placed in the *Vanitas* tradition, for as soon as an instrumentalist articulated a note, the sound disappeared. The spinet was a portable instrument, without legs, and required a flat surface such as table to rest upon, as can be seen in the Barber *Still Life*. It was very popular in aristocratic homes, and played for solo and ensemble playing, as well as providing an accompaniment for singers.

    As an amateur musician, Baschenis played the spinet, and studied this instrument in minute detail for inclusion in his paintings. He depicted himself playing the spinet in a self-portrait entitled, *Musical Performance with Evaristo Baschenis and Ottavio Agliardi with an Archlute and a Musical*

23.   Laurinda Dixon, *Bosch* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2006), p. 268.

Still Life (mandola, guitar, bass viola da gamba) (1665, Palazzo Agliardi, Bergamo) where the painting forms part of a triptych of paintings from the Agliardi collection at Bergamo (c. 1665–70). Significantly, Baschenis recorded his signature on the spinet in the Barber *Still Life*, and in the self-portrait from the Agliardi collection, indicating to the viewer that the spinet was an instrument in his possession, and one he played in aristocratic company. In general, neither the spinet nor instruments of the harpsichord type appeared very often, if at all, in biblical art partly because they were associated more with music making in aristocratic households. There is an exception to this observation, however, in a painting entitled *Prodigal Son Feasting with the Courtesans* (uncertain date, Musées des Beaux-Arts, Nimes) by the Flemish painter Pieter Jansz Pourbus (1523–84), depicting the prodigal son in a brothel, enjoying all the earthly pleasures of the senses. A female instrumentalist plays the virginals, to the accompaniment of a lute played by a male instrumental-ist, to symbolize the lewd conduct of those represented in the scene. Vermeer (1632–75) regularly painted female instrumentalists playing the virginals, harpsichord, viola da gamba, lute, and cittern, but unlike Pourbus's depiction, his paintings reflect the elevated social class of young, virginal ladies in the serene setting of the family home. Vermeer's paintings form a contrast with various paintings of peasants and their noisy, raucous music played on hurdy-gurdies, bagpipes, rackets, and rommelpots. Baschenis, like Vermeer, only painted musical instruments associated with the aristocratic classes, as it ensured a viable market for his paintings.

b. *Lute and Mandola*
Baschenis placed a large upturned lute to the right of the table to form a near symmetrical balance with the spinet to the left, and an upturned mandola, that is, a fretted stringed instrument with metal strings, to the left of the Lombard Cabinet.[24]   Renaissance lutes derived from the

24.   A similar type of Lombard Cabinet features in Baschenis's *Still Life with Musical Instruments, a Globe, and Cabinet* (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice). See Andrea Bayer, '*Still Life with Musical Instruments, a Globe, and Cabinet (recorder, shawm, violin with bow, mandola, lute*', in Bayer (ed.), *The Still Lifes of Evaristo Baschenis*, pp. 110-13 (112). The small box contained within this cabinet in the Barber *Still Life* would have contained either precious items or sweets and candied fruit. A similar small box is found in *Still Life with a Nautilus, Panther Shell, and Chip-Wood Box* (1630, Metropolitan Museum, New York) by Sébastien Stoskopff (1597–1657). A chip-wood box is found also in *Le cinq sens* (1638, Musées des Beaux-Arts, Palais Rohan, Strasbourg), and *Vase de fleurs sur la boîte de copeaux* (c. 1640, Karlsruhe Staatliche Kunsthalle) by the French artist,

Arabian Ud and were introduced by the Moors during their conquest and occupation of Spain (711–1492). The lute and the mandola had specific V*anitas* significance in seventeenth-century still-life paintings; the fleeting nature of their sound and the physical fragility of the instruments made them fitting emblems of transience. Baschenis incorporated his trademark *trompe d'oeil* dust on the bodies of his lutes, and emphasized this effect with a trail of finger-marks, alluding to the presence of human beings; this effect is unique to Baschenis and found in no other *Vanitas* painting before his time. The inclusion of dust on the musical instruments highlights the biblical focus of the painting and points to humanity's origins (Gen. 2.7), the ephemerality of human existence, and the inevitability of death (Gen. 3.14, 19; Eccl. 1.2, 3:20):

> All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again (Eccl. 3.20).

The link with the creation and fall narratives from Genesis 1–3 is further emphasized by the seven course strings of the lute to symbolize the seven days of creation taken from Genesis 1, and the seven deadly sins of lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. The broken strings on the mandola and violin, by comparison, symbolize the fragility and brokenness of human existence brought about by sin, together with the inevitability of sickness and death (Genesis 3).

The monogram M+H on the end-clasp of the multi-rib yew lute identifies the sixteenth-century German lute maker Michael Hartung as the manufacturer.[25] The lute depicted is typical of its period, with a rounded profile and multi-rib backs of stripped heart and sapwood yew, bent and glued together. The neck of the lute is concealed by the lute's voluptuous body, and the pegbox with its tuning pegs inserted laterally can be seen standing against the rounded profile of the instrument. The symbolism of the lute was double-edged in paintings; as an instrument of the angels, it symbolized spiritual harmony, whereas in the hands of men, women, and demons it was considered an emblem of lust and lasciviousness.

Jacque Linard (1600–45). In the Barber *Still Life*, this box resembles a miniature coffin, serving to remind viewers of the futility and impermanence of earthly possessions and pleasures.

  25.   Colin Slim, 'Morando's La Rosalinda of 1650: Visual, Dramatic, Literary, and Musical Progeny', in Irena Alm and Alyson Mclamore (eds.), *Musica franca: Essays in Honour of Frank A. D'Acione* (New York: Pendregon Press, 1996), pp. 567-85 (570).

Figure 3. Piero della Francesca, *The Nativity* (1470–75),
The National Gallery, London

Piero della Francesa's painting entitled *The Nativity* (1470–75,
National Gallery, London) (fig. 3), includes string instruments to sym-
bolize harmony between the earthly and spiritual realms. In this painting,
three angelic instrumentalists accompany two angel choristers to sere-
nade the infant Jesus at his birth. The instrumentalists stand in perform-
ance position, with feet placed in acutangular leg position, while the two
angel choristers distinguished by hair accessories and ornate high-church
collars sing to the accompaniment of two lutes and what appears to be
either a rebec or a vielle, that is a mediaeval fiddle, played by an angel
who stands between the two lutenists. The whole of creation participates
in the music-making, including the braying donkey who sings with the
angel choristers to his left. Piero della Francesca set the heavenly and
earthly realms apart by positioning the angelic musicians to the left and
Joseph and the shepherds to the right. The Virgin, who kneels on an area
of sand between the two realms of heaven and earth, acts as a mediator

connecting heaven and earth through the symbolism of her blue cloak, that swirls across the border of heaven and earth to cushion and support her infant child. While the music plays, this border momentarily disappears to symbolize the meeting of heaven and earth. The shepherd to the right of the painting holds a sceptre that points heavenward, and like a conductor with a baton, invites the viewer along with the whole of creation to join in the musical celebration of the birth of Christ.

    Conversely, in human hands the lute was a symbol of lust and sensuality. In paintings of the sixteenth century, this instrument had become a metaphor for sex, and by the seventeenth century, it was an attribute of procuresses and prostitutes.[26] Craig McFeely points out that the Flemish for lute, *luit*, was also the word for vagina; he notes how this translation explains why numerous paintings from the Low Countries depict prostitutes holding lutes.[27] The Flemish Master of the Female Half-Lengths (1530s) depicts Mary Magdalene as a lutenist in five paintings,[28] to suggest her wayward life before her legendary conversion upon meeting Christ. Although the biblical writer(s) never referred to Mary Magdalene in this way, the Golden Legend associated her with the sinful woman who anointed Christ's feet in Simon's house (Lk. 7.36-50). Colin Slim points out that the musicologist Daniel Heartz has identified the music illustrated from one of the paintings by the Master of the Female Half-Lengths as a chanson by Claude de Sermisy (1490–1562), *Jouyssance vous donneray*, first published by Pierre Attaingnant (c. 1494–1552) in 1528.[29] The French composer, Thoinot Arbeau (1519–95), set the tenor part of this chanson as a *basse dance*, that is, a graceful court dance from the fifteenth century. The inclusion of this chanson/*basse dance* in the painting points to the Magdalene's reputation as a singer and a dancer.[30] All five paintings by the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, according to Slim, have inscribed a lute tabulation of the two lower voices of the three-part chanson, *Si j'ayme mon amy* by Chansonnier de Françoise de Foix.[31] The lyrics point to the Magdalene's wayward life, as illustrated below by the second-last verse:

26. Zecher, 'The Gendering of the Lute in Sixteenth-Century French Love Poetry', p. 774.
27. Cited in Zecher, 'The Gendering of the Lute in Sixteenth-Century French Love Poetry', p. 774.
28. See Colin Slim, 'Mary Magdalene, Musician and Dancer', *Early Music* 8.4 (1980).
29. Slim, 'Mary Magdalene, Musician and Dancer', pp. 462-63.
30. Slim, 'Mary Magdalene, Musician and Dancer', p. 463.
31. Slim, 'Mary Magdalene, Musician and Dancer', p. 463.

Bien doibt etre marri,
Celuy qui est mari
D'une putain de feme,
Qui va veoir son amy,
Quant il est endormi:
Tant set orde es infame! [32]

The lute also features prominently in brothel scenes depicting the prodigal son's life of drunken debauchery and sexual licentiousness. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo depicts the prodigal son in a tavern surrounded by the earthly pleasures of food and love in *The Prodigal Son Feasting with Courtesans* (1660, National Gallery of Ireland) (fig. 4), based upon Lk. 15.11-24. In the shadow of the foreground to the left, the neck of a lute, as played by a male lutenist, directs viewers' attention to the prodigal son depicted centre-stage. It is significant that a male rather than a female lutenist serenades the couple, for the symbolism of this instrument and its performance by a male instrumentalist point to the sexual licentiousness of the prodigal son.

Figure 4. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo,
The Prodigal Son Feasting with Courtesans (1660s),
The National Gallery of Ireland

32.   William M. McMurtry, *Selected Chansons from the British Library MS Additional 35087* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1985), pp. 55-57.

   Baschenis chose not to reveal the lute's flat soundboard with its carved, ornate sound-hole known also as its 'rose', possibly because this part of the lute represents the female genitalia. The French humanist François Rabelais (1494–1553) made up the pun *jouer de luc*[33] to refer to an act of love-making; in general, depictions of lutes in biblical paintings reflect this understanding. In the Barber *Still Life*, the symbolism of the lute as an instrument associated with sexual licentiousness combined with the symbolism of the apple with evident signs of decay would seem to suggest that Baschenis was illustrating the fall of humanity based on Genesis 3 to warn viewers against the dangers of a life without God, and to urge them to guard against the transient pleasures associated with their sinful, carnal nature.

c. *Violin*

The violin and bow placed on the Lombard cabinet were made by Nicoló Amati, a famous Cremonese violin maker, whose instruments are still highly regarded today. This instrument conforms to the way violins were made before 1750; the viewer will observe how the neck of the instrument is more in line with its body, and how the fingerboard is shorter than modern fingerboards. In the late eighteenth century, a slight tilting back of the neck and an elongation of the fingerboard facilitated the execution of musical passages requiring more intricate finger-work. At the time when Baschenis was painting his still-life paintings of musical instruments, Cremona was noted for its manufacture of excellent quality stringed instruments; this tradition was established in the sixteenth century by the Amati family, whose craftsmanship led to the manufacture of the modern violin. By 1530 they had set up a shop in Cremona under the leadership of Andrea Amati (c. 1511–77). When Andrea died, the Amati brothers, Antonio (1540–1607) and Girolamo Amati (c. 1561–1630), carried on the tradition of violin making. The most illustrious member of the family was Nicolò, Girolamo's son, who trained the notable violin makers Antonio Stradivari (c. 1644–1737) and Andrea Guarneri, known also as del Gesù (1623–98). Nicolò Amati was the sole member of his family, and the only professional violin maker in Cremona to survive the Great Plague of Milan in 1630.

   The violin, along with the lute, was a popular instrument in *Vanitas* paintings during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As in other paintings of this genre, the [D] string of the violin represented is broken

   33.   Zecher, 'The Gendering of the Lute in Sixteenth-Century French Love Poetry', p. 772.

to symbolize humanity's discordant nature brought about by the fall as recounted in Genesis 3. The violin's depiction in art, unlike the lute, tends not to contain any allegorical allusions to licentiousness or debauchery. Baschenis draws attention to this distinction by placing the violin on a higher plain, while instruments symbolizing lust and lasciviousness, the lute and shawm, are placed at a lower level. Stringed instruments pre-dating the violin such as the rebec, the mediaeval fiddle, also called the vielle or fiedel, the Renaissance lira da braccia, and the viola da gamba, are more often included in biblical paintings. Paolo Veronese included musical instruments in *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1562–63), Musée de Louvre, Paris) (fig. 5), based upon Jn 2.1-11.

Figure 5. Paolo Veronese, *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1562–63),
Louvre, Paris

This painting was commissioned by the Benedictines for their refectory at the Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. Masking as a musician, the artist painted himself dressed in white playing the viola da gamba, next to fellow artists Titian in red, and Bassano in the centre depicted also as musicians playing the viola da gamba and bass viola da gamba known also as the *violone*. All three artist-musicians peer into a shared copy of music placed on a table in the sumptuous setting of a Venetian wedding. A vertical line cuts through the centre of the painting to reveal Christ, not as a guest but as the host sitting beside his

mother in plain clothing. The central balustrade above Christ depicts the butchering of a lamb, evoking Eucharistic symbolism, while below on the musician's table an hourglass and a dog chewing a bone are represented as symbols of Christ's Passion and Death. Veronese placed the ethereal music of stringed instruments centre-stage just below Christ, to symbolize the supernatural nature of Christ's power that transcended the boundaries of time and space, of heaven and earth, at the precise moment of the miraculous transformation of water into wine. In the Barber *Still Life*, a source of light at the highest point of the painting above the violin suggests to viewers the hope of eternal life beyond the grave.

d. *Shawm*

As in his other still-life paintings of musical instruments, Baschenis incorporates an alto shawm in the Barber *Still Life*, placed between the mandola on the left and the lute on the right. This instrument was a precursor of the modern oboe, and was introduced into Europe during the crusades. During their military conquests, crusaders heard the terrifying sound of screeching Saracen shawms played as weapons in psychological warfare. Impressed by the power of this sound, crusaders brought it back to Europe where it was played by Waits who guarded the city walls, and by town musicians who played music for dance and ceremonial occasions. Shawms were made of various hardwoods and had a conical bore expanding into a bell. They were usually made in one piece, except for the larger instruments that had several sections fitted together. In the Barber *Still Life*, the bell duct of the shawm is visible. Shawms generally had little external ornamentation and were slightly tapered in outline. At the top end of the shawm, not seen in the Barber *Still Life*, there were three detachable parts, the staple, pirouette, and a reed. The player's lips rested against the top of the pirouette which supported the *embouchure* against fatigue to allow the reed to vibrate freely inside the mouth. There are many depictions of musical ensembles in which one shawm is resting, illustrating the strain placed on the lips in performance. Denis van Alsloot's painting entitled, *Procession of the Religious Orders of Antwerp on the Feast of the Rosary* (1616, Museo del Prado, Madrid) depicts a treble shawm, two tenor shawms, a cornett, trombone, and a curtal. Early accounts of shawms suggest that it was extremely loud and powerful, and for this reason, more suited to being played outdoors as illustrated by van Alsloot.

As noted previously, in biblical and religious art before the sixteenth century, artists popularly depicted angels playing this instrument in the heavenly orchestra. However, as Boydell points out, from the sixteenth

century, woodwind instruments were associated with sensuality and sin due to the instrument's long, phallic appearance.[34] For this reason, shawms along with bagpipes were associated with peasants, and included in scenes of weddings, brothels, and dancing outdoors. Shawms and bagpipes were also included in depictions of the prodigal son feasting with courtesans. In a painting entitled *The Prodigal Son* (1556, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique), Jan Sanders Van Hemessen depicts the prodigal son in a brothel, drunk and surrounded by women, while in the background, a male musician, with a lecherous gleam in his eye, plays a bag-pipe. The phallic appearance of this instrument alludes to the male genitalia, and points to the debauchery and lechery of the prodigal son's activities, as 'he abandons himself to the sins of the senses: lechery, gluttony, and laziness'.[35] Baschenis includes a shawm in the Barber *Still Life* to depict men's flawed, carnal nature and their potential for sin in lascivious acts, in the same way he includes a lute to depict woman's sinful nature.

4. *The Significance of Books and Musical Scores*

Like other painters of the *Vanitas* tradition, Baschenis incorporated a number of untitled as well as a small proportion of titled books in his still-life paintings with musical instruments. In general, books in the *Vanitas* tradition emphasized the futility of knowledge as outlined in Eccl. 3.18:

> For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
> the more knowledge, the more grief.

Untitled books, as seen in the Barber *Still Life*, highlight the *Vanitas* theme of the passage of time. Baschenis illuminates such books to accentuate the worn, dog-eared, and dust-laden exteriors found strewn across the table or stacked precariously on top of an instrument or other books. Placed beneath the shadows of the Lombard Cabinet, a book, *La Rosalinda*, stands out faintly illuminated in uppercase letters along the book's spine. Written in 1650 by the Italian novelist Bernardo Morando (1589–1656), this novel enjoyed immense popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with over twenty reprints since its initial publication.[36] A slightly adapted version of the novel exists in translation

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34. Boydell, *Music and Painting in the National Gallery of Ireland*, pp. 4-5.

35. Véronique Bücken, 'Jan Sanders Van Hemessen', in Eliane De Wilde (ed.), *Museum of Ancient Art: A Selection of Works* (Ghent: Snoeck–Ducaju, 2006), pp. 74-75 (74).

36. Albert N. Mancini, 'The Forms of Long Prose Fiction in Late Medieval and

into French (1730), and then English (1733).[37] Substantial in length, the Italian edition boasts 696 pages divided into ten books, and the English version, substantially shorter, consists of 347 pages divided into eight books.[38] While the contemporary viewer might wonder why Baschenis incorporated *La Rosalinda* in his *Still Life*, a seventeenth-century viewer, familiar with the story, would have understood the book's relevance and significance in this painting. First, the themes of death, loss, and separation, so prevalent in this novel, fit very well with similar themes from paintings of the *Vanitas* tradition. Second, Morando had written this novel as an apology, set within a fictional story, for Roman Catholics who in seventeenth-century England and Ireland faced persecution and death for the practice of their faith. The story is set against the historical background of the English Civil Wars (1642–49), and the Barbary pirate raids that plagued the coasts of Christian Europe, North America, Canada, and Iceland in the seventeenth century. The narrative accurately and intricately weaves real-life and tragic events into the fabric of the fictional story. Third, the novel's incorporation into the painting enables the viewer to commemorate the death of King Charles I, whose story Morando tells alongside that of Rosalinda's. Charles was beheaded on 30 January 1649, on a scaffold erected outside the Banqueting House in Whitehall, London, on the charge of 'high treason against the realm of England'. Following his death, Charles was hailed as a martyr; to this day supporters lay wreaths of remembrance, on his anniversary, at his statue, which faces down Whitehall to the place of his execution. Fourth, the novel's inclusion in the painting enables the viewer to commemorate the suffering, slavery and death of thousands of Christians abducted against their will, separated from their families forever, and auctioned at the Bedistan slave markets in Algeria in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Finally, there are a number of musical themes incorporated into the storyline of the novel, which complement the musical theme of

Early Modern Italian Literature', in Peter Bondanella and Andrea Ciccarelli (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 20-41 (30).

37. B. Morando, *Rosalinda, A Novel: Containing the Histories of Rosalinda and Lealdus. Intermixed with a Variety of the Most Affecting Scenes Both of Distress and Happiness* (London: Davis, 1733).

38. Sourced at Database: Eighteenth Century Collections Online, University College, Cork, http://0-find.galegroup.com.library.ucc.ie/ecco/infomark.do?type= search&tabID=T001&queryId=Locale(en,,):FQE%3D(BN,None,7)T129715$&sort=Author &searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&version=1.0&userGroupName=uccork&prodId=ECCO (accessed 10th April, 2010).

Baschenis's *Still Life*. At every opportunity, Morando weaves the theme of death into the fabric of his storyline, with graphic accounts of death resulting from illness, accident, warfare, and murder. Apart from the novel's popularity, one can understand why Baschenis saw fit to incorporate it in his *Still Life*, with its references to music, combined with the pervading theme of death. The English and French editions of this novel omitted many of the subtle references to music contained in the Italian edition. For example, at the end of the Italian version, Morando provides an accurate description of Rosalinda's religious profession, including authentic details of the religious ceremony at the time, with details of the music performed.

Baschenis includes mostly untitled musical scores in his still-life paintings with musical instruments, with one such score included in the Barber *Still Life*. The score found in the latter, illuminated by the light, appears to balance rather precariously on the ebony Lombard cabinet, and tilts in a direction away from the spectator. At the same time, the opened page of music juts out, inviting examination by the passing eye. On closer inspection, the viewer will observe text-like markings below the first and third staffs of music, suggesting perhaps the words of an air or recitative. There is no text below the second and fourth staffs, suggesting an accompaniment line. The score indicates that a singer, accompanied by a musical instrument, might have been present during the concert of music that had taken place long ago. Interestingly, whether one views the score from the left or the right, that is, underside down or not, the musical parts are accurately portrayed, with the top line designated for the singer, indicated by the text underneath this line, and the lower line designated for the accompaniment.

Artists generally incorporate titled scores into a painting to give a clue to the painting's meaning. Martin O'Kane points out that knowledge of the contents of an actual musical score in a painting is a key to understanding the painting's meaning. For example, he notes that in Caravaggio's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (c. 1597, Doria Pamphilj, Rome), musicologists have identified the music as a motet based upon the Song of Solomon 7.6-7 by the Flemish composer Noël Bauldewijn.[39] The letter Q on the score, visible to the viewer, is suggestive of a text from the Song of Solomon found also in the Office of the Vespers.[40] O'Kane notes that in reading the score, the viewer becomes 'part of the

39.   Martin O'Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), p. 87.

40.   O'Kane, *Painting the Text*, p. 87.

Vespers picture and joins in the devotion to Mary, as suggested by the text of the Song of Solomon'.[41] But Baschenis, unlike Caravaggio, did not include authentic music in his illuminated score, although he tricks viewers into thinking that he did. The musical score, as explained above, masquerades reality and therefore, is as meaningless as a life of fleeting pleasure.

