

# Die Bibel in der Kunst / Bible in the Arts

Online-Zeitschrift 5, 2021

## Jesus among the Doctors or Jesus against the Doctors? On Some Discrepancies between the Visual and Textual Exegesis of Lk 2:41–45

Régis Burnet / Matthieu Somon

# Jesus among the Doctors or Jesus against the Doctors? On Some Discrepancies between the Visual and Textual Exegesis of Lk 2:41–45

Régis Burnet / Matthieu Somon

Institut de recherche RSCS, Université catholique de Louvain<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article explores the distinctions between the exegesis of the pericope in Luke 2:41–45 dominant in textual sources and its artistic representations. Through a range of works of art selected for their exemplarity or their inventiveness (Dürer, Tintoretto, Veronese, Ribera, Champaigne, Rembrandt and his circle, Holman Hunt, among others), the study seeks to point out the specificities of artistic exegeses of an episode from Luke, revealing the ways in which they appropriate the biblical narrative and reshape its historicity and significance.

Nineteenth-century romantic thinking persists in the twenty-first century: many of us still believe that religious art was the “Bible of the illiterate” and that the “book of stone” preceded the “book of paper”; in other words, that art is a faithful representation of the biblical text and not its interpretation. To teach everyone the Christian doctrine, the Church would have used visual culture as a strict equivalent of the written heritage. In 1910 Émile Mâle, for instance, wrote: “Victor Hugo was right. The cathedral is a book of stone for the ignorant, which the printed book has gradually made useless.”<sup>2</sup> In the preface to his translation of John Ruskin’s book, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, Marcel Proust went even further: “The Porch of Amiens is not only, in the vague sense in which Victor Hugo would have taken it, a book of stone, a Bible of stone: it is ‘the Bible’ of stone.”<sup>3</sup> Proust’s

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors are grateful to Tatiana Senkevitch for her review and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> *Victor Hugo a vu juste. La cathédrale est un livre de pierre pour les ignorants, que le livre imprimé a peu à peu rendu inutile*. Mâle, *L’Art religieux*, 455. Mâle repeats the 19<sup>th</sup> century vulgate found in particular in Viollet-le-Duc’s work, whose most beautiful literary illustration is *The Cathedral* by Huysmans. Cf. Fraisse, *Architectes*.

<sup>3</sup> *Le porche d’Amiens n’est pas seulement, dans le sens vague où l’aurait pris Victor Hugo, un livre de pierre, une Bible de pierre: c’est “la Bible” en pierre*. Ruskin, *La Bible d’Amiens* traduction, notes et préface par Marcel Proust, 32.

sentence captures the identification that until recently one did not hesitate to make between the Bible and its representations.

This romantic prejudice comes from a slogan attributed to Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), quoted wrongly for two centuries: images are the Bible of humble people. In his letter to Serenus, the Pope wrote: “For it is one thing to adore a picture, another through a picture’s story to learn what must be adored. For what writing offers to those who read it, a picture offers to the ignorant who look at it, since in it the ignorant see what they ought to follow, in it they read, those who do not know letters; whence especially for gentiles a picture stands in place of reading.”<sup>4</sup> Pictures are therefore above all a means of reading for people. The key term here is, of course, *historia* (the story, what is told). A picture is already a *historia*, almost an interpretation. Moreover, pictures are by no means the equivalent of the Bible. The last sentence, rather subtly, does not oppose “bible by letter” and “bible by drawing,” but compares pictures to reading, i.e., to the process of interpretation itself. Pictures are close to reading. In 1639, the French painter Nicolas Poussin clearly formulated this idea in a letter about his painting representing *The Israelites Gathering Manna*: “read the story and the painting, in order to know if each thing is appropriate to the subject”<sup>5</sup>.

Things are obviously more complex. The interpretations of the pericope about Jesus among the Doctors in the Gospel of Luke (2:41–45) reveal the discrepancies at work between textual and visual practices of exegesis. Since the first observations by Origen in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, commentators have seen in this text a messianic revelation story. In the Gospel, the episode plays a transitional role: a chronological transition between Jesus’ childhood and his public life, and a transition between the revelation of Jesus’ identity made by others and the revelation made by himself. For the first time in the gospel of Luke, he speaks and makes a strong theological statement about himself.<sup>6</sup> This is the dominant reading. Several works of art, however, offer alternative readings and reveal a great autonomy when compared with the dominant textual interpretation, presented first in what follows.