5. Conclusion

Baschenis invented a new genre of *Vanitas* painting based solely on the symbolism of musical instruments to enable viewers reflect on the fallen nature of humanity's sinful condition, and the inevitability of death as outlined in Genesis 3 and the Book of Ecclestiastes. Even though the subject matter of this painting might appear outwardly secular, an exposition of the symbolism of objects reveals its biblical focus. The Barber *Still Life* resembles the genre paintings of Pieter Aertsen, in particular, his rendition of the story of Mary and Martha based upon Lk. 10.38-42 as depicted in *The Cook* (1559, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique). In a similar manner, Baschenis depicts outwardly secular subject matter, musical instruments, with a biblical focus based on Genesis 3, Ecclestiastes, and Luke 10.38-42; 15:11-24, together with a *Vanitas* theme warning against the dangers of *voluptas carnis*. The inspiration for depicting so many musical instruments in any one single painting may have come from Caravaggio, who, as I explained, painted five paintings featuring still-life elements that included musical instruments. If one compares, for example, Caravaggio's *Lute Player* (1596–97, Metropolitan Museum, New York) to the Barber *Still Life*, one notices the uncanny similarities between the two paintings, in the choice, placement and depiction of musical instruments, together with the inclusion of *Vanitas* elements such as broken instruments, rotten fruit, books, and musical scores. Baschenis replicated also the mood of Caravaggio's *The Dead Virgin* (1604–1606, Louvre, Paris) in his treatment of subject matter, and in his application of the principles of chiaroscuro and foreshortening.

To uncover the symbolism of the five musical instruments depicted in the Barber *Still Life*, it was necessary to analyse the symbolism of musical instruments in general and in particular in other biblical paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This analysis confirmed the biblical focus of the painting. While up to the fourteenth century, artists

41. O'Kane, *Painting the Text*, pp. 87-88.

incorporated all types of wind, string, and percussive instruments to illustrate the angels' praise of God, Christ, and Mary, from the fifteenth century on they incorporated instruments played by fallen angels, men, and women to symbolize their carnal natures resulting from the Fall. A brief analysis of the instruments depicted in *Hell* from the right panel of the triptych, *Garden of Delights* (1470, Museo del Prado, Madrid) by Hieronymus Bosch reveals my point; in this depiction, demons use musical instruments, more often than not, in a sexual way to punish sinners for having led lives of excessive earthly pleasures. In true *Vanitas* style, Bosch's painting contains a shocking, moralistic message to alert viewers to the dangers against living a life of excess. In this painting, Bosch equates instruments not with the praise of God, but with the Fall of humanity into Hell. From this analysis, it was clear that Baschenis, too, used instruments to point to the Fall from grace as based upon Genesis 3.

My analysis of the five instruments from the Barber *Still Life* and their symbolism in other biblical paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries revealed a connection between the appearances of certain musical instruments and the sexual nature and activities of men and women. In general, the shawm along with other woodwind instruments, including the flute and the bagpipes, are associated with the male genitalia, and feature prominently in paintings of the prodigal son feasting with courtesans in a tavern or a brothel, as based upon Lk. 15.13. The voluptuous body of the lute together with its rose, symbolizes the female body and genitalia, and features in paintings depicting Mary Magdalene, who, as the Golden Legend recounts, was a dancer and a singer before meeting Christ. The lute features also in paintings of the prodigal son, as depicted in Murillo's *The Prodigal Son Feasting with Courtesans* (1660s, National Gallery of Ireland) to symbolize the sexual licentiousness of his activity in the brothel. In the hands of angels however, this instrument and its music symbolizes the harmony between the heavenly and earthly realms at Christ's Incarnation (Lk. 2.1-20), as depicted by Piero della Francesca in *The Nativity* (1470–75, National Gallery, London). In the Barber *Still Life*, the lute, mandola, and shawn represent the carnal natures of men and women, and their propensity for sin as represented by the seven course stings of the lute, symbolizing the seven deadly sins. The violin, placed on the highest plain, is unlike the other instruments as it symbolizes the hope brought about by Christ's Resurection. Paolo Veronese depicts the positive attribution of string instruments in *The Wedding Feast at Cana* (1562–63, Musée de Louvre, Paris). In this painting based upon Jn 2.1-11, the ethereal music of the viola da gamba and

the violone symbolizes Christ's power to transcend the boundaries of time and space, of heaven and earth, at the precise moment of his first public miracle. The spinet features more prominently in paintings of the haute-bourgeoisie than it does in biblical art. However when instruments of the keyboard type, such as the virginals, are depicted in biblical paintings, as in *Prodigal Son Feasting with the Courtesans* (uncertain date, Musées des Beaux-Arts, Nimes) by Pourbus, they point to the licentiousness of the prodigal son's activities in a brothel.

In a manner similar to other painters of the *Vanitas* tradition, Baschenis depicted fruit, books, and musical scores strewn about the table. The apple placed upon the violin points to the fruit of Gen. 3.1-13, while books, as emblems of knowledge, point to the futility of wisdom and to the passage of time as illustrated by their worn, dog-eared, and dust-laden exteriors. Baschenis tricks the viewer into thinking that the manuscript, placed on top of the Lombard Cabinet, contains authentic music, when in reality the music is as meaningless as a life of fleeting pleasure. Through his trickery, Baschenis highlights the Great Deception of Gen. 3.1-6, and in so doing, highlights the futility of pleasure, knowledge, and wisdom (Gen. 3.6), and the certainty of sickness, toil, and death (Gen. 3.16-19). He presents to viewers the tragedy of the human condition, as symbolized by the musical instruments, and recounted by the episodes and narratives from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Despite the certainty of death that pervades the painting, the light that falls on each of the five musical instruments symbolizes the hope of Christ's Resurrection that exists for every individual. In the Barber *Still Life*, as in other still-life paintings with musical instruments, Baschenis does not dictate how life ought to be lived. Rather, through the meditative silence of this painting, he presents viewers with the stark reality of a life without God, hoping that reflection on the issues raised by the painting, through the symbolism of musical instruments, provokes a change of heart and a life of eternal pleasure in the midst of God's presence.

6

'Behold the Man!' (John 19.5)—Pilate's Words in Art and Literature: Van Dyck's *Ecce homo*, in The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

John F.A. Sawyer

The Flemish artist Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) is better known for his brilliant portraits, such as those of King Charles I and his family, than for his paintings of religious subjects. But his *Ecce homo* in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts (fig. 1), together with some deeply moving paintings of other moments in the Passion of Christ, suggests that, had he not been overshadowed in Antwerp by his great contemporary Rubens (1577–1640), and had he been able to spend more of his short life in Italy, where he travelled for six years admiring and sketching the works of the great renaissance masters, especially Titian, his career might have taken a different course.[1]

In representations of Christ's Passion writers and artists divide the gospel narrative into a series of discrete scenes such as the Crowning with Thorns, the Mocking, the Flagellation, Pilate Washing his Hands, *Ecce homo* and Christ carrying the Cross, to which we should add the Man of Sorrows, the Pietà and some of the fourteen 'Stations of the Cross', which depart from the gospels and are usually more explicitly devotional. Van Dyck's *Ecce homo*, which was painted in Genoa c. 1625–26, towards the end of his travels in Italy, is one of a number of *Ecce homo* images in which theological and devotional aspects of the scene are so central that Jesus is shown almost, if not entirely, alone. The other characters referred to in the text, the soldiers, the chief priests, the angry crowd, and even Pilate himself who utters the words, have faded into the background.

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1. R. Verdi, *Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641): Ecce homo and The Mocking of Christ* (University of Birmingham: Trustees of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2002), p. 6.
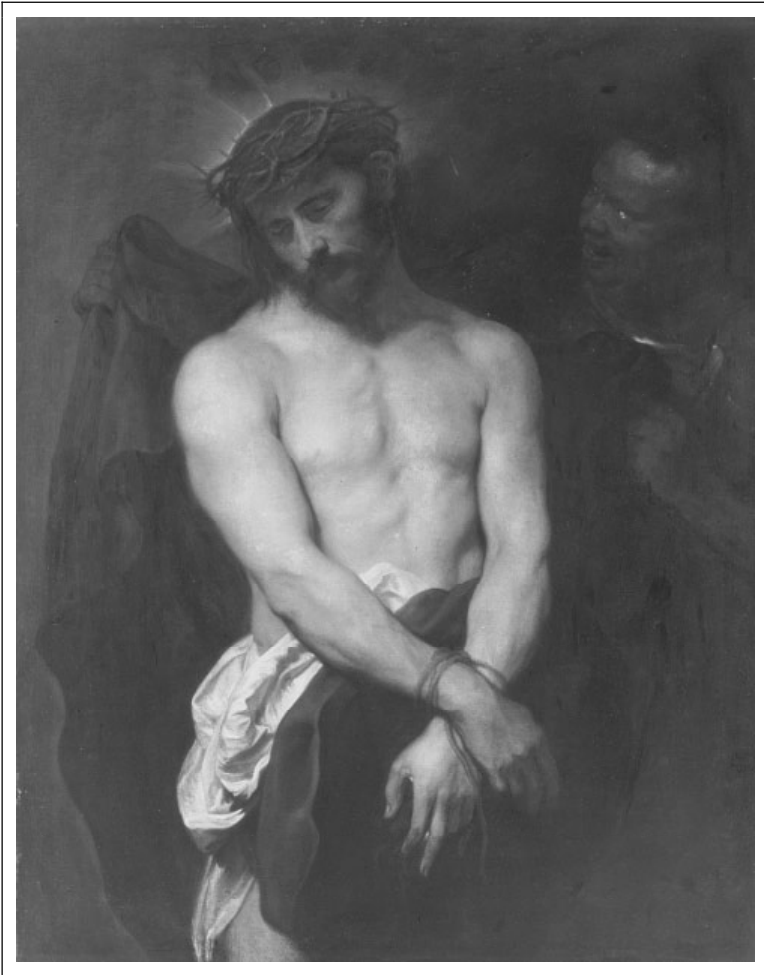
Figure 1. Anthony van Dyck, *Ecce homo* (c. 1625–26),
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

This focus on the words *Ecce homo* and on the suffering figure of Christ, to the virtual exclusion of all the other characters in the narrative, is a late development in the history of artistic representations of the scene. Examples from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries show Pilate, often in a sympathetic light, presenting Jesus to a group of mocking Jews.[2]

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2. C. Hourihane, *Pontius Pilate, Anti-Semitism, and the Passion in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

This is also how the scene is depicted in paintings by Bosch (fig. 2), Quentin Massys (fig. 3), Tintoretto and others, which are sometimes entitled *Christ Presented to the People* or the like, rather than *Ecce homo*.

Figure 2. Attributed to Hieronymus Bosch, *Ecce homo* (sixteenth century), Philadelphia Museum of Art

Such paintings often add lurid details derived from Isa. 1.6 and 53.3, Ps. 22.8 and elsewhere, absent in earlier versions, to emphasize Christ's suffering and the guilt of his tormentors.[3] But from the late fifteenth century we find a tradition developing in which Christ is portrayed, in sculpture and painting, as alone or almost alone. Antonello da Messina's

3. See especially J.H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern Europe in the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative* (Brussels: Van Ghemmert, 1979); G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (trans. Janet Seligman; 2 vols.; London: Lund Humphries, 1972), pp. 85-86; J.F.A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 85-87.

Ecce homo (1470) is one of the earliest, followed by the single-figure *Ecce homo* paintings of Titian (c. 1488–1576), Murillo (1617–82) and many others, right down to a nineteenth-century devotional work by the Polish artist Adam Chmielowski (1881) and Mark Wallinger's sculpture in Trafalgar Square (1999). Van Dyck's painting, influenced by Titian and commissioned by a wealthy Genoese family for private devotional purposes, belongs to this tradition with its Johannine emphasis on the person of Christ.
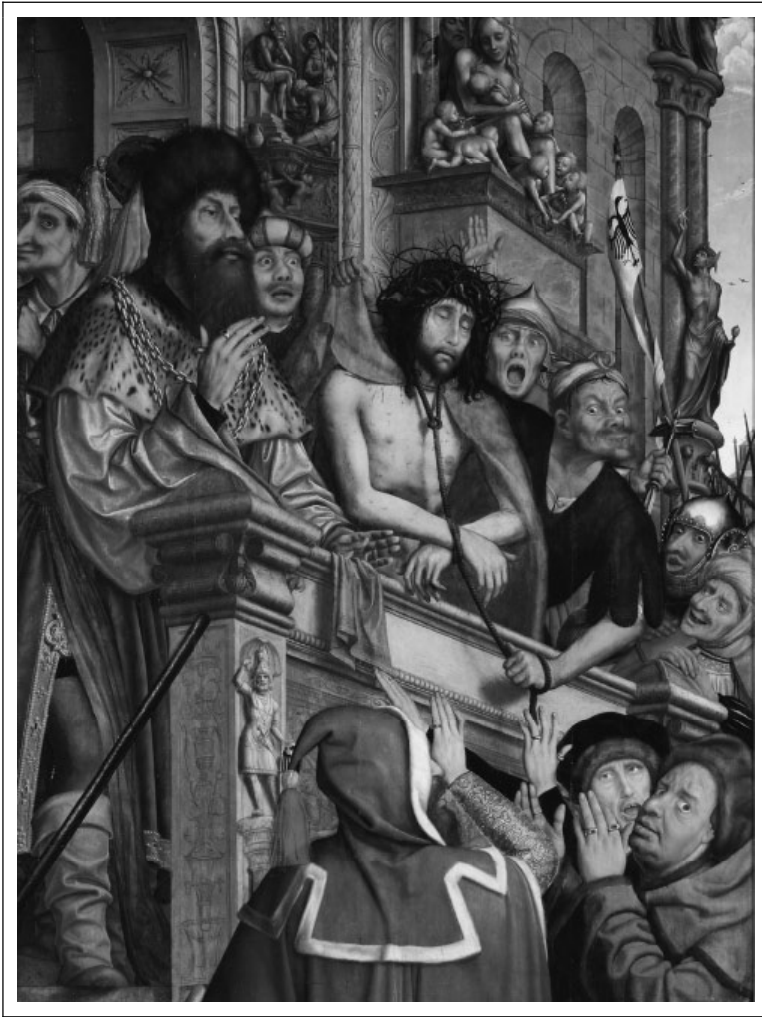
Figure 3. Quentin Massys, *Christ Presented to the People* (c. 1520), Museo del Prado, Madrid

1. *Language and Narrative Context*

Pilate's words *Ecce homo* 'Behold the man!' appear only in John's Gospel (19.5). The other gospels state in a single verse that Pilate handed Jesus over to the Jews to be crucified (Mt. 27.26; Mk 15.15; Lk. 23.25), but John dwells on this moment in a most dramatic way (19.1-16). He tells us that when Pilate presented Jesus to the angry crowd, he shouted 'Behold the man!' (*Ecce homo*, v. 5), and then, after some further discussion with the Jews and with Jesus, he addressed them once more, this time with the words 'Behold your king!' (*Ecce rex vester*, v. 14). Their response in both cases was to shout '*Crucify him! Crucify him!*' Furthermore, it is surely no coincidence that between these two '*Ecce*-sayings', the words 'Son of God' are also applied to Jesus, albeit on the sarcastic lips of his accusers (v. 7). For the benefit of his Christian readers, John, the most theological of the evangelists, thus presents this 'Man' who is about to suffer and die on a cross, as both the 'Son of God' and the Messiah 'King of Israel' (1.49; 12.13; cf. Mk 15.39).[4]

There are a number of other memorable '*Ecce*-sayings' in the Latin version of John's Gospel, and it must be kept in mind that the Latin Vulgate had far more impact on western culture than any other version of the Bible until the advent of Luther's German Bible, the King James Authorized Version and other vernacular translations. Four of these sayings occur in this one chapter and the rest at other pivotal moments in the narrative. In addition to Pilate's 'Behold the man!' and 'Behold your king!', Jesus on the Cross says to his mother a few verses later in the chapter, 'Behold your son!', and to the disciple whom he loved, traditionally believed to be John the author of the gospel, 'Behold your mother!' (19.27). Surely we are expected to pick up the poignant contrast between Pilate's unsettling words addressed to a jeering crowd, and this touching scene on Calvary shortly afterwards. We shall return to the role of the Virgin Mary in Passion iconography later.

The formula used by Pilate clearly recalls two other key moments in John's Gospel. At the very beginning of the narrative, Christ's first appearance is greeted by John the Baptist with the words: 'Behold the Lamb of God!' (*Ecce agnus Dei*, 1.29). Next day these words are repeated for the benefit of two of his disciples, including Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, whose response is to follow Jesus and announce that 'We have

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4. C. Panackel, *Idou ho Anthropos (Jn 19,5b): An Exegetico-Theological Study of the Text in the Light of the Use of the Term Anthropos Designating Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1988).

found the Messiah' (1.35-42). The other passage is in ch. 12, considered by many to be the conclusion of the first half of the gospel, describing the moment when Jesus enters Jerusalem 'riding on an ass's colt'. At this crucial moment in the narrative the words of the prophet Zechariah are applied to him: 'Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king…' (*Ecce rex tuus*, 12.15). This time it is the response of the 'daughter of Zion' that the writer describes, that is to say, the crowd that had come to Jerusalem for Passover: 'so they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him crying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!"' (12.12-15). Perhaps the author is consciously using these 'Behold' formulas at pivotal points in the narrative as theological titles of Christ, in much the same way as he uses the more frequent 'I am' sayings (e.g. 8.12; 9.5; 11.25; 14.6; 18.5, 6, 8).

This brings us to Pilate's *Ecce homo* in John 19.5. Many commentators believe that the word *homo* 'the man' (Greek *ho anthropos*) in this formula, like 'Lamb of God' and 'your King' in the other *Ecce*–sayings, refers to a heavenly saviour figure like the much commoner 'Son of Man' (1.51; 3.13-14; 5.27; 6.27; cf. Dan.7.14).[5] Christ was tauntingly arrayed in royal insignia just before he was presented to the crowd and this gave a messianic meaning to Pilate's words, both 'Behold your Son of Man!' in v. 5 and 'Behold your king!' in v. 14. This certainly seems to be how the Jews understood him, although, unlike the disciples at the beginning of the story and the crowds celebrating the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem a few days earlier (Jn 12.12-15), they fiercely rejected the messianic claim. We can appreciate the dramatic irony on the part of the author who, in this one crucial scene, places no less than three of Christ's most distinctive messianic titles on the scornful lips of unbelievers: '(Son of) Man', 'Son of God' and 'King of the Jews'.[6]

There is another element in the meaning of these words, however, which has been no less productive in the reception history of the *Ecce homo* image. In Latin and Greek, as well as Hebrew, German and other languages (but not English), there is more than one word for 'man', including at least one associated with maleness, physical strength and

5. See C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1955), p. 450; W.A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), pp. 69-72; R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2nd edn, 1982), pp. 876, 890; R. Kieffer, 'John', in John Barton and John Muddiman (eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 960-1000 (994).

6. R. Kieffer, *Le monde symbolique de Saint Jean* (Paris: Cerf, 1989), pp. 112f.

courage (Latin *vir*, Greek *aner*; cf. Hebrew *ish*, *gever*, German *Mann*), and another denoting humanity, both male and female, and frequently also frailty and vulnerability (Lat. *homo*, Greek *anthropos*; cf. Hebrew *adam*, *enosh*; German *Mensch*). In biblical Latin 'Behold the man (*Ecce vir*)' refers to angels (Gen. 32.24; Dan. 9.21; Acts 10.30), kings (1 Sam. 9.17), prophets (1 Kgs 13.1) and other heroic figures. There is even a messianic prophecy in Zechariah which is occasionally cited in relation to Jn 19.5,[7] but the Latin there has *Ecce vir* (Zech. 6.11-12). *Ecce homo*, on the other hand, usually refers to people who are godless (Ps. 51.9), drunkards (Mt. 11.19), old (Lk. 2.25), sick (Lk. 14.2) and disabled (Mt. 12.10). Thus many commentators argue that Pilate simply meant 'That's the man! There he is! Look at the pathetic creature' – perhaps appealing to the crowd to have pity on him and let him go.[8] While the words may well suggest a heavenly saviour figure to anyone familiar with Jewish messianic tradition, the words undoubtedly also stress his humanity, and, as we shall see, this has had enormous theological significance for Christian readers down the ages. The prophet Zechariah envisaged a mighty hero (*vir*) who would restore the fortunes of his people by worldly power, while *Ecce homo* in John's Gospel places the emphasis firmly on the vulnerability of this unique messianic figure, this 'Son of Man', at the mercy of his tormentors.

Before turning to our main subject it might be useful to compare the *Ecce homo* image with the *Man of Sorrows*, with which it is sometimes confused. What is distinctive about *Ecce homo* is that it is rooted in a specific and vividly portrayed moment in the Johannine account of Christ's Passion. As the clock in Rembrandt's version of the scene in the National Gallery, London, clearly shows, it was at 'about the sixth hour' (Jn 19.14).[9] In the case of the *Man of Sorrows* (*vir dolorum*), derived from Isaiah 53, by contrast, no information is given about time or place: even the identity of the Suffering Servant, as he is often referred to in that famous passage, is not made explicit.[10] The *Man of Sorrows* was thus an

7.   B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1972), p. 566.

8.   See N. Micklem, *Behold the Man: A Study of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1969), p. 65; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (ed. R.W.N. Hoare and J.K. Riches; trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), p. 659; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (3 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1980–82), I, pp. 255-57.

9.   J. Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Paintings and their Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 98.

10.   B.S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 420-23.

ideal image through which devout Christians could identify their own personal experience with Christ's Passion, whoever and wherever they were. The first person plurals in the original text ('wounded for our transgressions…bruised for our iniquities', 53.5) made the passage even more personal.[11] A fine example is a miniature by Jean Colombe in *Les très riches heures du Duc du Berry*.[12] This shows the bloodstained Christ beneath a cross, with wounds in his side and hands (stigmata) and wearing a crown of thorns, but no attempt is made to depict the original narrative context in the gospels. On the contrary, Christ is flanked by the kneeling figures of the Duke and Duchess of Savoy, who commissioned the work in 1485, and in the background there is a beautiful rural landscape showing a castle on the shores of a lake and perhaps the city of Geneva in the distance.

This form of devotion, perhaps best known from accounts of St Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), St Catherine of Siena (1347–80) and others becoming so closely identified with Christ that they physically receive the stigmata on their own bodies, became popular in the later Middle Ages. In Albrecht Dürer's *Self-portrait as the Man of Sorrows* (1500) in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, the artist actually gives himself Christ-like features, though whether the motive for this was devotional is unknown.[13] In the words of Thomas à Kempis:

> *Ecce in cruce totum jacet, et non est alia via ad vitam, et ad veram et internam pacem, nisi via sanctæ crucis, et quotidianæ mortificationis.*

> Behold, in the cross is everything, and there is no other way to life and to true inward peace than the way of the holy cross and daily mortification (*Imitation of Christ* 2.12.3).[14]

Something of this timeless devotional appropriation of the moment appears in other images of the Passion as well. An extreme example is Velásquez's painting of *Christ after his Flagellation Contemplated by the Christian Soul* (c. 1630), in the National Gallery, London. This shows the suffering Christ, still tied to a pillar, the instruments of torture lying beside him on the ground, but instead of his tormentors, the only other

11.   Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, p. 83.

12.   J. Colombe, *Les très riches heures du Duc du Berry* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), p. 75.

13.   G. Finaldi, *The Image of Christ* (Catalogue of Exhibition; London: National Gallery, 2000), p. 82.

14.   T. Kempis, *De imitatione Christi libri quatuor* (ed. Tiburzio Lupo; Città del Vaticano Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982; English translation, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952).

characters in the scene are a little child representing the 'Christian soul', kneeling in contemplation, and a benign angel standing by. In van Dyck's *Ecce homo* the focus is on the figure of Christ. The muscular torso, the bowed head in shadow with the hint of a halo and the limp hands tied at the wrists have a timeless quality like the *Man of Sorrows* image, that is to say, with a minimum of narrative context. But by depicting the leering soldier in the shadows behind him, preparing Christ for his humiliating appearance in front of the crowd, van Dyck's *Ecce homo* retains something of the force of Pilate's peremptory words in their original context, words which demanded a response at the time, first, from the soldier, then from the crowd, and finally from all of us who look at the painting.

2. Crowd Scenes and Small Groups

This brings us to our main topic: how reactions to Pilate's words have been portrayed in art, literature and elsewhere. The Latin demonstrative *ecce* 'Look at this!' summons people to look at the spectacle of a man tied up, beaten and humiliated, and this theatrical element in the scene lends itself to graphic representation. Thus Pilate and Jesus are frequently shown on some kind of raised stage or balcony overlooking a public square, so that everyone can get a good view. Reactions from the spectators, which range from sadistic pleasure to overwhelming grief and soul-searching, can be studied in three categories. First, there are the animated crowd scenes like those of Bosch, Massys and Rembrandt, secondly, there are close-ups of small groups like those of Correggio, Mantegna and Caravaggio, and, thirdly, there are portraits of Jesus on his own where the artists, Antonello da Messina, Titian, Murillo and others, take Pilate's place, so to speak, and address the words *Ecce homo* to all who view their paintings. Tintoretto's two *Ecce homo* paintings show a crowd scene in one (1546–47) and a small group in the other (1566–67), while Titian's include some in all three categories. Van Dyck's clearly belongs to the single figure category, despite the shadowy figure of a soldier in the background.

   Adhering most closely to the gospel narrative are those interpretations which depict the response of an angry crowd shouting 'Crucify him, crucify him!' (Jn 19.6, 15). The theatrical nature of the episode can be particularly developed in this first category, as in a painting by Jan Mostaert (c. 1515), which shows a second stage in the background on which an earlier scene, the Flagellation, is being acted out for all to see (fig. 4).
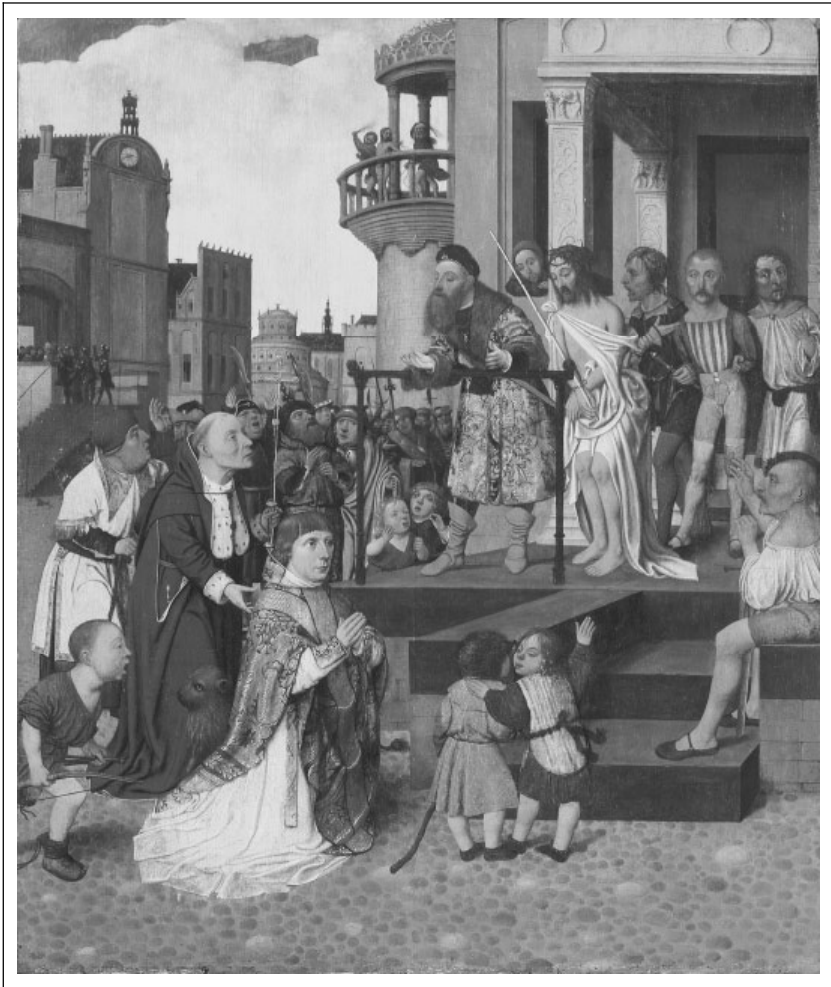
Figure 4. Jan Mostaert, *Christ Shown to the People* (c. 1515),
St Louis Art Museum, Missouri

Another dramatic example is that of the nineteenth-century Italian artist Antonio Ciseri (1821–91) in the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Florence. He views the scene from the back of the stage, as it were, so that we can clearly see the uncertainty and even compassion on the faces of Pilate and his Roman associates, including two women, in contrast to the huge, blurred crowd of spectators stretching into the distance in the piazza below. In another unusual portrayal on the Kaisheim altarpiece, now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, Holbein places Christ down

among the crowd, with Pilate pointing to him from above (1502). In music, both the raucous polyphony of the chorus ('Kreuzige, kreuzige!') in Bach's *St John Passion* (1724), and the four stark unaccompanied syllables *Cru-ci-fi-ge* in Arvo Pärt's *St John Passion* (1982), express the passion of a ferocious crowd determined to get what they want, while in paintings like those of Hieronymus Bosch, the crowd are shown carrying spears, pitchforks and other fearsome weapons, and the ghoulish expressions on their faces signify the same fierce anger and hatred. Some painters, including Quentin Massys (c. 1528) (fig. 3) and Jan Mostaert (c. 1515) (fig. 4), show some of the crowd laughing and clearly enjoying the show. In van Dyck's painting in the Barber Institute, the faint smile on the black face of the soldier and the glint in his eye have the same heartless effect.

The composition of the crowd is a very significant feature in representations of the scene. In the Johannine narrative it is specifically stated that it was the Jews who shouted out 'Crucify him, crucify him!' First, it was their 'chief priests and officers', or 'temple police' (v. 6; cf. v. 15) and then simply 'the Jews', repeated three times (vv. 7, 12, 15). Scriptural authority for the Christian belief that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion was found here in John's Gospel, and strengthened by the words put into their mouths by another evangelist: 'His blood be on us and on our children!' (Mt. 27.25). That text, together with passages from the Book of Isaiah (e.g. 1.15; 65.2-3), was repeatedly cited as proof that Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion applied not only to the Jews at the time, but to all Jews forever, generation after generation.[15] In fact the other three gospel accounts of the Passion clearly apportion the blame to the chief priests and the elders, not the Jewish people as a whole (Mt. 27.20), but sadly the anti-Jewish Johannine tradition prevailed in the Church for centuries and is reflected in several artistic interpretations of the *Ecce homo* scene, including paintings by Mantegna (c. 1500) and Rembrandt (1634), in which gratuitous Hebrew lettering has no other function than to label the villains in the story as Jews.[16] Only in the twentieth century did the Church make serious attempts to correct this glaring injustice.

    15.   Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel*, pp. 109-15.

    16.   See H. Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art: An Illustrated History* (London: SCM Press, 1996), pp. 182, 192; G.B. Sarfatti, 'Hebrew Script in Western Visual Arts', *Italia: studi e ricerche sulla storia, la cultura e la letteratura degli Ebrei d'Italia* 13–15 (2002), pp. 451-547 (455).

The omission of any specific reference in the other gospels to the guilt of the whole Jewish people in some sense provided scriptural authority (if it was needed) for writers and artists to include other people in the crowd, not just Jews. The crowd in Tintoretto's *Ecce homo* (1546–47) in the Sao Paolo Museum of Art in Brazil is not made up only of Jews, as the Roman SPQR standard fluttering above their heads makes clear, nor is that portrayed in Titian's 1543 version of the scene in the Kunst-historisches Museum, Vienna, where the outrageous poet and satirist Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) is playing the part of Pilate, and the Sultan of Egypt can be identified among the crowd.[17] A striking feature of some interpretations of the scene is the presence of eminent church figures in the crowd, as well as what appear to be ordinary Christian men, women and children. The distinguished Christian clerics in Mostaert's *Ecce homo* (c. 1515), for example, must have requested that they should be depicted as present in the crowd, to express their involvement in the sinfulness which led to Christ's death (fig. 4). The same applies to the pious groups of Christian men and women on either side of the gaudy, cruel *Ecce homo* scene in Maerten van Heemskerck's triptych in the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem (1559–60). They appear to be sharing both in the sufferings of Christ and in the guilt of his tormentors.

The belief that all humanity shares in the responsibility for Christ's death, not just the Jews or Romans who were there at the time, is an integral part of Christian theology, frequently expressed by theologians, preachers and poets. John Donne, for example, contrasts his own greater crime with that of the Jews: 'They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I / Crucify him daily, being now glorified' (*Holy Sonnets* 11). In the words of Charles Wesley's famous hymn beginning 'And can it be that I should gain' (1738),

> Died he for me who caused his pain,
> For me, who him to death pursued?
> Amazing love! How can it be
> That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?[18]

We shall return later to the belief that it was actually God who died on the Cross. For the moment we note that, alongside those devotional exercises referred to above which seek to follow the 'Way of the Cross' and involve the worshippers in the Passion of Christ, there is the notion

17. R.F. Heath, *Titian* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1879), p. 57.

18. *The Church Hymnary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edn, 1973), no. 409.

that his sufferings were caused by their own sinfulness and that they must take their place in the crowd crying 'Crucify him! Crucify him!'

From crowd scenes we move on now to small groups. The advantages for the painter were twofold: portraits of two or three individuals rather than a huge crowd, made it possible to say more about each, and secondly, greater attention could now be devoted to the figure of Christ. One of the earliest and certainly one of the most disquieting of these close-ups is the distinctive, cold *Ecce homo* of Andrea Mantegna (c. 1500). Most of the painting is filled with the image of Christ, his head with a crown of thorns and a halo, his solemn eyes gazing straight out at the viewers, the upper part of his naked body showing the weals suffered in his flagellation, a rope round his neck like a dog leash, and his hands tied together in front of him. This leaves just enough room for the heads of two elderly men close beside him, staring at him with sinister sneers on their faces. One is wearing a turban, the other an absurd-looking hat with pseudo-Hebrew writing on it so that we can be sure he is a Jew, and above them the words *Crucifige eum! Tolle eum!* (Jn 19.15), written over and over again in Roman lettering.

In the second half of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the focus on small groups became an increasingly popular way of depicting the *Ecce homo* scene, though few are so disturbing as that of Mantegna. Most of them, like those by Titian (1570–76), Caravaggio (c. 1606) and Rubens (c. 1610) show three figures: Christ, Pilate pointing to him, and one tormentor, either a soldier or a civilian. A more developed example of this type is Tintoretto's brilliant *Ecce homo* in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice (1566–67). This shows Jesus slumped on the floor at the top of some steps, between Pilate and a soldier, with two other figures in the background, one of them holding a bloodstained shroud behind Jesus back. Very striking are the bright light on Christ's naked bleeding body, and the small, clearly defined cruciform halo round his head, reminiscent of Titian's *Ecce homo*, painted just a few years earlier. Quentin Massys, as well as his crowd scene referred to already (fig. 3), also painted an animated small group version, in the Doge's Palace, Venice (1526), in which the richly clad Pilate, with a chain of office round his neck, is the dominant figure, beside the stooping, suffering figure of Christ in the foreground, with three hideous, leering tormentors behind them, one holding the rope with which Christ's wrists are tied.

Rubens's *Ecce homo*, which was executed in Antwerp in c. 1610 and survives only in an engraving made c. 1620, now in the British Museum, must have been known to van Dyck, but lacks the deep emotions and

religious awe inspired by Titian and his followers. As in the other groups, Pilate accompanies the words 'Behold the man' by pointing at Jesus and a helmeted soldier is raising a garment above his shoulders, but uniquely all three characters are gazing directly at us with solemn but somewhat blank expressions on their faces. Of course, we do not have Rubens's original painting which was doubtless more expressive, but the contrast could hardly be greater. An interesting feature of the Rubens engraving, however, relevant to our present discussion, is the Latin quotation from the Song of Solomon printed at the bottom:

> *Egredimini et videte, filiae Sion, regem Salomonem*
> *In diademate quo coronavit illum mater sua.*

> Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon,
> with the crown with which his mother crowned him (Song 3.11a).

The verse is cited by Matthew Henry[19] and other commentators in relation to the *Ecce homo* passage. It originally celebrated the king's wedding, 'the day of his heart's rejoicing' (v. 11b), and actually says as much about maternal love as about the bride.[20] Bernard of Clairvaux, in a sermon composed for Epiphany, interprets the verse as a reference to the Adoration of the Magi who recognized the baby Jesus as their king, though his mother could only crown him with 'crowns of poverty and misery', and though he would have to wear a crown of thorns before receiving the crowns of justice and glory that were his due. But with the sharp eyes of faith (*quam oculata sit fides; quam lynceos oculos habeat…*), the robber crucified with Jesus (Lk. 23.40-43), the centurion (Mk 15.39), and all faithful Christians down the ages can see in the helpless, wounded and humiliated mockery of a king presented by Pilate to the crowd with the words *Ecce homo,* the Son of God and their Redeemer.

According to John's Gospel, not all the Jews were baying like dogs for his death. Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, for example, who cared for Jesus' body after the crucifixion, are referred to later in the chapter (vv. 38-42), as is John the evangelist according to an ancient tradition (vv. 26-27). But in what is perhaps the most original of the small group versions, Antonio Allegri Correggio's *Ecce homo* (1525–30) in the National Gallery, London, shows the reaction of Mary the

19. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible 1708–10* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008).

20. F. Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), p. 120.

mother of Jesus to her son's suffering (fig. 5). Although not mentioned
in the gospel narrative at that moment, she is there with her sister and
Mary Magdalene, standing by the cross, a few verses later (vv. 25-27).

Figure 5. Antonio Allegri Correggio's *Ecce homo* (1525–30),
National Gallery, London

Correggio's remarkable close-up shows Jesus standing helpless between
Pilate and a helmeted soldier, his hands tied in front of him, a crown of
thorns on his head, and the Virgin Mary fainting in the arms of her sister
in front of him. We the viewers now take the place of the crowd and a
troubled Pilate, looking directly at us, cries 'Behold the man!' with a
gesture of his hand. Even more disturbing is the weary imploring look in
the eyes of Jesus, which is also directed at us as we watch him suffer.

The presence of Mary at this moment in her son's Passion is exceptional. There is a similar painting of the Flagellation by the Sienese painter Francesco Vanni (1563–1610) which shows the wounded Jesus, his hands bound behind his back, stooping compassionately over his fainting mother. But this is rare, perhaps because it departs somewhat from the biblical narrative. On the other hand, it was customary in parts of renaissance Italy and elsewhere to hang a painting of Jesus' grieving Mother (*Mater dolorosa*) beside paintings of the *Man of Sorrows* or *Ecce homo*, and Mary's suffering, foretold already when Jesus was still a baby (Lk. 2.35), is frequently and movingly portrayed (Jn 19.25). Devout Christians wished to identify with Mary in the events of the Passion, as well as with her Son. In the words of the thirteenth-century hymn *Stabat mater* (cf. Jn 19.25):

> *Eia, Mater, fons amoris*
> *me sentire vim doloris*
> *fac, ut tecum lugeam.*

> Ah, Mother, source of love,
> help me to feel the intensity of your pain,
> that I may grieve with you.

One final small group *Ecce homo* comes from the twentieth century. It is a work by the German artist Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) in the Kunstmuseum in Basel. Painted in the last year of the artist's life, it shows Christ, strong and dignified, clad in a long bright red garment, his naked arms and face covered in wounds, his wrists tied in front of him. On one side, Pilate dressed as a physician, is anxiously pointing at him, whilst on the other stands a bulky, impassive soldier, 'just doing his duty'. There is no halo around Christ's head and the words *Ecce homo*, with the artist's signature, are written above Pilate. In many respects it thus follows the renaissance tradition, but the cold colours and savage brushwork add a new dimension to the scene reminiscent of the artist's more violent and disturbing *Red Christ*, painted three years earlier. Pilate's gesture challenges us to recognize in the tragic human figure of Christ, bearing all the marks of his flagellation and humiliation, the saviour of the world.

4. Behold the Man

This brings us to the final category of *Ecce homo* paintings, those in which only Christ is shown, and the words of the title are addressed directly to the viewers. In these the scene is often so completely removed from its original narrative context that John Tauler, a fourteenth-century

Dominican commentator, could interpret the words as spoken by God, not Pilate: 'Behold the Man! In Him have I given you My whole undivided Self, that you also might give to Me your whole undivided self, all that you are, and all that you can do'.[21] John Donne uses the words as the answer to a question raised in the Psalms: 'What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death?' (Ps. 89.48 AV): 'I will answer directly, fully, confidently, *Ecce homo*' (Sermon XXVII).[22] Similarly the English evangelical preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834–92), in a sermon on 'This do in Remembrance of Me' (1 Cor. 11.24), tells us how he used the words as a mnemonic to remind him every day of what Christ had done for him: 'My memory would be more treacherous than Pilate, did it not every day cry, *Ecce homo!* Behold the man'.[23]

It is this decontextualized use of Pilate's words that has dominated the history of their reception in European culture. Nietzsche's autobiographical *Ecce homo* (1888) is probably the best known, in which he places Superman in the centre of the universe, alone in all his glory, instead of God.[24] The liberal Victorian writer John Seeley (1834–95) used the phrase as the title of a well-known life of Christ, in which he portrays Jesus as a paragon of virtue with little regard to theological or ecclesiastical tradition,[25] and a more recent study of the gospels by Scott McCormick[26] is intended to stress the true humanity of Christ, with little or nothing to say on Jn 19.5. Still more distant from its original context and exploiting another meaning of the word 'homo' in colloquial parlance, is the use of the phrase *Ecce homo* as the title of a study of 'Homosexuality in the Bible' by Massimo Consoli,[27] while an exhibition with the same title by the Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin, shows Jesus and the disciples as homosexuals and transvestites. Like Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, these controversial images of the Baptism, the Last Supper, the *Pietà* and other moments in

21.   J. Tauler, *Meditations on the Life and Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* (trans. A.P.J. Cruikshank; London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1925), pp. 221-22.

22.   E.M. Simpson (ed.), *John Donne's Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels: With a Selection of Prayers and Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).

23.   *Spurgeon's Sermons on the Death and Resurrection of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004).

24.   F.W. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo; and The Birth of Tragedy* (trans. Clifton P. Fadiman; New York: The Modern Library, 1927).

25.   J.R. Seeley, *Ecce homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ* (London: Macmillan, 1865).

26.   S. McCormick, *Behold the Man: Re-reading Gospels, Re-humanizing Jesus* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

27.   M. Consoli, *Ecce homo: l'omosessualità nella Bibbia* (Milan: Kaos, 1998).

the life of Christ, were intended to teach that all humanity, even, or especially, the marginalized, can and should identify with Christ. With the blessing of the Archbishop of Uppsala, head of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, and despite fierce opposition from some quarters, the exhibition was shown, first in Uppsala Cathedral, and then in a tour of Scandinavia and continental Europe between 1998 and 2000.