## 1. Textual Exegesis of Lk 2:41–45

The reception history of the episode narrated in Lk 2:41–45 shows that theologians since Origen (c. 184–c. 253) up to François Bovon (1938–2013) tended to agree in their interpretation of the text.

---

<sup>4</sup> Gregory the Great, *Epistola ad Serenum* 11, 10, D. Norberg (ed.), CCSL140A, 1982, 874. Translation in Chazelle, *Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate*, 139.

<sup>5</sup> *Lisés l’histoire et le tableau, afin de cognoistre si chascque chose est appropriée au subiect* (letter to Chantelou dated April 28, 1639; see Jouanny, 20–22). On the idea of reading and the literary dimension of Poussin’s paintings, see Marin, *Lecture du tableau*, 251–266.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 481.

## 1.1. The Story

The plot of the story is rather simple: Jesus, who had initially disappeared, is found in the Temple. A pious family goes up to Jerusalem every year to perform the pilgrimages prescribed by the law in Ex 23:14–17; 34:23; Deut 16:7. The child of the couple is twelve years old. The rabbinic prescriptions will set the age of reason at thirteen years (bar mitzvah), but the twelfth year is the year of the long preparation (Abot 5:21; TJ Ketubot 50a). At the end of eight days, the festivities are over and the group of Galileans sets out to return home.

The caravan (συνοδία) is long; everyone relies on neighbours and friends to look after each other's children. But after three days—a rather long time,<sup>7</sup> the Fathers interpreted as a sign of Resurrection—it becomes obvious that the child has disappeared. So the troop gets back and finds him in the sanctuary (ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ), probably not a liturgical room. Jesus is in the middle of a conversation with “the Doctors” (διδασκάλοι), who are not the high priests, but the masters of the Law. So there is no liturgical context. Jesus listens first and asks questions, he seems to be in a position of an apprentice. Origen comments: “It was right that the Saviour should first become a master of questioning who teaches. He will then answer the questions with Wisdom and the Word of God.” The Doctors seem to be very surprised. The verb used, ἐξίστημι, which is very strong in classical Greek, has lost its vigour in the Greek of the New Testament<sup>8</sup> and denotes astonishment at anything out of the ordinary. What strikes them is the child's συνέσις, his intuition or intelligence (more than his knowledge).<sup>9</sup>

His mother is worried; she speaks first, contrary to the usual practice, and Luke uses ὀδυνάω, a verb expressing anguish.<sup>10</sup> Jesus answers in a surprising way, with a certain adolescent lightness.<sup>11</sup> What does ἐν τοῖς Πατρός μου mean? “My father's home” as in Job 18:19; “my father's business”; or “my father's household” as in Rom 16:10–11?<sup>12</sup> The rebuff only lasts a while: he eventually submits, proof of his humility. But the reader has understood that he is to become the true hero of the story: from now on, in the narrative, Jesus will be the subject of the action.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2. The Dominant Interpretation

What is the meaning of the episode? According to the dominant interpretation of the episode, Jesus shows that he is aware of his messianic identity. No one sees in this episode a condemnation of Judaism, neither of the Temple. Bede

---

<sup>7</sup> Plummer, Luke, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, Birth, 474.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Birth, 474.

<sup>10</sup> Plummer, Luke, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Frilingos, Parents.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, Birth, 475.

<sup>13</sup> Green, Luke, 156.

(672–735) pointed out that when Jesus is seated in the Temple, he is the co-eternal Son to the Father seated in his Temple; while when he is submissive, he is a true man.<sup>14</sup> His exegesis had a large audience up to the artistic spheres, as we will see. Jerome (347–420) had another point of view: Growing later in grace, human nature is taught by the divine,<sup>15</sup> it is therefore the proof of the hypostatic union of the two natures, and not the absorption of one into the other, as John Damascene (676–749) emphasises.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary commentators today do not say anything else when they insist on this revelation<sup>17</sup> being made to the reader here: the first mention of the divine plan on the life of Jesus (θεῖ “it must”).<sup>18</sup>

Even if modern commentators express themselves using narrative concepts such as the anticipation of the narrative figure of Jesus as the sole master<sup>19</sup> and only teacher,<sup>20</sup> or philological—the traditional union of the messianic figure and the figure of Wisdom in Is 11:2–4; Ps 17:37; 1Hen 49:2–3<sup>21</sup>—, they agree on the meaning of the episode: by confronting the elites of the Temple and overturning social conventions, Jesus asserts himself as a messianic figure.<sup>22</sup>

In his *Great Commentary*, Cornelius a Lapide (1567–1637) echoes the common opinion: Jesus showed himself to be God incarnate.