Let us turn now to the single-figure *Ecce homo* paintings, especially those of Titian. Titian was not the first to depict the scene in this way, although his are probably the best known and most influential. Four by the Sicilian artist Antonello da Messina (c. 1430–79), dated to the period 1470–76, are certainly among the earliest. The first of these shows only Jesus' head and naked shoulders above a kind of wooden balustrade, his lips are slightly open and his tragic gaze is directed at the viewer, as though pleading with us to take to heart what we see.. The earliest of Titian's, now in the Prado, Madrid, which was commissioned by the Emperor Charles V in 1547, is very different. It shows only Jesus' head and muscular torso, naked except for a pink garment over one shoulder, his wrists tied with a rope, blood dripping down his face and chest. The bowed head is shown in profile, one heavy-lidded eye downcast in submission, and his black hair merges into the total darkness of the background. There is no trace of a halo or even the crown of thorns. Titian's *Ecce homo* in the National Gallery Dublin (c. 1560), which is regarded by many as 'the most successful and moving of the various versions of the subject'[28] is strikingly different (fig. 6). In both the bowed head and downcast eyes denote resignation, but there is more light and detail in the later painting. A reed cane, symbol of his flagellation, has been humiliatingly placed in his hand, and a crown of thorns tightly pressed on to his head. Most notable is the roughly cruciform halo, which radiates from behind the head, rather like the rays of the sun during an annular eclipse, and transforms a picture of human suffering and defeat into an icon of the Saviour of the World.

Van Dyck's *Ecce homo* in the Barber Institute portrays the same Johannine message. As in the Titian, Christ is not weak or frail: his muscular neck, shoulders, arms and stomach are vividly portrayed, but the bowed head, closed eyes and the arms tied at the wrist, hanging limply in front of him, show a man who has been beaten into submission, without any hope of escape, resigned to his fate. Only his halo, unnoticed by his tormentor and so faint as to suggest his divine nature has been almost extinguished or 'emptied' (Phil. 2.7), is there for believers to recognize.

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28. F. Zeri, 'Major and Minor Italian Artists at Dublin', *Apollo* 99 (1974), p. 100.

Figure 6. Titian, *Ecce homo* (c. 1560),
National Gallery Dublin

Like Titian's *Ecce homo* paintings, van Dyck's Barber Institute version
together with several other paintings notably *Christ with the Cross* (c.
1619–20), the *Man of Sorrows* (1622–23) and the *Mocking of Christ*
(1628–30), had a marked influence on European religious art as can be
seen in a number of engravings, copies and paintings clearly modelled on
them.[29] One of the most striking is an *Ecce homo* by the Spanish painter

29.   Verdi, *Anthony van Dyck*, pp. 36-37.

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1660s) in the El Paso Museum of Art in Texas, which combines the pose of Titian with the tenderness of van Dyck. Another particularly touching tribute to van Dyck appears in a painting in the Palazzo Bianco in Genoa by the Flemish artist Cornelis de Wael. Entitled *Visiting the Sick* (c. 1645), it shows a painting very similar to van Dyck's *Ecce homo*, hanging on the wall above one of the hospital beds.

Like Titian and van Dyck, Christian writers have interpreted these words *Ecce homo* as a scriptural expression of Christ's true humanity, at this moment of his Passion, both man in all his vulnerability and *the Man*, the Son of Man, who is also God. It is worth quoting Harnack's comments on the image in full:

> That combined spectacle of suffering and of glory, that living picture of the true *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of attributes) developed itself, before which mankind stood worshipping, adoring with equal reverence the sublimity and the abasement. The sensuous and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, shame and honour, renunciation and fullness of life were no longer tumultuously intermingled: they were united in serene majesty in the 'Ecce homo'… We cannot measure the effects which this newly-tempered piety produced, nor can we calculate the manifold types it assumed, and the multitude of images it drew within its range. We need only recall the picture—new, and certainly only derived from the cross—of the mother and child, the God in the cradle, omnipotence in weakness. Where this piety appears without dogmatic formulas, without fancifulness, without subtlety, or studied calcula-tion, it is the simple expression, now brought back again, of the Christian religion itself; for in reverence for the suffering Christ, and in the power which proceeds from His image, all the forces of religion are embraced.[30]

In his commentary on Jn 19.5, Bultmann puts it more succinctly but no less cogently: 'to the mind of the Evangelist the entire paradox of the claim of Jesus is in this way fashioned into a tremendous picture… The declaration *ho logos sarx egeneto* ('The Word was made flesh', John 1:14) has become visible in its extremest consequence'.[31]

In literature it happens that three women chose to write poems entitled *Ecce homo*, and I propose to end by considering each in turn as representative of modern reactions to the image. First, the young English poet Felicia Hemans (1793–1835) wrote a poem about the effect an *Ecce homo* by Leonardo da Vinci had had upon her, many years earlier.[32] There

30. A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), VI/1, p. 10.

31. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 659.

32. F.D. Hemans, *The Poetical Works of Mrs Felicia Hemans* (ed. W.M. Rossetti; London/New York: Frederick Warne, 1912), p. 529.

is no evidence for the existence of such a painting. It seems likely that it was a single-figure painting but a reference to 'those holy eyes' seems to rule out some of the images we have been looking at, in which Christ's eyes are lowered. The reference to the eyes and the words 'pale, bright vision' would apply very well to one of Antonello da Messina's paintings though how or where she could have seen it or a copy of it is unknown. Whatever the actual picture, the words express the initial shock of a young girl when she first saw the picture, but then how, in later years, as the mother of five children, abandoned by her husband and devastated by the death of her mother, she saw in the image an icon of infinite divine compassion, as thousands of Christians have done down the ages:

> Oft does the pale, bright vision still float by;
> But more divinely sweet, and speaking now
> Of One whose pity, throned on that sad brow,
> Sounded all depths of love, grief, death, humanity!

Later in the same century the Pre-Raphaelite Christina Rossetti (1830–94) wrote two poems on human reactions to images of Christ's Passion. *Beneath the Cross* is a personal confession addressed to Christ, beginning;

> Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
> That I can stand, O Christ, beneath thy cross,
> To number drop by drop Thy Blood's slow loss,
> And yet not weep?

The poem lists all those who, according to scripture, wept and grieved when Christ was crucified and ends with a plea for mercy from one 'Greater than Moses: Turn and look once more / And smite a rock'.[33] Very different is the sonnet *Behold the Man!* which, despite the original context of the title, is also about the Crucifixion. Addressed to a wider public and alluding at the same time, perhaps, to *O vos omnes* 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?' (Lam. 1.12 AV), it is a condemnation of human sin and pride (lines 1-8) and a stern call for Christian action and discipline (lines 9-14). As in van Dyck's *Ecce homo*, the words of the title invite the reader/viewer to see in the image both God and Man:

> Behold the Man!
> Shall Christ hang on the Cross, and we not look?
>   Heaven, earth, and hell stood gazing at the first,
>   While Christ for long-cursed man was counted cursed;

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33. C.G. Rossetti, *Poems and Prose* (ed. Simon Humphries; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Christ, God and Man, Whom God the Father shook
And shamed and sifted and one while forsook:—
   Cry shame upon our bodies we have nursed
   In sweets, our souls in pride, our spirits immersed
In wilfulness, our steps run all acrook.
Cry shame upon us! for He bore our shame
   In agony, and we look on at ease
With neither hearts on flame nor cheeks on flame:
   What hast thou, what have I, to do with peace?
Not to send peace but send a sword He came,
   And fire and fasts and tearful night-watches.[34]

My final example contains an illustration of how the grammar of the words *Ecce homo*, removed from their original context, can be used to great effect. John Donne, as we saw, proposed interpreting them as the answer to a question posed by the Psalmist (89.48). The much-respected German Jewish poet Hilde Domin (1909–2006) in her short poem *Ecce homo* completes the grammatical circle, so to speak, by transposing the words into the first person singular as though spoken by the Man himself:

> *Ecce homo*
> Weniger als die Hoffnung auf ihn
> das ist der Mensch
> einarmig
> immer
> Nur der Gekreuzigte
> beide Arme
> weit offen
> der Hier-Bin-Ich

'Only the man on the Cross, his arms wide open, the *Here-I-Am*'.[35] The true meaning of *Ecce homo* is revealed when the Man on the Cross finally says, 'Yes, Here I am. I am the One'. The poet's Hier-Bin-Ich recalls the responses of Abraham (Gen. 22.1), Moses (Exod. 3.4), Isaiah (Isa. 6.8) and other servants of the Lord, who like Jesus were prepared to answer God's call wherever it should lead them. But does it also recall the words of the prophet Isaiah:

> Then you shall call and the Lord will answer,
> You shall cry and he will say, 'Here I am!' (Isa. 58.9; cf. 52.6; 65.1).

The effectiveness of the devotional image we have been discussing depends on the belief that the tragic figure at the centre of the scene is the 'Word made flesh' (Jn 1.14), both human and divine, both man and

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34. Rossetti, *Poems and Prose*.
35. H. Domin, *Ich will dich: Gedichte* (Munich: R. Piper, 1970).

God. As we have seen, this is how Pilate's words, far removed from their original context, have been understood by Christian artists, preachers and poets down the centuries. Charles Wesley addresses the figure on the cross as 'My God'. Can we interpret the words 'Here-I-am' in Hilda Domin's poem as addressed to us both by the Man on the Cross, and at the same time, in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, by God, his hands out-stretched all the day to a rebellious people (Isa. 65:2)? Though the Jewish poet would perhaps have rejected such a theology, as Elie Wiesel rejected belief in a God hanging from the gallows in Auschwitz,[36] there is little doubt what van Dyck's answer would have been.

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36. E. Wiesel, *Night* (trans. Marion Wiesel; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008).

7

Poussin, a Poem and a Sacred Story: Nicholas Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia*, in The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

Keith Tester

In her unrequited love the Saracen Princess Erminia went to find Tancred the Crusader after his battle with the giant Argantes.[1] Accompanied by Tancred's servant Vafrino she travelled secret paths, and at sunset the bodies of the two fighters were found. Argantes was dead and so too seemed Tancred. She held the limp body of the man she loved, kissing it and letting her tears fall. Erminia sighed, and at the brush of her breath Tancred awoke. Yet he was seriously wounded, and Vafrino cautioned Erminia that they ought to ensure Tancred's survival before all else. They tore off his armour to find the injuries, but there was nothing with which to staunch the flow of blood. Erminia desperately started to pull at her long amber hair. She used its strands to bind Tancred's wounds. So runs the story in chap. 19 of Torquato Tasso's 1581 poem, *Gerusalemme liberata.*

   With its tales of love and heroism against the background of the Crusaders taking Jerusalem, Tasso's epic quickly became immensely popular, and in Italy it inspired any number of poets and painters. Guercino offered a version of Erminia's discovery of Tancred in 1618–19, and later Poussin produced two versions of Erminia and Vafrino finding Tancred. In both, Erminia hacks her hair with Tancred's sword, rather than pull it out at the roots. The first of Poussin's depictions was painted

around 1631 and is in the Hermitage in St Petersburg (fig. 1). In this painting, Erminia has only recently come up to Tancred. She is standing although beginning to cut her hair, and he is still armoured.

Figure 1. Nicolas Poussin, *Tancred and Erminia* (1631),
The Hermitage, St Petersburg

The second version was completed around 1634 and is in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts (fig. 2). Now Erminia has fallen to her knees and her earlier dream-like expression is replaced with grief and desperation. She is cutting into her hair furiously and kneeling besides Tancred, whose armour has been removed.[2] These are two of the nine pieces that Poussin derived from themes in Tasso.[3]

Blunt suggests that 'At first sight, Poussin's choice of themes from the *Gerusalemme liberata* may seem curious, for he confines himself to the love stories…and neglects…the battles and the heroic episodes of the epic'. Yet the themes that Poussin chose cease to be 'unexpected' when it is appreciated that Tasso intended his poem to be read as an allegory rather than an epic collection of incidents. The poem's events and characters are symbolic of, in Tasso's own words as offered in a translation of 1600, 'the glasse and figure of humane life'.

2.   Richard Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia* (Birmingham: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery and the Trustees of The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 1993), pp. 17-18.

3.   Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin: The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts* (London: Phaidon, 1967), pp. 402-403.

Figure 2. Nicolas Poussin, *Tancred and Erminia* (c. 1634),
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts

That Poussin would have read the *Gerusalemme* as an allegory is highly probable. Indeed it might be more accurate to suggest that it is improbable that he would *not* have read it symbolically. Blunt shows that Poussin possessed a deep knowledge of Tasso's theories of poetry and he concludes that Poussin's recognition of the allegorical concerns of the poem, 'would explain the otherwise puzzling fact that he selected from the *Gerusalemme* precisely the love themes'. Poussin took to these themes in particular because they were 'allegories of the struggle between Reason and Concupiscence'.[4] There is more to *Tancred and Erminia* than initially appears.

Viewing *Tancred and Erminia* as an allegory enables Poussin's painting to begin to reveal many of its layers. It becomes obvious that the painting displays a certain virtuoso flattery of the knowledge that is brought to it by both the viewer and initially the purchaser of the painting.[5] It repays close study by revealing new meanings, challenges and concepts upon every viewing. Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia* is an invitation to see

4. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 148-50.
5. 'Poussin is not an easy artist for the uninitiated', writes Richard Beresford in 'Poussin's "Tancred and Erminia" in Focus', *The Burlington Magazine* 135.1078 (1993), pp. 47-48.

beyond the surface of the picture and, to put the matter more strongly, it is a pedagogical tool for the viewer to begin to be able to see the unseen. It is a painting that escapes its pictorial form and frame, but which requires the viewer to consider for her or himself precisely where that escape leads and in what it consists. After all if the poem is allegorical and if Poussin encountered it in those terms, then *Tancred and Erminia* has to be symbolic of something that was signified by, yet independent of, the narrative and representations themselves. To see the painting of *Tancred and Erminia* as symbolic is at once to make the point that what it shows gestures towards something unshown or perhaps even unshowable. The seen implies an unseen. But what is unseen?

Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia* is a vehicle for a reflection of the Stoic principles of life towards which he was deeply committed. According to Stoicism, life ought to be lived according to nature and reason but with rigid control of the passions. Nature and reason are linked through the *logos*, that is the natural law of reason that animates the universe. Such a life will enable the individual to be virtuous. Virtue was understood within Stoicism to be the only absolute good and it was a means by which the individual could achieve the ability to withstand the assaults and challenges of Fate. Through a life that is virtuous the individual can be patient and tranquil in the face of necessity.[6] These are abstract philosophical ideals, but *Tancred and Erminia* can be interpreted as an exercise in rendering them visible.

The figure of Vafrino represents one side of the scales.[7] According to Stoic principles, reason and nature demand that a servant attends without emotion to the demands of a master, and this is precisely what he does. He does not panic when he sees Tancred but quietly tethers Erminia's horse, before helping her to remove the injured man's armour, putting it neatly to one side, and beginning to lift him. In 1773 Jonathan Richardson remarked that if it was indeed Vafrino who attended to the horse so that everything was in order before Tancred was helped, then Poussin 'amplifies and raises' his character.[8] In other words, this is a detail that symbolizes the reason of the servant and which illustrates his ability to act deliberately in the face of Fate. In Vafrino, reason trumps desire.

6.   Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, pp. 166-69.

7.   Jonathan Richardson noted Vafrino's remarkably improbable helmet, which reappears in a slightly altered guise on the head of a Roman soldier in *The Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem* of 1635 in Vienna. He notes that Vafrino's helmet design designates him as inferior to Tancred (Richardson in Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, pp. 37, 41).

8.   Richardson, quoted in Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, p. 39.

According to this reading, Erminia's desperation and furious attempt to help becomes a symbol of what can happen when reason has not taken sufficient hold. This is the second side of the scales. Erminia is a symbol of concupiscence trumping reason. Her love for Tancred is such that she quickly dismounts and rushes to Tancred when she sees his prone body. Erminia acts out of blind desire and, left to her own devices, would have spent so long bewailing the fate that had befallen Tancred that he would likely have died before she had got around to tending to his wounds. Taken separately then, Vafrino and Erminia polarize the conflict between reason and desire, but taken together they symbolize the unity of virtue. Vafrino is too tranquil of mind to engage with concupiscence, and Erminia is too driven by desire, too lacking in tranquillity, to be able to engage with reason. But together they can rescue Tancred from fate and, indeed, balance one another.

Now, in his second letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote that 'we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal' (2 Cor. 4.18). By this argument, Poussin is encouraging his necessarily historically situated viewers to try to *see* by putting into a contemporary yet transient form the *unseen* things that are eternal. Of Poussin it has been said that, 'the temple of his art is contemporary, reworking classical forms to address eternal questions'.[9] From a Stoic point of view the eternal questions centre upon the virtues, but there is another answer to be extracted from the Greek tradition that was so important to Poussin. John Carroll points out that for the Greeks, before all else, even before virtue, there was *Necessity*: 'In her control over human destiny, she determined the grand as well as the particular patterns. Her three beautiful daughters, the Fates, wove the thread of each individual's destiny, a thread that could be neither cut nor loosened… Fate binds'. Carroll suggests that Necessity is made meaningful, and that humans make their lives make sense in the face of Necessity, through stories such as those of Homer, the Greek tragedians or, later, Shakespeare. These stories connect with the archetypal experiences of the confrontation with Necessity understood as Fate, and they find their completion in 'the Jesus cycle, told like most of the others, in the beginning, in Greek. Together, they staked out the sacred site that would found the West and make it great'.[10]

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9. John Carroll, 'What Poussin Knew: Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion', *Quadrant* (Jul-Aug. 1997), pp. 46-52 (47).

10. John Carroll, *The Western Dreaming: The Western World is Dying for Want of a Story* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 13-14.

Carroll asserts that 'in the beginning was the story' of the human encounter with Necessity and that a culture consists in the sacred stories through which it makes Fate make sense and establishes responses to it. Stoicism is a case in point. The encounter with Necessity is eternal, but it can only be confronted and made meaningful from time to time if the stories of the encounter are retold in a relevant manner. The sacred stories must be perpetually retold else they will wither and, for Carroll, culture itself will lose its sacred core and be emptied of significance. '*Midrash*, in the Hebrew tradition, is the process of each age taking up the ancient, sacred stories and retelling them in a way that spoke to the new times. Every living culture is inwardly driven to *midrash*'. He contends that Nicolas Poussin is one of the most important retellers of the ancient stories in the history of Western culture.[11] *Tancred and Erminia* is an exercise in *midrash*.

This chapter thus takes a cue from John Carroll. It proposes that if Poussin's art is indeed engaged in the activity of *midrash*, that is to say, if his work is a retelling of sacred stories in a contemporary guise, then it follows that the unseen towards which its visible surfaces gesture is that of the human condition of dealings with Necessity. The encounter with Necessity is the immutable Truth of human existence. Carroll holds that Poussin sought to recover the sacred stories that were challenged by the rise of the Humanist conceit that Man is the measure of all things and that Necessity can be vanquished. 'He returns to the classical Greek equation of culture with story. In the beginning was *mythos*, the body of timeless, archetypal narratives that carry the eternal truths'. For Carroll, Poussin saw that: 'The task of the artist is to retell those stories, and thereby to engage with the ancient currents of shape and form that move in the unconscious dreamtime of the people'.[12] Furthermore, Poussin evidently confronted the stories themselves as being harnessed to an institutional and orthodox militancy that actually served to silence their sacred core, and so they were being allowed to wither by the very authorities that ought to have been making them live in culture. Indeed, the stories only need to be made visible, they only need to be seen, in as far as they are becoming invisible, unseen. This was the situation that Humanism and institutional militancy was creating and which Poussin's art sought to resist.

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11.   Carroll, *The Western Dreaming*, p. 13. Jesus' use of parables can be seen as a work of *midrash*, especially given his explanation in Jn 13.10-17.

12.   John Carroll, *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2004), p. 70.

With Poussin the representational form of the unseen is Stoical, but if it is also the case that the West's sacred stories are completed in what John Carroll calls the 'Jesus cycle', then it follows that Poussin's work of *midrash* consists in putting the stories of that 'cycle' into a contemporarily relevant visual language so that they might be seen anew, and so that they might continue to shape confrontations with Necessity. *Tancred and Erminia* achieves this because it uses Tasso's poem as an opportunity to *midrash* a sacred story, but in so doing it goes beyond the frame that Tasso left. In this case the retelling is greater than its ostensible inspiration because it connects more fruitfully with the eternal Truth of the archetype, whereas Tasso tied its traces to more transient concerns.

The structure of this chapter goes back from Poussin to Tasso and to biblical sacred stories, and then forwards to the present, to show that *Tancred and Erminia* continues to be culturally alive because it deals with eternal issues that by definition cannot be resolved and which, moreover, continue to be raised. The first section of this chapter pays attention to Poussin's painting and explores the extent to which it represents a retelling and even a careful critique of Tasso's poem. This section is about Poussin's *midrash* of Tasso and the distinct likelihood that there is a connection from the story of Crusaders and Saracens to one about Western-Christian dominance. It is proposed that Poussin's *midrash* of Tasso is a critique of the poem. John Carroll implies that the 'greatness of the West' is largely derived from the power of its sacred stories, yet Poussin's retelling of Tasso suggests that it is also based on domination over the other. If that were all that Poussin had achieved then *Tancred and Erminia* would now be dead in as much as it would be dealing with long forgotten—and presently rather embarrassing—issues. Poussin's painting is however far too subtle to fall into that abyss. The charge of the painting comes from the way that Poussin takes his *midrash* of Tasso back to the sacred stories of the 'Jesus cycle' and *midrashes* them in turn. That *midrash* on a *midrash* is the theme of the second section of this chapter. It is proposed that Poussin extended Tasso's poem, and subverted the evident acceptance of the claims of the Church Militant that it implies, in order to retell the Truth that is within the Magdalene story. The importance of that particular story will be examined through the work of John Carroll. The conclusion of the chapter brings these themes together to contend that the picture and sacred story are about *right love*, where the criterion of the right is derived from the Stoic principle of virtue as a way of achieving a certain control in the face of Fate. Right love implies a virtuous balance of reason and concupiscence, and it is proposed that the Barber Institute *Tancred and Erminia* gestures precisely

towards the chance of such virtue. Yet this notion of right love has itself been subjected to a recent *midrash*, in Pope Benedict's encyclical *Deus caritas is est*.