In the Temple—For the place of God Incarnate is in the Temple. There is He to be sought, there shall He be found—not in the marketplace, not in the tavern, not in the theatre. S. Basil and S. Gregory Nazianzen imitated Christ, for they, according to Ruffinus, when they were studying at Athens, knew but two streets in the city—one led to the church and the other to the school.<sup>23</sup>

Next, Cornelius, collating the ancient commentaries, underlines the fact that Christ’s approach is pedagogical. For the time being, it is a preparation for the message.

Sitting in the midst of the Doctors. A Hebraism—among the Doctors, but in a lowly position like a disciple, in order that He might rouse them to think and inquire about the advent of the Messiah, which was now nigh at hand, because the sceptre had departed from Judah, and the seventy weeks of Daniel and other oracles of the prophets were now fulfilled. It is very probable that Christ questioned the Doctors about the coming of the Messiah, so that His manifestation might not be unexpected, but that, afterwards, when preaching and working miracles, He might the more readily be received by them as the Messiah, from these same indications which now flashed out like sparks upon them.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Bede, Hom. on the Gospels 1, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome of Stridon, Hom. on Ps 15.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Damascene, Orthodox Faith 3,2.

<sup>17</sup> Carroll, Luke, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, Birth, 489.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, Birth, 483.

<sup>20</sup> Carroll, Luke, 84.

<sup>21</sup> Green, Luke, 155.

<sup>22</sup> Carroll, Luke, 86, Brawley, Luke, 54.

<sup>23</sup> a Lapide, Commentarius, 68C. Translation by Mossman, Great Commentary, 131.

<sup>24</sup> a Lapide, Commentarius, 68D–69A. Translation by Mossman, Great Commentary, 131–132.

He points out that the approach is Socratic.

Asking them questions (1). Because it was fitting that the child should ask questions of these learned men, and not teach them. (2.) To teach the young modesty, and the desire to hear, to question, and to learn, “Lest,” says Bede, “if they will not be disciples of the truth, they become masters of error.” (3.) That, asking them questions, He might be questioned in turn by them, and might teach them by His replies.<sup>25</sup>

Three hundred and fifty years later, exegesis is at the same point, as François Bovon puts it: “The account is neither pro- nor anti-Jewish.”<sup>26</sup> The very peremptory character of the statement reflects the general feeling of the reading tradition. While one might wonder whether the somewhat naive admiration of the doctors in awe of a simple boy in the Temple is not an implicit condemnation, the exegete, confident in his reading tradition, cuts through the question by moving from interpretation to account.

## 2. Artists as Visual Exegetes

Considering the exegesis developed in artistic representations of the pericope, one can be surprised to see that some artists distance themselves from traditional theological interpretation. This is remarkable since the ancient iconographic types, elaborated to emphasise Jesus’ messianic identity, persisted.

### 2.1. A Twofold Iconographic Tradition Among Artists

The Byzantine artists have shaped two dominant iconographic models.<sup>27</sup> The oldest type represented as early as the Milan ivory diptych of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or the one in the British Museum of the same period, shows Christ teaching on his cathedra following the model of the ancient teachers (*Lehrtypus*). It fits into a theology of the Messiah as Doctor (**Fig. 1**).

From the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Byzantium invented the type of the conversation (*Diskussionstypus*), represented for example in a miniature of the Bib. Nat. of Athens (Ms. 211, fol. 226). In this type, the teenager



**FIG. 1** Anonymous, *Baptism and Jesus among the Doctors* (5<sup>th</sup> century, ivory, 17,5 cm width. London, British Museum, 1856,0623.3).

Christ and the Doctors sit traditional on the same kind of thrones, so their disposition does not materialise a strong hierarchy between the teenager Christ and the Doctors.

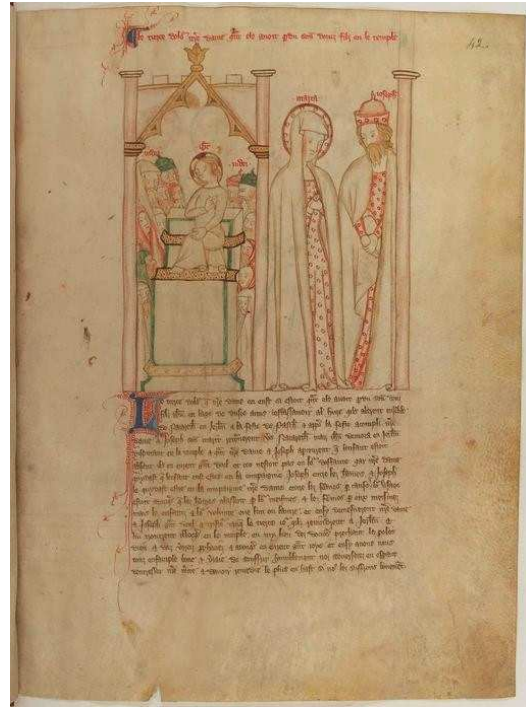
<sup>25</sup> a Lapide, Commentarius, 69B. Translation by Mossman, Great Commentary, 131–132.

<sup>26</sup> Bovon, Luke, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Osteneck, Zwölfjähriger Jesus.

### 2.1.1. The *Lehrtypus*' Fortune in the Early Modern Period

In a late 14<sup>th</sup> century French manuscript, one can see the seated magisterial Christ teaching among the Doctors who are standing around him (Fig. 2). This artistic choice provided Christ with a professorial appearance. During the early modern period, artists reworked this *Lehrtypus* that exalts the science of Christ. One can also trace these artistic inventions to promote Christ's superior science in the early modern iconography. Dürer (c. 1494–1497) executed a panel in which Jesus, on the top, sits on a cathedra and comments on a printed book in front of some Doctors assembled at his feet. One of these Doctors is drowsy and burlesquely flanked by a monkey, while another one is flanked by a dog and turns his back on Christ (Fig. 3). These details do not appear in Luke's account and are Dürer's invention, that shows Doctors not very attentive to the Messiah's words.



**FIG. 2** Anonymous, *Jesus among the Doctors* (Manuscript, France, late 14<sup>th</sup> century, incipit: *le primer dez sept dolors principalx*. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 400, fol. 85r).



**FIG. 3** Albrecht Dürer, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1494–1497, oil on panel 62,5 × 45 cm. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie, nr. 1877).



**FIG. 4** Bernard van Orley, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1513, oil on panel 54,4 × 33,3 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1952.5.47.a).

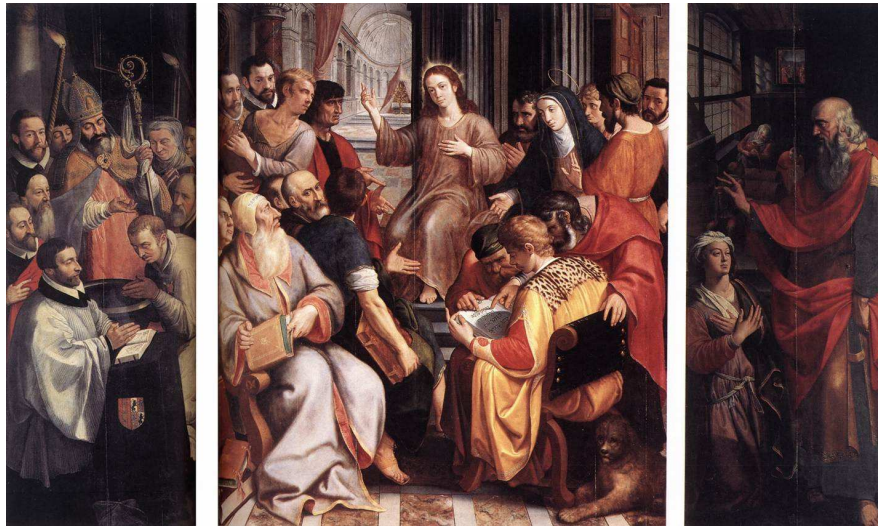
In a small panel painted in 1513 by Bernard Van Orley (c. 1487–1541) (**Fig. 4**), Jesus, without any halo nor any text at hand, sits in majesty under a canopy located on the vertical median axis. He exposes his ideas, with his left arm outstretched and his right hand drawn back towards him, like an orator.



**FIG. 5** Veronese, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1560, oil on canvas, 236 x 430 cm. Madrid, museo del Prado, P000491).

Similarly, in a monumental canvas painted around 1560, Veronese (1528–1588) places Christ without a halo on a carved platform with foliage and makes him imperiously dominate the assembly, as the adolescent is taking the heaven as a witness with his right index finger in a pulpit-like posture (**Fig. 5**).