1. *The Poem*

Perhaps because he was one of the first artists to represent the story of Tancred and Erminia, Poussin relied on a visual repertoire that was already well known. As Richard Verdi notes, Poussin tells the story through 'the traditional form of a Lamentation over the Dead Christ' where Tancred stands in for the body of Christ, Erminia for the Virgin or Mary Magdalene and Vafrino for St John the Baptist.[13] However, the figure of Vafrino also situates *Tancred and Erminia* in the tradition of paintings of the Deposition. Although Vafrino is lifting the wounded body of Tancred, the pose that he adopts could be just as easily one that is involved in lowering a body to the ground. To this extent it is interesting to compare the Barber Institute *Tancred and Erminia* with Raphael's *Deposition* of 1508 in the Borghese Gallery (fig. 3). The poses of the central male bodies are reminiscent of one another, and there is another point of connection too. Tancred's left hand is as important in the Poussin as is that of Christ in Raphael's painting.

The left hand is a focal point in the Barber Institute's *Tancred and Erminia*, and this is emphasized by its complete invisibility in the Hermitage version. It is in the middle of the canvas but, more than that, it is picked out by two light sources. First of all there is a light source that is in front of the canvas, rising to the central horizontal from the bottom, to the right of vertical centre. This brings Tancred's hand from out of the shadow in which his forearm continues to rest, although the light seems to have the primary function of highlighting Erminia's flesh-tones and the hand that is holding the sword with which she cuts her hair. Second, and much more interestingly, there is the light from the sunset at the left side of the canvas. It comes from behind Vafrino, continues across Tancred's body and carries as a wide beam between Tancred's raised knee and his left hand. The top line continues across Erminia's blue dress and along the scabbard that lies on the ground. The positions of Erminia's horse's legs, which make it the third angle of a triangle, reinforce the importance of Tancred's hand, as do the verticals of Erminia's upper right arm and the tress of hair that has not yet been cut but will soon fall upon Tancred's wrist.

13.   Richard Verdi, *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts* (London: Scala, 2nd edn, 2005), p. 60; Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, p. 16.
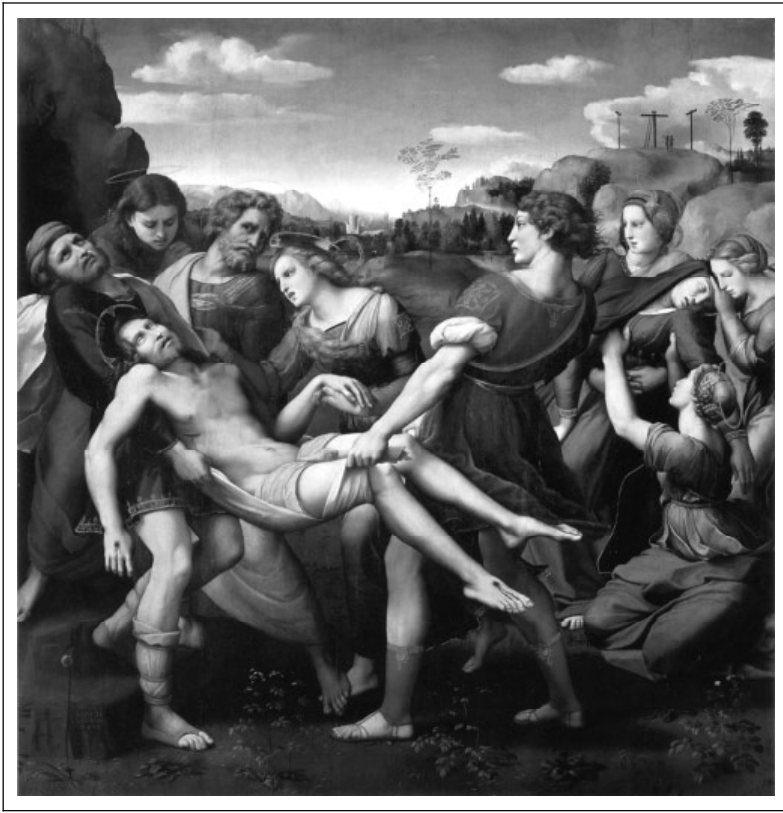
Figure 3. Raphael, *Deposition* (1508),
Borghese Gallery, Rome

However there is a crucial difference between the hand of Christ and that of Tancred. Raphael's Christ is having his hand held by Mary Magdalene. In his death he is being cared for and held as a human body, in an act that is all the more poignant because it will be denied when the risen Christ tells Mary Magdalene not to touch him (Jn 20.17). By contrast, Tancred's hand is empty and is limply *pointing*. The importance of this pointing is reinforced by the extent to which Tancred's hand 'borrows' its gesture from Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel.[14]

Adam is lifelessly pointing towards the finger of God. When they touch a spark of life will cross from the one to the other, Adam will awake and the human story shall begin. Tancred's lifeless pointing is

14.   Verdi, *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts*, p. 60.

different, but the similarity with Adam is so deliberate that it is impossible to believe that an artist as nuanced and precise as Poussin is not making a significant point in using the gesture. So where then is Tancred pointing? The lighting of the picture makes the answer to that question perfectly clear. Tancred is pointing at Erminia's womb. Now if it is agreed that Adam is pointing towards the animating principle of life, then by 'borrowing' the gesture, Poussin is enabling Tancred to do something similar. Both Adam and Tancred are pointing towards that which they need to receive, that upon which they are waiting. Consequently, Tancred is waiting to receive something from Erminia just as Adam was waiting to receive something from God. But for precisely what is Tancred waiting?

At a first glance, the answer to that question is obvious and Tancred is waiting to be helped by Erminia. He is waiting for her medical care and unbeknown to him she is determined to give it selflessly because of her unrequited love. Her womb and her caring come together to make her a woman. By this argument, Tancred is a rather straightforward Stoic hero in that he has done what was required of him in fighting with Argantes, and now he has the tranquillity of mind to accept what has happened and to wait patiently for the help that Fate decrees either will or will not be provided by others. At this obvious level then Tancred is a symbol of virtue and Erminia is one of maternal assistance, and thus the gender identification of those roles is not at all coincidental.[15] But the situation becomes more complicated when it is recalled that, as Tasso's poem establishes, Tancred is a Crusader and Erminia is a Saracen princess. In that context Tancred's limp pointing to her womb adds another dimension to Erminia and as an allegorical figure she becomes exceptionally complex. What Tancred is waiting upon is not as obvious as it might at first appear. He is not just waiting to have his wounds tended.

Adam was waiting for the transmission of the spark from God. Without that spark his gestures could only be placid. Later Christ was born of Mary by the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1.26-38). Indeed, Poussin stressed the theme of pointing in his *Annunciation* of 1657, in the National Gallery in London (fig. 4). In that painting the archangel, Gabriel, points towards heaven with his left hand and to the Virgin's womb with his right.

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15. For a gendered discussion of the Hermitage *Tancred and Erminia*, see Phillippa Plock, 'Watching Women Watching Warriors: Nicolas Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia* and the Visuality of Papal Court Tournaments', *Art History* 31.2 (2008), pp. 139-58.

The Holy Spirit hovers above Mary, in the symbolic form of a dove, while Gabriel's gestures are definite and deliberate. The angel is most definitely giving a message. But he is also awaiting Mary's declaration, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word' (Lk. 1.38). Tancred's pointing stands in this line of succession, and it is implying that now rebirth is this-worldly and comes from the womb. However, Erminia's womb is problematic because she is a Saracen, and therefore before it can be a site of rebirth for the Christian warrior she needs to be reborn herself (as such Erminia is *not* an allegorical form of the Virgin Mary; Erminia has had no Immaculate Conception). Tancred is waiting for Erminia's womb to be saved before it can be given. The womb itself must be reborn.

Figure 4. Nicolas Poussin, *The Annunciation* (1657),
The National Gallery, London

After all, Tasso's poem is not just a collection of love stories and battles, and neither is it just an allegory. More than that it is an epic of the victory of the Crusaders over the non-Christian presence in the Holy Land, and it is precisely in that context that Erminia appears. She is a symbol of what the Crusaders seek to dominate, and Poussin deals with this theme in Tasso by making Erminia a willing accomplice in the repudiation of her Saracen identity. Tancred's gesture is therefore intimating that Erminia's womb is the site of rebirth, but that this can only happen if it is saved. The point of the Crusades was not to unify the Christian and the Saracen, rather it was to impose Christian dominance and this is exactly what Tancred does to Erminia's womb. In the first place, historically the imposition of Christian dominance took place through force of arms (hence in the allegory Tancred needs to defeat Argantes), but the conceit of Crusader dominance is that thereafter it involved the willing acceptance by the local population of what had happened. This is one dimension of the meaning of Erminia cutting off her hair. She is removing her former identity and, moreover, in using Tancred's sword to do so she is reinforcing the principle that the means of her rebirth is Christianity, regardless of how it is brought to her. The suggestion is that Erminia is *willing* to cut off her old self.

One of the profound disjunctures between the poem and the painting is that, according to Tasso, Erminia used her hair out of necessity and because there was nothing else with which to bind Tancred's wounds, but Poussin painted a picture in which lengths of cloth and other bindings abound. Erminia wears a voluminous blue dress, Tancred is covered with a golden-orange cloth, Vafrino wears a red tunic, Argantes is fully clothed and the horses have saddlecloths and bridles. Actually then Erminia does not *have* to cut her hair. In Poussin's painting Erminia is acting out of *choice* and not at all out of need. Consequently, Erminia's desperate expression and action is not *just* a sign of her unfettered desire to help the man she loves. It is also a mark of the frenzy that she feels to be received before it is too late into the salvation that is offered by Christ, even—according to Tasso—when it is brought with the force of arms (Tancred's shield is engraved with the monogram of Christ.)[16] As Verdi notes, 'Erminia…is seeking her own salvation—not merely through the revival of the knight but presumably also through her own conversion to the Christian faith'. Indeed, 'In saving Tancred, Erminia may…be seen to be saving herself'.[17] By this argument, *Tancred and*

16.   Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, p. 17.
17.   Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, pp. 17, 28.

Erminia is a political allegory of a victory of the Crusades even in the minds of the vanquished. Tancred is waiting for Erminia to be reborn into her new identity, and he is pointing to the place of the birth of the unified religion that will ensue. Erminia's womb will be thus redeemed.

The original birth of Adam was obviously entirely removed from any semblance of sexuality, and although Poussin's *Annunciation* is overtly sensual in its depiction of the Virgin, *Tancred and Erminia* seems to be reticent to follow through on the logical implications of the identification of the womb as the site of rebirth. Poussin is beset by a level of ambiguity in the Barber Institute's portrayal of Erminia that is entirely absent from the rather dreamier Erminia of the Hermitage. The clothes of the Barber Institute Erminia are slipping from her shoulder and the light catches her bare flesh. Indeed her breast would likely be exposed were it not for her arm clutching the hilt of the sword. Erminia is presented as a passionate actor and this is what makes the cutting of the hair such a powerful symbol of her wilful decision to be saved by Christ through the subordination of herself to the force of the arms that are borne in his name (and that is symbolized by Tancred). Although Erminia is aware of the presence of Tancred, and therefore of the salvation that is promised according to Tasso and the Church Militant by military might, like the Church Militant itself Tancred is largely indifferent towards her as an individual. He is merely waiting for her to come to him in the rightful way. And come to him she does. Cutting off her hair is Erminia's symbolic sacrifice of self for love of Tancred, and by extension of her own religion for the version of historically Church-authorized Christianity that is borne by the Crusaders. She cuts off her hair and in so doing makes herself able to receive the message that Tancred brings.

The lighting of the picture is such that Tancred's torso is shown very clearly, and it is without wound. On the one hand Poussin might have done this in order to avoid any chance of an allegorical identification of Tancred with Christ. For instance it is very clear that Tancred's side has not been pierced by a spear, and despite the intimation of the decoration on his sandals, neither have nails pierced Tancred's feet. But on the other hand the ostentatious display of the unmarked flesh necessarily raises the question of *where* exactly *is* Tancred injured. It is a question that is reinforced by the Hermitage *Tancred and Erminia*, where the lighting and the line of Erminia's gaze make it clear that Tancred is wounded in the area of his left shoulder, or the left side of his neck and face. In the Barber Institute version however Tancred's wounds are hidden from view. There is relatively little blood for one so grievously

wounded, and it is only by following the line of Erminia's gaze that it is possible to locate the injuries at all precisely. As soon as the line of gaze is followed it becomes obvious that Erminia is looking intently towards the bulge at the top of the golden cloth that covers Tancred's loins. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, the Barber Institute's Tancred is wounded in the area of his genitals.[18] Jonathan Richardson appears to be making the same point somewhat more discreetly in 1773 when, immediately after mentioning the cloth over Tancred he wrote: 'that nothing might be shocking or disagreeable, the wounds are much hid, nor is his body or garment stained with blood, only some appears here and there upon the ground just below the drapery, as if it flowed from some wounds which that covered'.[19]

In the terms of Poussin painting Tasso's poem, the *overt* suggestion seems to be that even if the Church Militant is exhausted by its rightful struggles, victory will lead to a rebirth for the Church itself through the salvation of those upon whom it visits its might. To this extent the painting is about the defence of Christianity and also a guarantee of success for the Church Militant. The hint seems to be that the Church will be reproduced in this world so long as it makes others prepared to accept it (in one way or another) and willing to subordinate their desires to its needs.

This is a theme that would have sat well in the Rome of Poussin's time, when it was the centre of the Counter-Reformation struggle against the Protestantism that was being established in Northern Europe.[20] But Poussin was far too subtle and self-assured merely to provide propaganda. After all, and as Blunt comments 'Poussin was not in sympathy with the Catholicism current in the Rome of his own day'.[21] John Carroll puts the same point somewhat more powerfully and broadly. He sees Poussin as one of the leading figures of, 'a Reformation all its own, moving beyond Catholic orthodoxy and bursting out from its medieval walls. It is more accurately described as an Alternative, rather than Counter-Reformation—itself assaulting the foundations of the Roman Church and its doctrine in comparable ways to the demolition from the north'.[22] There still remains something unseen about *Tancred and Erminia*.

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18.   This observation resonates with the argument in: Jonathan Unglaub, 'Poussin's Reflection', *Art Bulletin* (Sept. 2004), pp. 505-29.

19.   Richardson in Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, p. 37.

20.   Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, p. 10.

21.   Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 177.

22.   Carroll, *The Wreck of Western Culture*, p. 71.

2. *The Sacred Story*

Poussin continues to be relevant because, despite the obviously historical conditions of the existence of his work, it explores the necessary questions of the human condition. Blunt suggests that Poussin's intellectual circle was one that was interested in exploring the continuity of eternal truth across and within religions. Given this belief in continuity it would not have been impossible to hold to both Stoic and Christian precepts since, from this point of view, truth is 'above sect or creed'.[23] This explains the ambiguous relationship of Poussin's art with the Catholic Church of his time. He does not reject the Church as such, but the general sense of Poussin's work is that the Church as an institution has become too this-worldly and aggressively militant and, in so doing, has lost touch with the profound charge and force of its eternal Truth. For example, Blunt says that Poussin's series of *Sacraments* of the 1640s, 'concentrates attention on a central point of religious dogma and is far removed from the emotional and ecstatic Catholicism expressed in Roman Baroque art'.[24]

Consequently, and following the cues that are offered by John Carroll, Poussin's art can be interpreted as engaged in a work of Reformation, but its project is quieter than the frontal institutional and theological assault of northern Protestantism. Poussin is working inside (and for that matter actually *on*) the walls of the Church as he found it, in order to revitalize its eternal Truth so that it might demolish its temporary institutional constraint. The method he adopts is one of retelling the sacred stories in a way that speaks to the times and yet opens the present to the eternal. Poussin's art can achieve that precisely because its tendency towards impersonality and its deliberate anachronism (thanks to its classical formalism, obvious allegorical weight and so on) enables it to act as a scalpel against the everyday and its obviousness.

According to John Carroll, 'We are haunted by the Truth that we suspect lies behind things'. He contends that to be fully human is to be possessed of the nagging suspicion that the events and institutions of everyday life are little more than temporary coverings of the eternal. Moreover, the everyday is too routine to provide access to the eternal Truth that is always intuited as being there as an incitement. 'The imagination is full with its promise—that it might tap into the source of vital energy, injecting the zest and dynamism that is lacking; that it might

23. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 187.
24. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, p. 187.

bring illumination to a life, and provide the key to what it is all about, bestowing meaning'. For Carroll, the problem with the contemporary West is that it has produced an everyday life that is so comfortable and a culture that is so easy to consume that Truth becomes decisively unseen to such a degree that it is invisible. But then all that results is a life of torpor and indifferent apathy. He says that, 'without such a truth, or truths, life sinks into routine—lacklustre in mood, absurd in content, ultimately futile'.[25] Although Carroll makes this comment by way of a critique of contemporary social and cultural life, it can be projected back upon Poussin's position, and on that basis it is possible to suggest that Poussin is precisely trying to 'tap into the source of vital energy' that he associated with Stoicism and which he considered was being made lacklustre by the institutions and orthodoxy of his time. As such he paints a decidedly ambiguous version of *Tancred and Erminia* so that it might retain an ability to illuminate, and so that it might never be an unproblematic representation of a romance about Christian dominance and Saracen acceptance. There is more to the painting that Tasso allows.

Poussin's Stoicism required that, for him, the Truth was to be found in the life that was lived virtuously, and with a tranquil mind in the face of Necessity and Fate because there has been in the individual an acceptance of the need to achieve a balance between reason and desire. Yet in that balance there is inescapably to be found *tragedy*. Poussin is saying that to live virtuously is to accept what Fate decrees and to come to terms with it. Virtue consists in reconciling the self with the not-self. But this is only possible if the self is given a reason to carry out such reconciliation. *Tancred and Erminia* pursues the possibility that this-worldly power and dominance is a sufficient reason, but ultimately Poussin reveals that more than might is needed. Something extra is needed to come to terms with Necessity. John Carroll says that 'this is possible only under the authority of myth. Take away the charged archetypal story, fail to keep it animated, and you take away life'.[26] This is what Poussin teaches, and his work is an exercise in trying to reanimate the eternal archetypal stories by retelling them in a way that is relevant to the times and which, moreover, releases them from the unthought structures and routines of the everyday. This is the work of *midrash*.

Carroll is enquiring into how it is possible for humans to understand their position in the world, yet this in turn requires a common language in which understanding can be expressed and shared. After all, Carroll

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25. John Carroll, *The Existential Jesus* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007), pp. 2-3.
26. Carroll, *The Western Dreaming*, pp. 9-10.

contends that where the tragedy of human existence cannot be shared there is, 'withdrawal into self, chit-chat about the everyday, as if describing how I drank coffee at nine-twenty-seven this morning anchors existence'.[27] Culture is taken by Carroll to be the repository and pursuit of that common language, and it consists in the 'sacred stories' that enable a shared experience of the archetypal tragedies of the human condition and thus access to the eternal Truth. Carroll is to a considerable extent carrying out a sociological variation on the theme of Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic, but he is a little vague about precisely what it is that makes a story 'sacred'. It is unclear whether a story is 'sacred' for Carroll because the Truth it contains is revealed or imminent or, alternatively, whether a 'sacred story' is one that has come to be surrounded with accretions and attributions of insight because it has existed since cultural time-immemorial. In other words, is Truth a product of a successful cultural dealing with the eternal human tragedy (where success is derived from the ability of a story to be *midrashed* from one time to another) or is it contained in a kernel that has to be found through the work of cracking the nut of everyday routine and acceptance? Carroll does not really overcome this question when he explains that '*Mythos* was the classical Greek understanding of culture: a body of timeless, archetypal stories from a long time ago. This is myth in the sense of a charged narrative about larger-than-life—even semi-divine—figures whose lives set the pattern for the way things human have been ever since, and always shall be'.[28]

It is possible to be sure that Poussin is dealing with one of these 'larger-than-life' figures, and that he is thereby retelling a strand of the Western *mythos*. More strongly it can be proposed that Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia* is charged with eternal Truth because it retells—*midrashes*—one of the sacred stories of the tragedy of the human condition. It is dealing with an archetype. But with which archetype is the painting dealing? If it is accepted that *Tancred and Erminia* focuses on the central Stoic issue of the tension between reason and concupiscence, and if it is also accepted that the archetypal stories have been put into the shared experiences of Western culture through the 'Jesus cycle' (that is to say, through the New Testament), then it is possible to conclude that the sacred story that Poussin retells in this picture is the one about Mary Magdalene.

Richard Verdi explicitly connects *Tancred and Erminia* to the Magdalene story: 'Just as the repentant Magdalene had once served Christ by

27. Carroll, *The Western Dreaming*, p. 11.
28. Carroll, *The Existential Jesus*, p. 14.

anointing his feet with oil and drying them with her hair, so Erminia
here prepares to bind Tancred's wounds with her own hair'. Furthermore
Magdalene carries out this act in order to seek forgiveness, and Verdi
suggests that Erminia is likewise seeking salvation through her reception
into the Christian faith. It is clear that Poussin saw connections between
Magdalene and Erminia, and Verdi sees similarities between the Barber
Institute Erminia and Magdalene as she appears in Poussin's *Lamentation*
of 1628–29 in Munich.[29] It is also noticeable that when Poussin painted
Magdalene in the *Sacrament of Penance* in 1647 (fig. 5), her hair is a
shade of amber as Erminia's had been in the 1630s, and the hair band
and style is very similar. The connections that Poussin makes are not at
all accidental, and indeed Tasso's own stress on Erminia's hair immedi-
ately points back to Mary Magdalene.
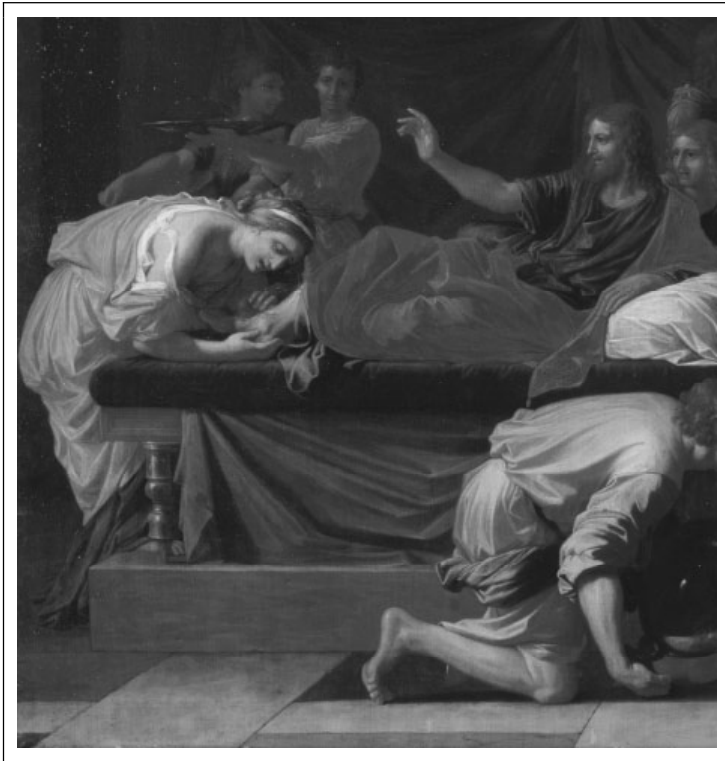
Figure 5. Detail from Nicolas Poussin, *The Sacrament of Penance* (1647),
The National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

29.   Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, pp. 16-17.