Yet, Frans Francken I (1542–1616) distinguished the figure of Christ by using a nimbus in the central panel of a triptych for the Cathedral of Our Lady of Antwerp commissioned by the guilds of schoolmasters and soap makers. Christ is standing on a platform and teaching while raising his right index finger to heaven in front of an audience gathered at his feet (**Fig. 6**).



**FIG. 6** Frans Francken I, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1587, oil on panel, central part, 250 x 220 cm. Antwerp, cathedral).

These artistic devices—the dominant and majestic posture of Jesus often situated on the vertical median axis—help to call attention to his figure, as well as his youthful physiognomy, which contrasts with that of the elderly men who are the Doctors (the Bible does not mention their number). Variations of values in the rendering of the flesh tints allow enhancing Jesus' clearness, distinguish-



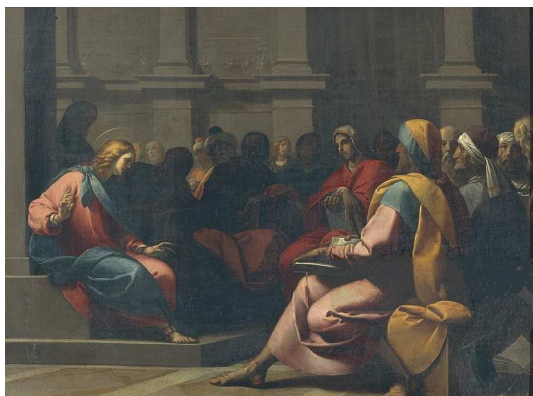
ing him again from the Doctors and likely implementing his messianic nature, in accordance with the Gospel of John, who made him the Word of Light and the light of the world (John 1:9 and 8:12). All of these compositional features put together build up a learned and messianic figure that seems to concretise the already quoted exegesis of Bede, for whom Jesus seated in majesty in the Temple is the co-eternal son of God who sits in this Temple.

### 2.1.2. The *Discussionotypus* After Giotto

The second iconographic type related to the discussion itself, on the contrary, does not accentuate the hierarchy between the Doctors and Jesus. The arrangement of the figures sets them in a kind of equal footing that is particularly suitable for exchanges between Christ and the Doctors. Jesus no longer has the ostentatious and strongly individualised presence of a professorial messiah who dominates the teachers by his posture. Giotto reshaped this *Diskussionotypus* around 1300–1305, in a fresco of the Scrovegni chapel in Padua. He placed the haloed figure of Christ on the vertical median axis of his composition, but situated him among the Doctors and on the same level as them (**Fig. 7**). Pier Francesco Mazzuola (**Fig. 8**) about 1616 and then Giovanni Serodine (**Fig. 9**) set Jesus aside in the left edge of their canvas, and made him sit among the Doctors without placing him in a dominant position. Like Giotto, both have painted Jesus with a distinctive halo to identify him clearly amid the assembly. Yet, it is in the work of Rembrandt and his circle that Jesus is more closely associated with the Doctors.



**FIG. 7** Giotto, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1300–1305, fresco, 200 x 185 cm. Padova, Scrovegni Chapel).



**FIG. 8** Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1616, oil on canvas 67 x 88 cm. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana).



**FIG. 9** Giovanni Serodine, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1626, oil on canvas 145 x 224 cm. Paris, musée du Louvre, RF1983–4).

## 2.2. A Distinction between Calvinists and Catholics?

### 2.2.1. Rembrandt and His Milieu

The hierarchy between Jesus and the Doctors is even less marked in many compositions executed in a Calvinist milieu, faithful to the tradition of the *Diskussionstypus*. In Rembrandt's etchings (Bartsch 64, 65 and 66) and drawings (**Fig. 11–12, 15–16**), the concordance between the teaching of the Doctors and that of Jesus, could appear through the arrangement of the figures. Jesus is actually among the Doctors, in conformity with the text of Saint Luke. In contrast to the Catholic compositions discussed above, the welcoming behaviour of the Doctors, gathered around Jesus, in an attitude of conspicuous attention, is striking: one cannot perceive any sign of division between the figures. In these Rembrandtesque compositions, one can hardly find compositional features to distinguish Jesus from the assembly of Doctors (no halo nor dominating posture), but his youthful physiognomy that contrasts with the venerable scholars' faces, and his hands, raised to support his speech, or to count his arguments on his fingers like an orator. These drawings and engravings reveal a humble Saviour, integrated amid the Doctors. In a touching way, the centripetal disposition of the figures oriented towards Jesus (gestures and gazes converge towards the wonder child), the multiplication of visual overlaps and sometimes even physical contacts between Jesus and the Doctors show a warm cohesion between the characters. One of the Doctors is even hugging his left shoulder in a drawing made in Rembrandt's circle and in a painting by Leonard Bramer (**Fig. 10 and 18**). This contiguity of the figures in the Rembrandtesque compositions (**Fig. 10–18**) could materialise their spiritual and theological affinities, given their discussions in the Temple. Indeed, the entangling lines and contours seem to display the solidarity between the teaching of Jesus and that of the Doctors,