Her story appears in all of the Gospels but only John calls her Mary. It is a few days before Passover and Jesus is a dinner guest of Simon the Leper. Whilst he is eating, a woman who is known to be a 'sinner' (Lk. 7.37) comes into the room. 'Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment' (Jn 12.3). Luke gives a more poignant and sensual account of this moment 'and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment' (Lk. 7.38). Led by Judas Iscariot, some of the disciples expressed their outrage that money that could have been given to the poor had been wasted in this way but Jesus admonished them 'Let her alone…She has done a beautiful thing to me…She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (Mk 14.6-9). Luke stresses the salvation that Jesus gave to Mary: 'her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much… And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven"… And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace"' (Lk. 8.47-50). Much the same comment could be made of Erminia. Her faith saves her too, and the two *putti* at the top left of the canvas guarantee this: 'Bearing torches and arrows, these foretell the happy outcome of it all and suggest that Tancred and Erminia will eventually be united in love',[30] and that in turn means that Erminia will achieve a virtuous reconciliation of reason and concupiscence. *That* is what distinguishes Poussin's Erminia from Tasso's. In the poem she needs to be completely uprooted, whilst in the painting she needs to achieve reconciliation. Consequently Poussin's Erminia is always relevant because she signifies the tragedy of the human condition whereas Tasso's is a story about the eventual happiness of the conquered.

According to Carroll, the Truth in the Magdalene story revolves around the tension between the need to live rightly and the difficulty of doing so. He says that, 'Mary Magdalene is the great fallen one who, once she sees Jesus, recognizes her own degradation…She is the commanding figure of worldliness out of balance'. She is 'there, wherever the dual movement occurs, of a life that has lost its way—due to a damaged or out-of-balance character, or a savage fate—followed by transformation'.[31] The point about Magdalene, as Jesus saw, is that she has 'loved much' and, in so doing, allowed desire to come to dominate over reason.

30.   Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin: Tancred and Erminia*, p. 11.
31.   Carroll, *The Wreck of Western Culture*, p. 83; Carroll, *The Existential Jesus*, p. 151.

Magdalene feels the consequences of this imbalance in the very core of her being, else she would not weep so profusely at Jesus' feet and neither indeed would she seek forgiveness. The Magdalene story centres on the meaning of sin and on the nature of redemption. Here, Carroll's discussion takes a controversial turn. He argues that Christian orthodoxy has 'distorted' the Greek word *hamartia* that appears in the Gospel of Mark in order to justify 'the image of a moralistic Jesus preoccupied with *sin*'. But, Carroll says, that is not at all what *hamartia* means. Rather it means 'missing the mark' and so instead of sin, 'Jesus is concerned with the righting of being, or the restoring of a character that is out of balance'.[32]

It is in that context that Carroll reads the biblical narrative of Magdalene. Now, shortly before Jesus admonished the disciples for being sceptical about Magdalene, he floated a question. He asked Simon— presumably the Simon who was his host—who would be more grateful: a man who had been forgiven a debt of two hundred denarii or one who had been forgiven a debt of fifty? Simon answered that the creditor would be 'loved' most by the man who had been forgiven the greatest debt. Jesus told Simon that he had 'judged rightly' (Lk. 8.41-43). In giving that answer, which is of course the right one according to the logic of the initial question, Simon is actually condemning himself for his attitude towards Mary Magdalene. He was outraged that the sinner Magdalene had come into his house and disturbed the dinner. He was outraged too at Jesus' acceptance of her ministrations: '"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner"' (Lk. 8.39). Yet by the logic of his answer to Jesus' question, Simon ought to have forgiven Magdalene just as Jesus did, *precisely because* she was a sinner. In John Carroll's reading, Jesus has to humiliate Simon in public in order to show that the question is not about a failure to uphold the demands of ethical or legal codes and therefore about a right to condemn, but rather the nub of the matter is about how to live. *Hamartia* is about *being not sin*. Consequently, by this reading, Jesus gives Magdalene salvation by pointing her in the direction of right and balanced being.

From the moralistic point of view, Magdalene needs to stop being a prostitute. But from the perspective of *hamartia* as understood by Jesus (according to Carroll), she needs instead to balance her being and then she will appreciate that her previous life is catastrophic. The transformation will come from within and not from a forceful outside. The point is for Magdalene to accept that she 'loves much', but to turn that abundance of love away from an exclusive focus on physical desire and to

32.   Carroll, *The Existential Jesus*, p. 9.

reconcile it with a more spiritual love that comes from having faith. Magdalene's saving transformation is signified by her changing dealings with Jesus. In the house of Simon she touches him, and she holds his hand in Raphael's *Deposition*, but when the Resurrected Christ appears before her she is told to touch him not and she accepts that command immediately (Jn 20.17). Through faith she achieves a life in right balance. Magdalene is encouraged not to love less, but to love *rightly*. Her encouragement is to accept the nature of her being but to reconcile its parts. It is a question of *right* love, of love that accepts *both* reason and concupiscence. It is about a love that is thus virtuous and able to withstand the blows of Fate.

In other words, by John Carroll's reading at least, the Truth that runs through the story of Mary Magdalene fits precisely with the Stoic conception of virtue. In these terms, when Poussin uses the story of *Tancred and Erminia* to retell the archetypal *mythos* of right being that is signified by Mary Magdalene he was doing considerably more than illustrating a fashionable poem. He was also making a case for Stoic virtue and, furthermore, liberating Magdalene herself from her orthodox condemnation as nothing more than a prostitute. Poussin makes Erminia-Magdalene an allegorical signification of what all humans must do if they seek to love in a balanced life that is meaningful, if they seek to be received into the tranquillity of virtue and taken away from the harshness of too much reason or the promiscuity of untrammelled desire.

As Carroll suggests, it is a question of *balance* and not of domination as implied by Tasso's poem. Magdalene is not asked to transform her identity, unlike Tasso's Erminia who has to give up everything in her desperate desire for salvation and the love of Tancred. Christ is more humane than that and, Poussin seems to be suggesting, so ought the Church to be. The point is that Magdalene *reconciles* two aspects of herself. 'There is a tragic self, which must spend the rest of its life struggling free from ever-present worldliness'. Her first impulse is to touch the Resurrected Christ, else he would not tell her to desist. Yet there is another aspect: 'forgiven, a full-blooded woman in the round, embracing and cherishing herself, free to touch. Her past, her worldly being, does not need to be renounced, for it is constitutive of what she is. In its reintegrated form, it is essential to her strength'.[33] Free to touch, and therefore free not to, because balanced. This is the Truth that Poussin too seeks to recover; even from a poem that denies it.

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33. Carroll, *The Western Dreaming*, pp. 60-61.

3. *Conclusion*

Poussin's *Tancred and Erminia* is a *midrash* of the archetypal story of Mary Magdalene, filtered through the prism of the Stoic understanding of virtue. In this way the painting is situated in both of the mainstream traditions of the Western *mythos*, the Greek and the Christian. It is a story about a balanced life and eternal Truth. Put another way, Mary Magdalene is an allegorical figure of *right love*, and so is Poussin's Erminia. Poussin is not using Erminia for propaganda or condemnatory purposes. He accepts her for what she is and yet, more importantly, in terms of a faith about what she can become. Tancred might not recognize Erminia because, perhaps, he is too tied to the everyday orthodoxies, but Poussin does encourage his viewer to engage with the story, and this engagement is possible for two reasons.

First, it can happen because Poussin's picture draws on a common language in order to enable Erminia's plight to become a shared experience. She is taken beyond creed. The problem is of course that in as far as that language is decreasingly shared and held in common, Poussin's picture is likely to become more and more silent, increasingly ignored in the galleries because it is the work of a dead 'old master'. To mix metaphors, Poussin will become *unseen*. That is our problem, however, not Poussin's. It is a challenge to those who would see. Second, Poussin encourages engagement because *Tancred and Erminia* deals with an aspect of the human condition that can never be resolved and that will always continue to haunt precisely because it is eternal. That is, after all, what gives the archetypal stories their charge. Poussin's Erminia is our contemporary in a way that Tasso's is not.

That is no fanciful claim. The very dilemmas that are confronted in Poussin's painting and in the biblical narrative of Mary Magdalene were the theme of Pope Benedict's first Encyclical in 2006, *Deus caritas est*.[34] Poussin's painting and the papal text are *midrashes* of the same eternal Truth and the latter can be taken to be proof of the continued relevance of the former's Barber *Tancred and Erminia*.

Benedict immediately points the issue back to the Greeks, and once again there is then the implication of a synthesis of the Hellenic and the Christian. He writes about: 'That love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human

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34. Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est: God is Love* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2006).

beings, [which] was called *eros* by the ancient Greeks'.[35] This is the kind of love that Erminia felt for Tancred and, to take the matter back to the archetype, the kind that Magdalene experienced, as she 'loved much'. According to Nietzsche, this is precisely the kind of love that Christianity destroyed, but Benedict rejects that claim and argues that what Christianity set itself against was the celebration of *eros* as sufficient unto itself, *eros* as a quasi-divine force. For Benedict, *eros* is to be celebrated because it is an integral part of the human condition but he cautions: 'An intoxicated and undisciplined *eros*…is not an ascent in "ecstasy" towards the Divine, but a fall, a degradation of man'. He continues: 'Evidently, *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns'. The principle of discipline comes from the love that gives a direction to the yearning. This is love as *agape*, and Benedict says that in this form: 'Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice'.[36] This is what Poussin's Erminia knows, sees and shows.

Erminia is a *midrash* of Magdalene, and both of them tell the Truth that *eros* or concupiscence needs to be balanced by *agape* or reason if a virtuous life is to be possible. *Eros and agape* or concupiscence *and* reason. Not one *or* the other, but both in equilibrium. Perhaps these are the names of the *putti* in the Barber Institute *Tancred and Erminia*, and maybe that is also why they appear together, balancing one another.

35. Benedict, *Deus caritas est*, p. 5.
36. Benedict, *Deus caritas est*, pp. 7, 9.

8

WHO IS ESAU (GENESIS 27.32)?
MATTHIAS STOM'S *ISAAC BLESSING JACOB*,
IN THE BARBER INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS

Martin O'Kane

In the reception history of the Bible, the story of Jacob and Esau is particularly prominent. Studiously interpreted in Jewish and Christian tradition and imaginatively reincarnated in literature, music and art, the identity of the twin brothers has been a subject of heated debate among theologians and a source of inspiration for artists through the centuries. Invariably, however, attention is focussed on the identity of Jacob, the chosen son who inherits the birthright, becomes a prototype for Christ and later represents both Church and Synagogue. But what about Esau? Who is he and what does he stand for? Why has he become such a thoroughly maligned figure in the history of tradition and why has he been given a reputation totally unjustified, based on the few details we know about him from the Bible itself? A painting depicting a key episode in the biblical narrative of Jacob and Esau, and now occupying a commanding position in one of the galleries of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, invites the viewer to reflect again on Esau and his identity and to reassess the undeserved reputation he has acquired. Beginning with the Barber Institute painting and using it as a point of departure, this chapter explores some of the issues surrounding Esau's identity that emerge from this painting and in other significant works of art.

In 1991, a painting entitled *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (fig. 1), by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Matthias Stom, was acquired, amid much excitement, by the Barber Institute. Shortly afterwards, to celebrate its acquisition, an exhibition of other works by the little-known artist Stom was set up to contextualize the painting. In this exhibition and in the accompanying catalogue, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* was interpreted primarily in the context of two other biblical paintings, between which, the then

curator Richard Verdi believed, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* had originally hung, namely *Tobias Healing his Father's Blindness* and *Christ Disputing with the Doctors in the Temple*.[1] Thus the interpretation focussed on how all three paintings expressed a common theme, namely father–son relationships, and on the importance of seeing in the Old Testament figures of Jacob and Tobias 'types' of Christ. By placing the morally questionable episode of Jacob's deception of Isaac between two such 'unproblematic' biblical scenes, one could argue that, in the eyes of the viewer, the juxtaposition served to rehabilitate Jacob's deceitful character and justify his morally dubious actions within a mysterious and providential plan of God.

But, quite apart from this interesting interpretation that the position of *Isaac Blessing Jacob* within the triptych facilitates, its composition, on its own, has always fascinated me for quite different reasons: composed in such a way as to convey deliberately the importance of the five senses, the painting parallels precisely the literary structure of the corresponding biblical narrative in Genesis 27, a narrative which, as Robert Alter brings out very clearly, is also constructed around the five senses.[2] In a previous publication, I tried to show how the dynamic at work in the painting parallels the dynamic of the text and how, through an emphasis on the five senses, it effectively insinuates both viewer and reader into the murky world of treachery and deceit.[3] Stom's painting, like the narrative, asks a number of disturbing questions of its characters, of the author who created the narrative and even of God himself, the controlling hand sanctioning the deceit for his own ends. Rembrandt considered the treatment of the weak and aged Isaac so disrespectful that he never actually painted the scene, preferring instead to represent the distinguished old age of biblical patriarchs in a more dignified way, for example as in his painting *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, which depicts an incident from the end of Jacob's life, taken from Genesis 48.[4]

Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* comes from an important period in the history of the iconography of Genesis 27. Although the story was depicted in art from early Christian times, it became particularly popular in seventeenth-century Holland, after which it appears only very sporadically.

1. Richard Verdi, *Matthias Stom: Isaac Blessing Jacob* (The University of Birmingham: The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 1999).

2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 139.

3. See my chapter, 'The Deception of Isaac (Genesis 27): Matthias Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob*', in Martin O'Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp. 107-27.

4. Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, p. 60.

Stom's version, therefore, represents one of the most significant and yet one of the final stages in the rich iconography of this biblical story. Its popularity in seventeenth-century Holland has been attributed to the intense interest in the subject by Rembrandt and his followers who were attracted to the psychological complexity and striking emotional contrasts of the subject.[5] So, although Rembrandt did not actually paint the scene, and indeed made only two drawings of it, it appears that he did use it frequently as a kind of master-class study for his pupils.[6] By the mid-seventeenth century the followers of Rembrandt had produced more than two dozen paintings and drawings of it (almost half of the depictions of the subject known from this period). But the manner in which artists interpreted and depicted the story during this period changed radically. Not only did they tend to concentrate on the very specific episode of the blessing of Jacob (Gen. 27.27), rather than convey the several individual narrative episodes within the chapter as had previously been the convention, but, more often than artists of any other age, they were inclined to interpret the story generally on purely human terms, as one of sibling rivalry, guile and deception, rather than as an overtly religious theme. Seventeenth-century artists also devised a radically new way of portraying the theme from their predecessors and adopted a more immediate and concentrated approach. All three characters (Rebekah, Isaac and Jacob) are shown at close range filling the picture field and in direct proximity to the viewer. The space is usually shallow and barely defined; still-life elements (for example, the meal) are reduced to a minimum. All this serves to focus the attention of the viewer on the psychological undercurrents of the action but particularly on the character and motives of Rebekah. To achieve this effect, the episode of Esau returning from the hunt and presenting game to his father, a traditional element in earlier depictions of the scene, is usually eliminated.[7]

   The proliferation of Dutch paintings and drawings from this period and their accessibility to us today has meant that when we see depictions of this biblical scene, we generally do so through the perspective of seventeenth-century painters, and we focus on the particular characters and aspects of the scene they wish to accentuate. As a result, one of the casualties is Esau because, although well represented in earlier expressive depictions of Genesis 27, he is generally eliminated from Dutch paintings due to the desire to focus on the very moment of Isaac's blessing of Jacob, when Esau is out hunting and so absent from the scene. Nevertheless,

5. See Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, pp. 23-24.
6. Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, p. 60.
7. See Verdi, *Matthias Stom*, p. 26.

even though Esau is absent, the secretive and manipulative actions of the other characters draw our attention to him, reminding the viewer of the injustice perpetrated against him; indeed, if we do not call to mind the absent and wronged Esau as we engage with paintings of the scene, the episode loses entirely its psychological intensity.

Since Esau is not depicted explicitly we have to insinuate him, as did Stom, into the scene. In his painting, not only does the hunting dog symbolize Esau's presence, but Rebekah raises her finger to the viewer urging us not to divulge anything to Esau: Jacob wears Esau's clothes and, as far as the blind and duped Isaac is concerned, Jacob really *is* Esau. Such postures and techniques ensure that the absent Esau remains a central character in the plot. His haunting presence in the painting mirrors the text of Genesis 27 where the different episodes of the story appear punctuated by either Esau's presence or absence. He is present at the very beginning of the chapter when Isaac sends him out to hunt (vv. 1-4) and at the end when he reappears before his father and secures a lesser blessing (vv. 30-40), but in the central section of the chapter which describes how Jacob wins Isaac's blessing by deceitful means, he is absent (vv. 6-29). Yet, even in this absence, Esau seems to haunt the entire scene, primarily through the repetition of his name. Throughout Genesis 27, his name occurs twenty-one times while Jacob's and Isaac's occur only thirteen times and Rebekah's just five. In the crucial episode where Isaac bestows his blessing on Jacob (vv. 5-30), depicted by Stom, the name of Esau occurs ten times even though he is away hunting and absent from the scene. Yet, when Jacob departs and Esau re-enters Isaac's presence, in the ensuing conversation Jacob's name is never mentioned by Isaac and just once by Esau, and this only in a very derogatory manner in v. 36 ('Isn't he rightly named "Jacob"? He has deceived me these two times'). There are other ways, besides the constant repetition of his name, in which the presence of the absent Esau insinuates itself into the scene of Jacob's blessing, namely through the all-important question of identity. Jacob pretends to be Esau, he dresses like him and makes his skin feel like Esau's so that not only does Jacob now appear in Esau's clothes but also in his very skin. Jacob says to Isaac, 'I am Esau' (v. 19) and, for the blind Isaac, he really *is* Esau.[8] Again, later in v. 24, when asked by Isaac, if he is his son Esau, Jacob answers 'I am'. The effect of this skilfully constructed narrative is that the memory of Esau is never allowed to be forgotten but

8. Robert Alter comments on v. 18, 'Isaac's stark question in v. 18, "Who are you, my son?", as Tyndale and the King James version rightly sensed, touches the exposed nerve of identity and moral fitness that gives this ambiguous tale its profundity' (Alter, *Genesis,* p. 139).

is always kept before the reader of the text and the viewer of the paint-ing; the haunting and lingering memory of the deceived and wronged Esau powerfully elicits our sympathy for him in both the biblical text and in Stom's painting.

The interpretation of this painting within the triptych, referred to above, focusses on the choice and role of Jacob as a type of Christ and so, in that context, Esau's own story and identity are discarded and simply fade away. However, around the same time as *Isaac Blessing Jacob*, Stom painted another scene from the Jacob–Esau story (Gen. 25.29-34), in which Esau features very prominently, *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob* (fig. 2), now in the Hermitage, St Petersburg, which bears a remarkable likeness both in theme and composition to the Barber Institute painting. If we look at these two paintings side by side, they provide a sharper focus on the character of Esau than does the triptych.

Taken together, the two paintings convey Jacob's shrewd and manipu-lative manoeuvrings in respect of both his brother Esau and his father Isaac. The composition, focussed on a group of three figures, is similar in both paintings. Occupying the left side of the canvasses are Jacob and Rebekah: in one scene they scheme to rob Esau of his birthright and in the other, they scheme to deceive Isaac into bestowing his blessing on Jacob. Occupying the entire right side in the first painting is Esau with a hare slung across his shoulder while in the second painting Esau fills the entire right side of the canvas. The composition of the two paintings thus makes a clear and unambiguous parallel between Isaac and his son Esau, a bond made stronger through the depiction of the hare that Esau carries, a reminder to the viewer of Isaac's special love for him: 'Isaac loved Esau because he loved game' (Gen. 25.28).

Thus Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* can be interpreted within two con-texts: seen within the context of the triptych, it evokes the theme of father–son relationships in respect of Jacob, Tobit and the young Christ. However, when we look at this painting in the light of Stom's *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob*, it is clearly the relationship between Isaac and his son Esau—and not Jacob—that is highlighted. We have little or no background information and documentation either to these paintings or indeed to the life of Stom himself, but it is already clear that Stom was prepared to depict Esau more sympathetically than had been the case in biblical and theological commentary. Stom's two paintings raise the question as to whether Esau's character is viewed more positively in visual interpretation generally, compared to how he has been presented in textual traditions. It is this question I want to address in the following section.

Figure 1. Matthias Stom, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (c.1633–40),
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham

Figure 2. Matthias Stom, *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob* (1640s),
The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

1. *Esau in Tradition and in Christian Art*

Esau, most unfairly, has been vilified in both Jewish and Christian theological reflection and completely ignored in, and omitted from, the Koran. Such abject vilification is unjustified, based on what we know of him from scattered episodes in Genesis: he receives a minor blessing from Isaac (27.39-40); he willingly becomes reconciled with his brother (33.4); with Jacob, he takes care of the burial of his father Isaac (35.29); God gives him and his descendants the territory of Seir and makes him father of the Edomites (36.8). One remarkable aspect of the post-biblical traditions associated with Esau is that they focus almost entirely on his identity, an aspect partly reflected in the biblical tradition itself: the question that Isaac repeatedly asks throughout Genesis 27, 'Who are you?', is the same question that has been asked ever since: Who is Esau?, whom does he represent and what does he stand for?

    In the New Testament he is identified with all that is ungodly and with sexual immorality: 'See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son' (Heb. 12.16). In early rabbinic midrash, Esau is frequently an eponym for pagan Rome while Jacob is identified as Israel, but later, Esau, or Edom his descendant, is most often read as the Christian Church. The midrashic equation of Esau with Christianity is rich but very problematic because it implies that Christianity is the elder religion (Esau) and Judaism the younger (Jacob). The Rabbis resolved the problem by thinking of Esau as an elderly Rome become lately Christian.[9] Interest in Esau is continued in the Talmud where there is extensive folklore surrounding him: he is a hunter of people as well as of beasts and the murderer of Nimrod (*Yashar Toledot* 51b-52a); he had unusually long teeth (*Ber.* 54b) and an insatiable sexual appetite; his descendants live by the sword (*Tg. Yer. Gen.* 30.8) and are said to be nomadic peoples who refuse the Torah; the Gentiles, especially the Christians are held to be descendants of Esau (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam* 36d).[10]

    On the other hand, early Christian writers, such as Tertullian and Irenaeus, identify 'the Jews' as the elder son Esau, and the dominant younger son Jacob, as 'the Christians'. Commentators point out that, since, at the time of Tertullian, Christians were younger and more

9. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 5-6.

10. See Michael Fixler, 'Esau', in David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 239-40.

powerful it was obvious to Tertullian that only the Christians could be read as Jacob.[11] For Augustine, Esau is a symbol of the proud and carnal man and his descendants are said to be bent on 'the lust of the flesh'. In his interpretation of Rom. 9.13, 'Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated', Augustine identifies Esau as the *populus Synagogae* while Jacob represents the *populus Ecclesiae*. For Augustine, Esau is primarily a representative of all those who do not believe, while other Christian writers, for example Hippolytus, go so far as to identify Esau with the devil himself.

So, at an early stage, both Jews and Christians firmly rejected Esau (and Edom his descendant), preferring instead to associate themselves with Jacob. From the Middle Ages onwards, the rivalry between Esau and Jacob came to symbolize more overtly that between Christians and Jews. At the Reformation, both Luther and Calvin regarded the biblical story as a classic example of the doctrine of predestination, citing Gen. 25.23 in support of this interpretation. Calvin argued that the choice of Jacob over Esau had nothing to do with merit; God simply and freely chose to elect Jacob for no evident cause that reason might deduce. Luther identified Esau with Rome and all that was corrupt in the Catholic Church and Jacob with the Reforming Protestant Churches of Northern Europe. Thus, the entire reception history of Esau is preoccupied with his identity. Who is he? What are his characteristics? And most importantly, with whom is he to be identified now? Interpreters through the ages seemed to vie with one another to find hyperboles to express his evil nature and intent.

In art, Esau is given distinctive characteristics. Gen. 25.2 describes him as 'a skilful hunter, a man of the field,' and this is generally the way he is presented in iconography. Dressed as a hunter, he often carries a bow and is identifiable by his hairy appearance. His specific iconographical features include a hunting hat, a bow and arrow and his game, normally a deer, a rabbit or hare. Of the five episodes in his life that are most represented (his birth; the selling of his birthright; his marriages to Judith and Basemath; Isaac's request for game; his ultimate reunion with Jacob), the two most recurrent themes in art are the selling of his birthright and his appearances in the narrative of Isaac blessing Jacob in Genesis 27, the two instances where Esau has been outmanoeuvred by Jacob (both painted by Stom).

11. Fixler, 'Esau', p. 240.

Esau occurs in Christian art from an early period. He appears as a hunter returning to Isaac with his game in the early fourth-century Via Latina catacomb while in illustrated manuscripts from as early as the sixth century he features prominently: for example, in the Vienna Genesis he is depicted in the profile of a hunter selling his birthright while in the Ashburnham Pentateuch he is depicted returning to Isaac with game, in this instance a deer. In none of these early images is he given a particularly negative connotation and often simply appears as part of hunting scenes. In an eleventh-century illuminated manuscript in the British Library (fig. 3), an illustration accompanying Genesis 27 effectively sums up the entire narrative. Esau, in an attitude of filial obedience goes off to hunt to the left of the picture and returns to his father Isaac to seek his blessing. The four figures in the main panel are divided into two distinct groups: on the left, Isaac and Esau dialogue with one another while on the right and behind Isaac's back, Rebekah and Jacob whisper and plot together.
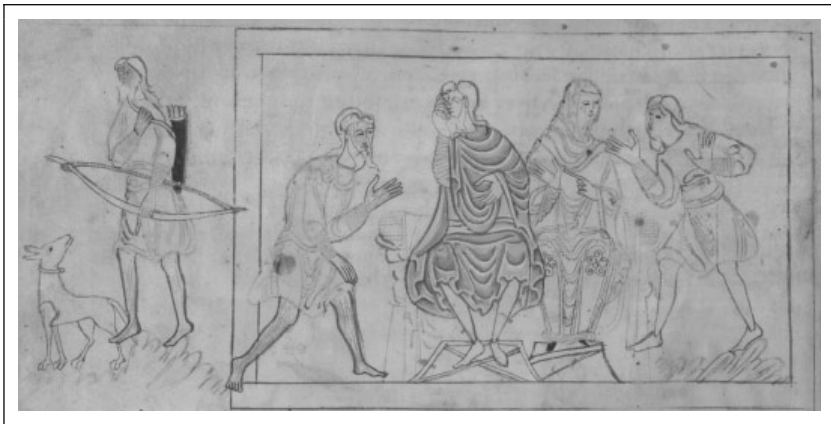
Figure 3. Cott. Claudius B. IV (Aelfric), *The Blessing of Jacob*, The British Library

In the detailed and extensive twelfth-century mosaics of the Cathedral of Monreale in Sicily, Esau's character is given careful consideration and is represented several times in ways that highlight his filial devotion to Isaac. One image shows Esau obeying his father's command to go hunting, a second shows him returning with game and a third depicts an intimate scene between Isaac and Esau. The number and variety of images of Esau contained in the Princeton Index of Christian Art illustrate not only the popularity of the image of Esau, but also indicate that

he was not, as in textual traditions, always portrayed negatively. Many mediaeval images ensured that Esau's return to Isaac is highlighted, thus offering a parallel scene to Jacob's offering of food to Isaac, and suggesting that Esau, because of his filial devotion, should be held in the same high esteem as Jacob. For example, in a twelfth-century illuminated manuscript from Zurich the story of Genesis 27 is depicted (fig. 4) in two narrative tableaux: while the first focusses on Rebekah's maternal manipulation of Jacob, the lower panel conveys Esau's filial devotion—his return from hunting game for his father.
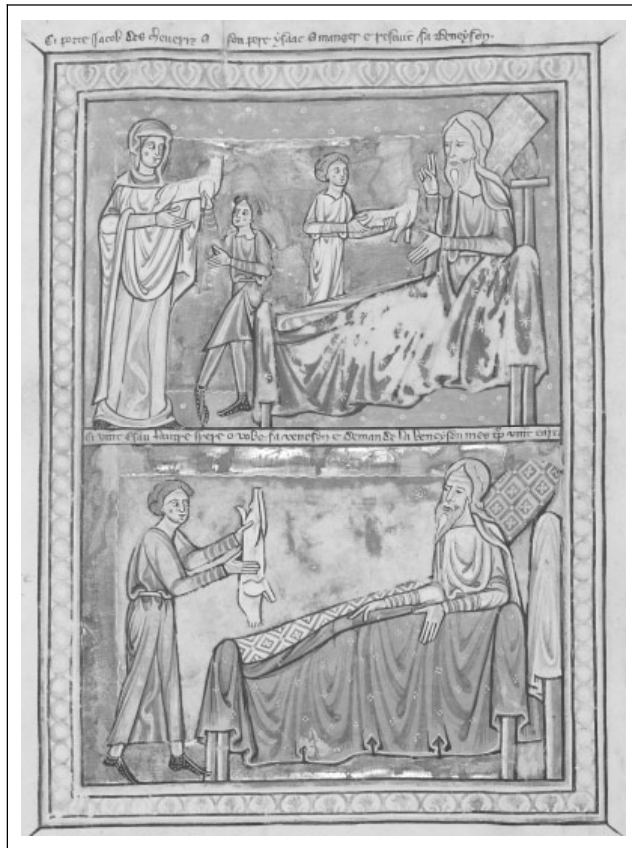
Figure 4. *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (twelfth century),
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

It is not until the mediaeval period that we find an increasing tendency to depict Esau negatively in art. In several instances, for example in illuminated manuscripts, the image merely reflects the negative tone

of the biblical text it illustrates. This is especially the case at the beginning of the Book of Malachi where Esau and Jacob are depicted within the capital O that begins the superscription in the Latin Vulgate:

> *Onus verbi Domini ad Israël in manu Malachiæ*

> The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by the hand of Malachias

The negative image of Esau reinforces the authoritative choice of Jacob over Esau and anticipates the first two verses of the book:

> I have loved you, says the Lord: and you have said: How have you loved us? Was not Esau brother to Jacob, says the Lord, and I have loved Jacob but have hated Esau? and I have made his mountains a wilderness, and given his inheritance to the dragons of the desert (Vulgate, Mal. 1.2-3).

Figure 5. *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (twelfth century),
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

In an example from late thirteenth-century France (fig. 5), Esau is pictured with his bow and arrow and has black skin, suggesting his evil and diabolic nature.

In an earlier twelfth-century French illuminated manuscript, the opening illustration of the Book of Malachi (fig. 6) depicts Jacob sitting on Christ's knee while Esau, raising his forefinger in protest, is rejected and pushed aside.
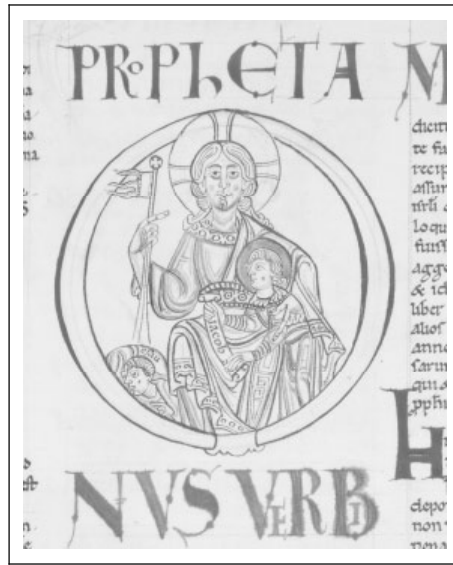
Figure 6. *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (twelfth century),
The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

In many examples from the *Biblia pauperum*, the Bible of the Poor, images of Esau's selling of his birthright are frequently juxtaposed between images of Adam and Eve, after they have succumbed to temptation by eating the forbidden fruit, and images of the temptation of Christ by the devil. The episode of the selling of the birthright was thus interpreted as a temptation for Esau, similar to that experienced by Adam and Eve and by Christ, and a temptation which he did not resist.

But the most negative assessment comes in the *Bible moralisée* (early thirteenth century, Paris), one of a unique group of Bibles containing extensive cycles of biblical illustrations, juxtaposed with theological texts and allegorical, interpretative images.[12] It includes over a thousand exquisitely illuminated medallions accompanied by textual extracts and commentaries that acted as captions to the illustrations in order to reveal, by word and image, the relevance of the Bible to contemporary life. The images were arranged in such a way that the *Bible moralisée* was to be 'read' by viewing/reading first the biblical image with its caption and then by viewing/reading the corresponding commentary image and

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12. *Codex Vindobonensis 2554* is now in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. All the medallions, along with translation of the captions and commentary, have been published in Gerald B. Guest, *Bible moralisée* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1995). I have taken the translations of the captions from this volume.

its caption; the commentary was designed to uncover the contemporary meaning, often moralizing in character, of the particular biblical event for the mediaeval viewer/reader.[13] There are eight illustrations that inter-pret the story of Jacob and Esau (fig. 7): four illustrate scenes from the biblical narrative while four more offer textual and visual allegorical interpretations and expansions.
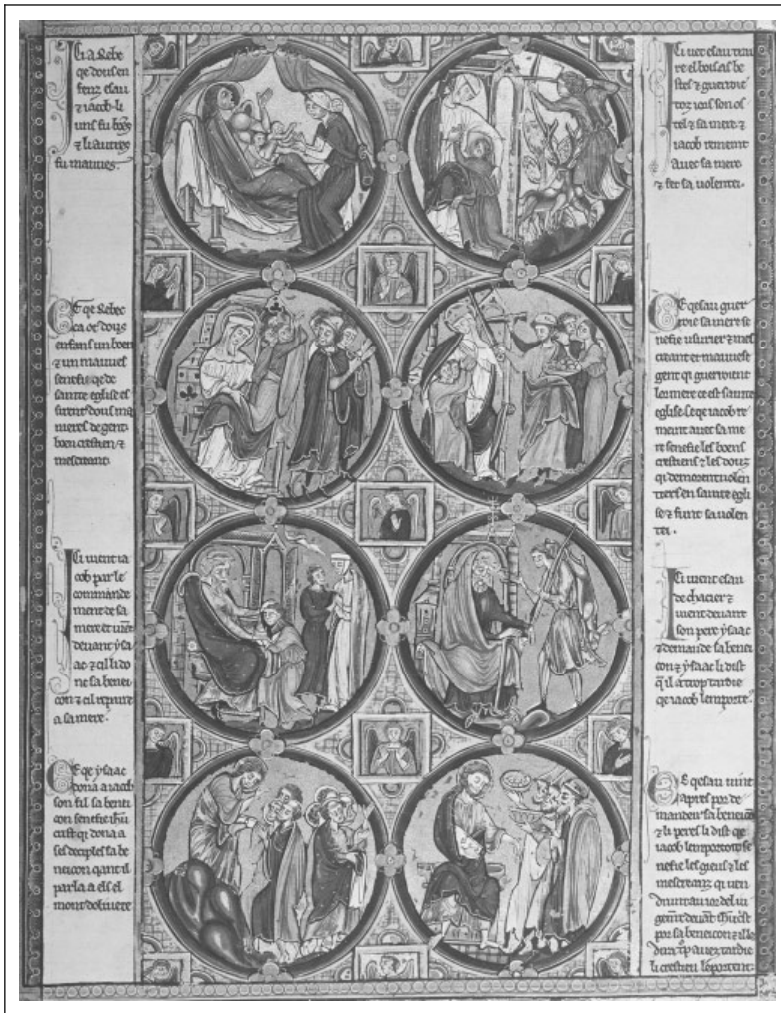
Figure 7. *Codex Vindobonensis* 2554,
Early thirteenth century, Paris,
Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

13.   Guest, *Bible moralisée*, p. 1.

Left (top image):
Biblical text:

Here Rebekah has two children: Esau and Jacob. The one was good and the other was bad (Gen. 25.24-25).

Left (second from top):
Commentary caption:

That Rebekah has two children, one good and one bad, signifies that the Holy Church gave birth to two types of people, good Christians and miscreants.

Right (top image):
Biblical text:

Here Esau goes into the forest to hunt for animals and leaves his home and his mother all day, and Jacob stays with his mother and does her wil. (Gen. 25.27-28).

Right (second from top):
Commentary caption:

That Esau leaves his mother signifies usurers and miscreants and wicked people who leave their mother, who is the Holy Church. That Jacob remains with his mother signifies the good Christians and the mild who stay willingly in the Holy Church and do her will.

Left (second from bottom):
Biblical text:

Here Jacob comes at the command of his mother and comes before Isaac and he gives him his blessing and he returns to his mother (Gen. 27.5-29).

Left (bottom image):

That Isaac gave Jacob, his son, his blessing signifies Jesus Christ who gave to his disciples his blessing when he spoke to them on the Mount of Olives.

Right (second from bottom):
Biblical text:

Here Esau comes from hunting and comes before his father Isaac and asks him for his blessing and Isaac tells him that he is too late that Jacob has taken it (Gen. 27.30-35).

Right (bottom image):
Commentary caption:

That Esau came afterward to ask for his blessing and his father told him that Jacob had taken it signifies the Jews and the miscreants who will come on Judgment Day before Jesus Christ for his blessing and he will say to them: You are too late, the Christians have taken it.

Thus, according to the influential *Bible moralisée*, Esau is inherently evil from birth, he signifies usurers and miscreants and evil people who leave the Church. He also signifies the Jews and all those who will be refused a blessing by Christ on Judgement Day. The emphasis of the *Bible moralisée* on making its message relevant to contemporary life resulted in a commentary that presented a negative assessment of Esau, identifying Esau as the 'other', with all those groups marginalized or excluded in mediaeval society. Esau represents everyone, and everything, according to the *Bible moralisée*, that must be avoided and shunned.

One of the most distinctive—and most negative—depictions of Esau is to be found on a fresco painted between 1288 and 1295 in the basilica of St Francis in Assisi, the spiritual home of the Franciscan Order.[14] It was painted by the so-called 'Isaac Master' but many art historians argue that this unidentified artist can be no less a person than Giotto himself. The early Franciscans, whose official name was *The Order of Lesser or Minor Friars*, emphasized that Francis's companions were to be brothers of equal worth; none was to be esteemed as superior to the other, and all were to live a humble life that was minor or lesser. To underpin their ideology with biblical authority, they pointed to those instances in the Bible where God had clearly chosen the lesser or minor brother over the elder and, not surprisingly, the story of Jacob and Esau provided one of the best examples to support their case.

Jacob was presented as one of the most fundamental prototypes for Francis, indeed prefiguring the saint himself, and the typological founder of the Franciscan order. Joseph and Benjamin, lesser brothers also, served as exemplars of a Franciscan ideology of mission. In Franciscan writings, much was made of Jacob, being the *frater minor*, the lesser brother to Esau, allowing many inventive and often fanciful interpretations. John of Wales summed up Franciscan thinking: 'If you search through Scriptures you will find that minor brothers are preferred to major brothers in sanctity and goodness'.[15] At the canonization of St Francis in 1226, he was heralded by the Pope as a 'new Jacob', in virtue of his contempt for the world, and in embracing both Leah and Rachel, symbols of the two religious paths, the active and the contemplative. For these reasons, the visualization of the story of Jacob in the Franciscan order assumed great importance and significance.

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14.   For a comprehensive discussion of the frescoes at Assisi, see Amy Neff, 'Lesser Brothers: Franciscan Mission and Identity at Assisi', *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006), pp. 676-706. I rely here on her painstaking and insightful interpretation of these frescoes.

15.   Quoted in Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 683.

Among the hundreds of frescoes to be painted in the basilica in Assisi, it was decided that only sixteen Old Testament scenes should be included, and so the choice and selection of subjects had to be made very carefully. When choosing which Old Testament scenes to depict, the question of Franciscan identity was particularly important: it was decided that it would be appropriate to include all lesser or minor brothers such as Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Benjamin to support the Franciscan ideology:

> The Isaac Master's frescoes demonstrate the scriptural origins and significance of minority, sanctioned and bound by a Franciscan rule whose essential and most crowning virtue is minority itself—namely being the lowest, the humblest of all.[16]

Of the sixteen Old Testament narrative scenes at Assisi, the story of Isaac blessing Jacob and his rejection of Esau are the subject of two of the largest frescoes (figs. 8 and 9). The warm red backgrounds and forceful perspectives make these scenes stand out from all others in the basilica.[17] They appear as a diptych with clear compositional repetition of pose and setting, the purpose being to ensure that the two biblical scenes would be seen as mutually related, that the two brothers would be contrasted and that, most importantly, the viewer would identify with Jacob and not Esau.

The most immediately striking aspect of these two frescoes is the colour red that predominates. Esau's distinctive colour was red; according to Gen. 25.25 he was born red and so his skin is imagined as ruddy and his hair reddish. He sold his birthright for a dish of red pottage (Gen. 25.30) and so he and his descendants were called Edom, meaning red. In addition, mediaeval exegetes often called Esau bloody and carnal because he was a hunter, stained red by the blood of his innocent victims. However, it is remarkable that in these frescoes Jacob appears to take on all of Esau's redness; while Jacob's garments are dark red and his complexion red and hair ruddy, Esau's garments are yellow and his complexion pale and hair fair. It is clear that Esau's essential characteristics have been transferred to Jacob in these frescoes. Neff emphasizes how, in mediaeval tradition, the clothes of Esau had immense symbolic value: the firstborn in the Old Testament had a special garment reserved for use when offering sacrifice but, since Esau sold his birthright, he relinquished his right to these clothes which Rebekah (the Church) then gave to Jacob. Esau's fine clothes were also interpreted as the Hebrew Scriptures. Both

16. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 701.
17. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', pp. 676-79, for a detailed discussion. In particular, she brings out very clearly in her article the significance of the colour red.

traditions imply a transfer of choice and preference from Jews (Esau) to Christians (Jacob). In the frescoes, the choice of Jacob and rejection of Esau are portrayed by transferring Esau's redness on to Jacob.[18]
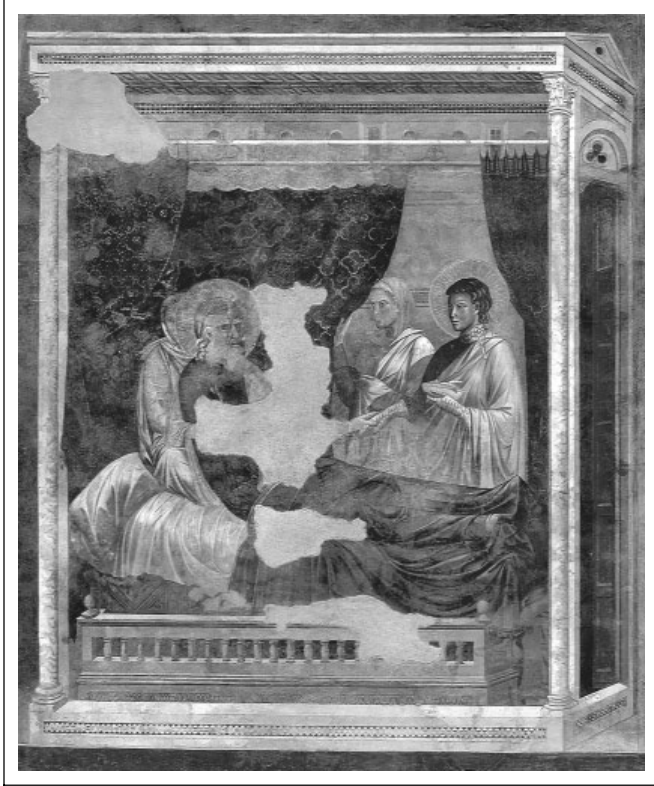
Figure 8. Isaac Master, *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (c. 1288–95), S. Francesco, Assisi

The red tones that predominate in these frescoes are important for another reason since the colour red was associated not only with Esau but also with Christ. In many mediaeval paintings (and also in Assisi) Christ wears wine-red garments in Passion scenes, the colour symbolizing both passion and redemption: these dual meanings associated with Christ's red robe were justified in mediaeval exegesis of Old Testament verses that lead back directly to Jacob and Esau.[19] For example the 'man from Bozrah'

18. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 683.
19. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', pp. 683-84, and her discussion of the original Franciscan sources.

in Isa. 63.1 ('Who is this man that comes from Edom, in crimson-dyed garments from Bozrah?') was interpreted in several mediaeval texts as Christ on the way to Calvary. Thus, in this fresco, Jacob, like Christ, takes and redeems Esau–Edom's sinfulness. The motif of dark red, so noticeable in the fresco of Jacob, is continued in the other frescoes depicting Christ and St Francis—thus providing a visual link between all three figures throughout the basilica.
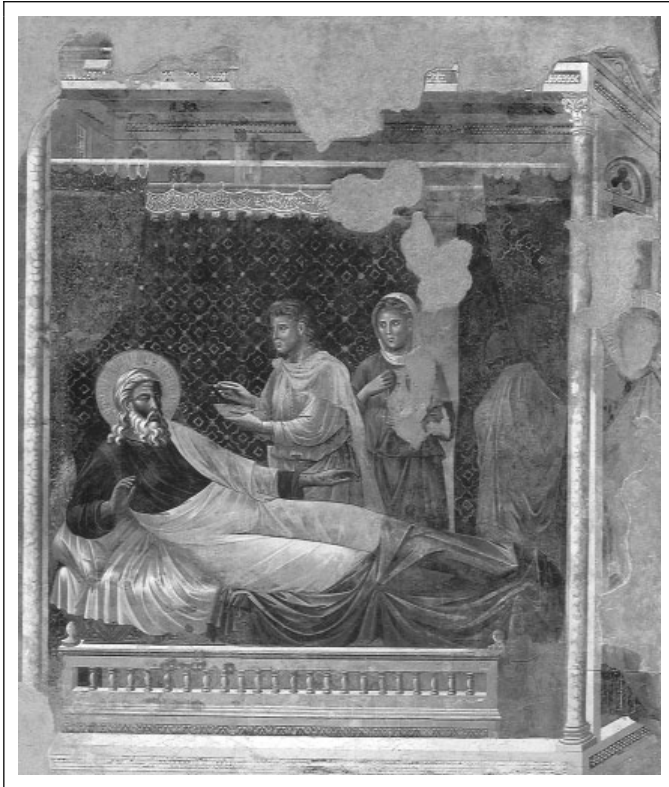
Figure 9. Isaac Master, *Isaac Rejecting Esau* (c. 1288–95),
S. Francesco, Assisi

In the second fresco, depicting Isaac's rejection of Esau, it is most unusual that Esau does not carry weapons or other usual attributes of hunting, something that contrasts with numerous mediaeval frescoes elsewhere that emphasize his carnality through clear references to the hunt. Esau's face appears handsome and trusting, suggesting that the Assisi frescoes are not judgmental of him. But, on the contrary, Esau cannot be taken as a neutral or benign figure here. Unlike Isaac and

Jacob, he is not haloed and a small detail confirms his semi-bestial nature: this is in the form of a centaur carved on the relief on the footboard of Isaac's bed, his arm flexed as if hurling a weapon. John of Wales says: 'Esau was a hunter because he was a sinner and, throughout scripture, we do not find any hunters among the saints'.[20] Esau wandering in the fields pursuing carnal passions, it was felt, was not a suitable symbol for the Friars Minor. Even though he is a hunter, it is noteworthy that the insipid liquid he serves up to Isaac on a spoon falls short of the game that Isaac had requested.

Thus, while Esau may at first appear open and trustworthy in this fresco (fig. 10), on closer inspection this is not the case and indeed his appearance is linked to the devil, an association made by several exegetes, for example, John of Wales who states: 'We understand in Esau that first angel puffed up with pride, full of envy towards God and perverted by greed for glory, he rightly lost the delights of paradise prepared for him and was cast down into hell'.[21] Directly below the image of Esau, there is another fresco which graphically depicts a vision of thrones in heaven with one very glorious throne (Lucifer's) conspicuously empty. Thus, rather than indicating Esau's innocence, his bright and handsome countenance likens him to the proud rebel angel Lucifer.
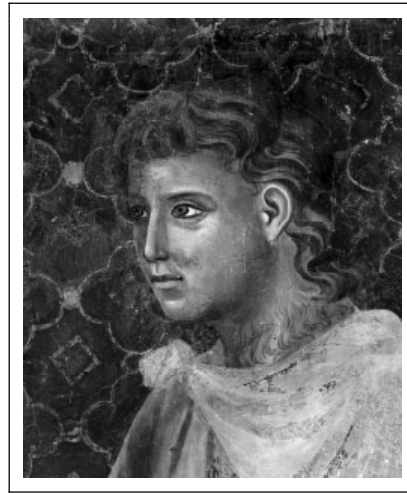
Figure 10. Isaac Master, *Esau*, detail (c. 1288–95),
S. Francesco, Assisi

20.   Quoted in Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 686.
21.   See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 687.

Figure 11. Isaac Master, *Jacob*, detail (c. 1288–95),
S. Francesco, Assisi

If, in these frescoes, Jacob (fig. 11) is clearly presented as a type of Francis and as a model for the followers of Francis, then who exactly does Esau represent for the viewer? Some suggest that he may represent overbearing leadership: John of Wales likens the overzealous and oppressive superiors of the Franciscan order to Esau, warning his readers not to emulate 'prelates who have the smooth and mild voice of Jacob but lacking mercy and moderation, confirm the hairy and harsh hand of Esau, hirsute and bloody who esteeming himself the superior and older always acted with brotherly hatred.'[22] Others (Bonaventura) identify Esau who sold his birthright with those 'who sell eternal blessings'. Yet others link Esau with the Dominican Order, rivals to the Franciscans. In Franciscan literature, Jer.16.16, 'Behold I will send man fishers...and after this I will send man hunters', is interpreted thus: the hunters are the Dominicans because they are prefigured by Esau 'who was a hunter and took as wives the daughters of Heth, that is secular learning'.[23]

As Neff concludes, it is likely that more research in Franciscan literature would yield many more 'Esaus' among the enemies and reprobates and rivals of the order. In this fresco however, Esau is primarily the antithesis of humble minority. Although individual viewers might have

22. Quoted in Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 700.
23. See Neff, 'Lesser Brothers', p. 701.

projected a range of identities on Esau's image, his role here is to show all the Friars Minor ideally are not. He demonstrates what they must work to redeem: offences against loving brotherhood and sins of pride, heresy and violence against God.

Figure 12. Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Jacob and Esau*, detail from Baptistery Doors, Florence (1404–24).

In Renaissance art, neither Esau nor Jacob was particularly popular subjects: but two outstanding examples of major artistic significance do exist from this period. The first appears on the doors of the baptistery in Florence by Ghiberti (1404–24) (fig. 12), and the second is on the logia of the Vatican by Raphael (1518–20). The Jacob and Esau panel is regarded as the most accomplished panel on the door of the baptistery in Florence and includes the significant episodes in the Esau–Jacob narrative. At the very centre of the panel on the ground lies Esau's hunting spear. Esau and his hunting dogs occupy the entire centre front of the panel as Esau listens obediently to the request of Isaac to hunt game. Significantly this episode of filial obedience effectively conceals the episode of the selling of the birthright that is just about visible in the far background. The narrative continues on the far right as Esau departs to hunt. In creating this masterpiece, Ghiberti clearly gave considerable thought to the role and character of Esau: he is not given any negative associations, he is not eliminated from the story and he is given as much prominence, if not more, than Jacob.

2. *Esau in Jewish Art*

In Christian iconography the clothes of Esau may have been an impor-
tant symbol, but in Jewish iconography, on the other hand, it was
the quarry that Esau carries over his shoulder that received most atten-
tion. The iconography of Jacob and Esau in Jewish art has been much
neglected and, as far as I know, has only been considered by one scholar,
Marc Epstein,[24] but with very interesting results, and, therefore, in the
following section I present the main thrust of his findings since they
illumine yet further the various identities foisted on Esau over the cen-
turies.

   In Christian literature from the mediaeval period, generic illustrations
of Esau the huntsman or depictions of Isaac sending him out to hunt are
common but in these images it is extremely rare that Esau's quarry is
depicted as a hare. Usually the quarry is a deer as in the *Bible moralisée*
and in early Christian illustrated literature; there is only one unambigu-
ous example of Esau returning with a hare on his spear (in the late fifth-
century Vienna Bible). In the extensive and elaborate cycle of the Jacob–
Esau stories in Monreale Cathedral, Esau is depicted hunting birds but he
returns with a hare. Here Isaac's surprise appears to be directed at Esau's
quarry rather than at Esau himself. Apart from these specific isolated
instances, the hare is not at all a continuous or consistent feature in
images of Esau in Christian illuminated literature.

   On the other hand, in contrast to this almost complete dearth of hares
in Christian iconography and tradition, there is a multiplicity of hares in
almost all Jewish depictions of Esau's hunt from the same period and is
well represented in all illustrated haggadahs in Germany, as well as Spain
and Portugal. In the beautifully illustrated *Golden Haggadah* from thir-
teenth-century Spain, now in the British Museum, Esau is armed with
a bow and arrow and bears a hare upon a club he has slung over his
shoulder (fig. 13).[25]

   In the early fourteenth-century Schocken Bible, a roundel depicting
Esau at the beginning of the book of Genesis shows him bearing a hare
tied to a spear; In the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, two full miniatures are devoted
to Esau's hunt and return. Although he goes out and hunts birds with his
bow, he is depicted returning with a hare slung over his shoulder. The

   24.   Marc Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature*
(Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1997).
   25.   Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 23.

frequent occurrence of the hare cannot be explained simply as a marriage between Jewish and Christian iconographical traditions since Christian sources are not interested in it as a symbol. So, Epstein concludes, it must be considered as an example of a distinctively Jewish mediaeval motif.[26]
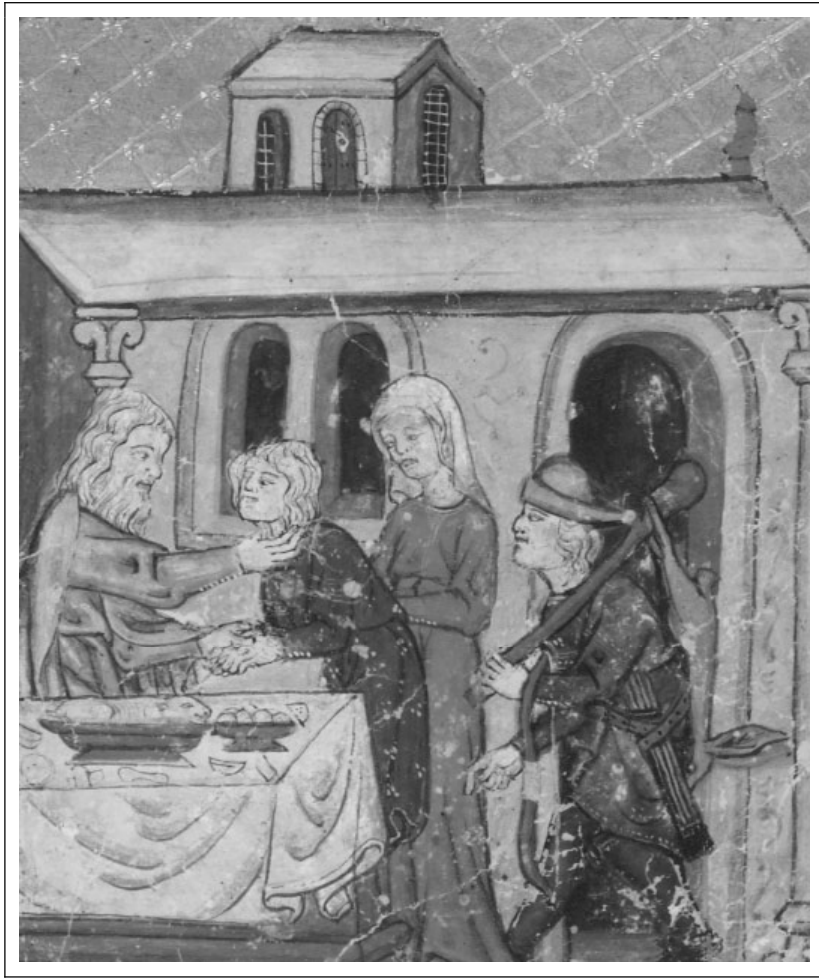
Figure 13. Esau with Hare,
Detail from *The Golden Haggadah* (Castile, c. 1320),
British Library

26.   Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 23.

This may seem somewhat peculiar since the hare (in Hebrew, *arnevet*) is mentioned only twice in the Pentateuch in the list of forbidden animals: Lev. 11.6 and 14.7. In addition, hunting by Jews was unequivocally condemned throughout ancient and mediaeval rabbinic literature and was viewed as a distinctively non-Jewish activity, one of the classical excesses of the gentiles. Yet, in Jewish iconography, the image of the hare hunt seems to have had a profound and pervasive allegorical significance for Jews in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when they appear to have identified themselves as the victim, the quarry.

Epstein argues that rabbinic literature makes it clear that Esau's quarry and target for killing is Jacob and his descendants, the Jews, and so Esau's hunt serves as a typology for the oppression of the Jews by the nations of the world. In biblical and rabbinic literature, particularly in the Psalms, the enemy is frequently envisaged as deploying 'the snares of the hunter'. When hunting appears in mediaeval Jewish literature and art (where there are very many images of hunting scenes) it is often used allegorically as a figure for the persecution of the Jews. The allegorical significance of hunts and hunting in mediaeval Hebrew texts and iconography explain the frequency of their appearance, despite the prohibition of hunting in Jewish law.

But why should an animal that has been hunted in a ritually unacceptable manner be offered as a meal to a venerable patriarch such as Isaac and why should such an animal be identified with the Jewish people? The hare is not mentioned at all in rabbinical exegetical traditions. In fact, the midrashim took great pains to show that Esau's catch should be ritually slaughtered for Isaac and that it should not be an unclean beast nor one that had died by itself nor had been bitten by a carnivorous beast nor even stolen from its rightful owner. The same midrashim also state that the only single virtue of the villainous Esau was his unwavering filial piety.[27] So it does not follow automatically that the depiction of the hare simply symbolizes Esau's disrespect for his father in bringing him food that he cannot eat.

27.   Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 130 n. 32, refers to *Bereshit Rabbah* 65.16 where R. Simeon b. Gamaliel compares Esau's filial piety to his own and finds Esau's devotion to his father 'a hundred times greater'. Epstein notes that Esau's response to Isaac's summons, 'Here I am!', in Gen. 27.1 parallels exactly Abraham's response in Gen. 22.1, the ultimate model of acquiescence to paternal will, in this case the will of God. Thus, Esau holds his father in an esteem similar to that in which Abraham held God. According to rabbinic sources, Esau's reward for his filial piety is that his children will have dominion over the entire world.

The idea that Isaac would have eaten non-kosher game is notably at odds with rabbinic imaginings of the scene. Classical midrashic works from the sixth-century *Bereshit Rabbah* to the fifteenth-century *Sefer haYashar* completely take for granted the kosher nature of Esau's hunt.[28] Those that actually describe the details of his hunt all note that it was done entirely in accordance with rabbinic law. Thus the rabbinic sources stand in stark contrast to the iconography. Ironically, Christian iconography appears to support rabbinic texts, through its representation of Esau's quarry as generally kosher, while Jewish iconography seems to ignore rabbinic views. Esau's hare in Jewish iconography might thus be regarded as an 'orphaned image', argues Epstein, in that it cannot trace its ancestry from the venerable tradition of rabbinic textual exegesis.[29] Thus, Epstein concludes, the hare (including Esau's hare) was a conscious iconographic contribution to the construction of mediaeval Jewish identity. Further, he argues, interest in creating a sort of 'iconographic exegesis' linking Esau's hunt with contemporary historical circumstances at that time was so strong that Jewish iconography did so in spite of the fact that no rabbinic text features the hare in describing Esau's quarry brought to Isaac.

The hare had a negative meaning for mediaeval Christians, sometimes being a symbol for homosexuals and by extension, Jews.[30] Thus Christians, the majority, had defined their quarry, the Jews, the minority, as hares. But Jews re-appropriated the image of the hare and set about transforming it from an emblem of infamy and oppression to a metaphor of Jewish self-definition. The character of the hare, Epstein argues, as adept at surviving, and fleet of foot, together with its reputation as a trickster, suited the Jews; traits that the majority regarded negatively were now viewed as advantages by the minority. Furthermore, not only could it be a symbol for Jews but also it was a particularly appropriate symbol for Jacob. Jacob, like the hare, had the reputation of being clever and cunning. Thus the hare could be an appropriate attribute for the ambiguous moral character of Jacob:

> The symbolism of the hare is manifestly consonant with Jacob's character and fortunes, and emblematic of the chain of concealment and revelation, of switched identities, of honesty and prevarication that constitutes his life's history.[31]

28.   Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 23.
29.   Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 26.
30.   Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 26.
31.   Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, p. 132 n. 47, draws attention to how the theme of Jacob's 'switched identity' is conveyed in the language of the narrative. Jacob deceives

By choosing the hare as a symbol and linking the trickster hare with Jacob, they acknowledge that their contemporary state of subjection to Edom is in some measure one of the continuing repercussions of Jacob's deception of Isaac. By placing the hare in Esau's hand, artists bring evidence against Esau on two scores: first, he dares to bring to Isaac food that was not kosher, thus spurning filial piety by pursuing game that was specifically in contradiction to the desires of his father. Second, the hare, Esau's quarry, symbolizes the diverse qualities of Jacob and by extension the Jewish people. Therefore Esau has spurned not only his father but also his brother Jacob and his descendants against whom he harbours a murderous intent, symbolized by the dead quarry he carries over his shoulder.

3. *Conclusion*

The starting point for this exploration of how Esau is presented in art was Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* at the Barber Institute. Stom's composition subtly draws attention to how Esau, even in his absence, still haunts this scene of deception and, seen alongside the artist's other depiction of Esau, *Esau Sells his Birthright to Jacob,* suggests that Stom was inclined to treat him more sympathetically than is evident elsewhere in the history of his reception. As in Stom's paintings, Esau's filial devotion is frequently alluded to in other visual representations; unlike the deceitful Jacob, he is shown as an obedient and dutiful son. But he is not always portrayed positively in art: he was appropriated by the Franciscans to symbolize everything that is evil, haughty and proud, and in the *Bible moralisée*, he is depicted as being inherently evil from birth and becomes a symbol for usurers, miscreants and those evil people who reject the Church. In the *Biblia pauperum*, his image is juxtaposed with that of Adam and Eve, thus making his sin equal to theirs. In Jewish art, Epstein has shown how the game that Esau hunts, the hare, symbolizes all that is evil in Esau: by placing the unclean hare in Esau's hand, Jewish artists—but not rabbinic sources—bring evidence against him that he dared to bring to Isaac food that was not kosher, thus spurning filial piety.

The artworks discussed in this chapter offer interpretations—and not simply illustrations—of the biblical Esau; some present him positively and others negatively, but through their imaginative interpretations, they

his brother in both Gen. 25.29-34 and 27.5-30. In the latter, Esau exclaims, 'First, he has taken away my birthright (*bekhorah*) and now, he has taken away my blessing (*berakhah*)!'

draw the viewer powerfully into a biblical world full of deceit and deception and invite the viewer to reassess the roles given to Esau, Jacob and Rebekah. Each depiction of Esau and Jacob can bring out a new aspect of this troublesome narrative, raising questions we have not thought of before. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer makes a useful distinction between the *broad* subject matter of a work and the very *particular* way a painting interprets it. The subject matter an artwork brings to mind, he argues, is larger than what is shown and, at the same time, reveals the individuality of a work, its particular way of contributing towards its expression.[32] Thus, when an artwork brings its subject matter to mind, it will bring to mind more than what is initially seen. We are led out of the immediacy of our own horizon and brought to consider other ways of seeing and thinking; re-acquainting ourselves with previous interpretations of a subject frees us from being compelled to think and feel solely in terms of our present horizon.[33] The subject matter that a painting expresses, in this case Esau, can never be exhausted by its particular exemplifications; it always remains more than any individual expression of it and is always susceptible to extension by further interpretation, so that no artwork can ever do full justice to the visualization of the subject:

> The particular artwork allows us to gain sight of that which, without art's mediation, we could never come to see. Though aesthetics and aesthetic revelation must focus on the particular instance, the value of aesthetic experience resides in its ability to illuminate, re-interpret and develop previous experience.[34]

Stom's *Isaac Blessing Jacob* at the Barber Institute constitutes, in Gadamer's terms, a very distinctive visual expression of the biblical story of Genesis 27 and offers a unique interpretation of the story that conveys a sympathetic understanding of the absent Esau. In suggesting with great subtlety how Esau has been wronged, the painting invites us to re-examine and reassess the negative reputation that Esau has acquired, so unwarranted and undeserved, in the reception history of the Bible.

32. See Nicholas Davey's discussion of Gadamer in his 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', in *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual* (ed. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandwell; London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3-29 (14-17).

33. Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', p. 3.

34. Gadamer, quoted in Davey, 'The Hermeneutics of Seeing', p. 24.

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