**FIG. 10** Rembrandt's circle, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1648, pen wash and highlighted with white, 16,3 × 21,2 cm. Art market).

and could therefore describe the harmony between the Mosaic Law and Grace, and the coherence between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. This is in tune with Calvinist theology that emphasises the continuity between Old and New Testaments. Calvin asserted that the Old Covenant had not been broken and that the Hebrew People, to whom the Doctors belong, remain God's chosen

people: the Jews are “the firstborn children in the house of the Lord,”<sup>28</sup> he wrote in the *Institution of the Christian Religion*. Postulating a filiation between Israel and the Church, this theological position can shed light on the thorough parity between Jesus and the Doctors created in Rembrandt’s and his entourage’s compositions that were likely intended for Calvinist circles.



**FIG. 11** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1652, feather, ink and highlighted with white, 18,9 × 25,9 cm. Paris, musée du Louvre).



**FIG. 12** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1630, etching, 8,9 x 6,8 cm. Amsterdam, Rijkmuseum).



**FIG. 13** Carel Fabritius, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1640, wash, black ink, pen highlighted with white, 22 × 29,5 cm. Winterthur, Oskar Reinhart’s collection).



**FIG. 14** Joseph Schmidt after Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1780–1810, etching with aquatint, printed in colours à la poupée, 19,6 × 26,9 cm. London, British Museum, 1895,0915.1433).

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institution*, 667.



**FIG. 15** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1652, etching and dry point, 12,6 × 21,4 cm. New York, Metropolitan).



**FIG. 16** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1654, etching and dry point on Japanese paper, 9,5 × 14,4 cm. Amsterdam,



**FIG. 18** Leonard Bramer, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas 33 x 44 cm. Private collection).



**FIG. 17** Leonard Bramer, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1640s–1650s, oil on canvas 51 x 38 cm. Private collection).

### 2.2.2. Some Nuances of Catholic Artistic Exegesis

One could not conclude, however, that the works of art rooted in the Catholic interpretation, in contrast to the Calvinists, systematically sought to establish a hierarchy in the relationship between Jesus and the Doctors to the detriment of the latter. The examples of Giovanni Serodine and Mazzucchelli quoted above (Fig. 8–9) show this, even if the halo was almost systematically used in Catholic circles to distinguish Christ from the Doctors. Yet, the works executed in Ribera's entourage, marked by Caravaggism, did not figure

any halo around Jesus's face but gave the humblest appearance to the holy figures, to the point of confusing them with their most modest contemporaries. In this regard, an anonymous 17<sup>th</sup>-century painting kept in Nantes (**Fig. 19**) is particularly convincing and reshapes the *Diskussionstypus* from a Caravaggio perspective by setting aside Jesus Christ, on the left edge of the canvas. Depicted as an almost miserable teenager, Jesus is facing a Doctor in a worn-out garment who points him out a fragment of a text from an open book. The exchange seems, however, less affable than in the Rembrandtesque compositions, which expose the understanding and fruitful dialogue between the adolescent and the Doctors.



**FIG. 19** Maître de l'Annonce des Bergers, *Jesus among the Doctors* (17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas 97,5 × 127,5 cm. Nantes, fine arts museum, inv. 332).

### 3. Polemical Exegesis at Odds With Textual Exegesis

If a large number of artists seem to follow the “official” exegesis carried out by the Fathers of the Church and their successors, it is also noticeable that some paintings manifest a certain hostility to Judaism. The works of Tintoretto, José de Ribera and Philippe de Champaigne are striking for the efficiency and the variety of their compositional devices to reformulate the story of Jesus among the Doctors. These compositions show how much these painters interpreted the episode in a singular way, distinct from the dominant textual exegetical tradition.

### 3.1. A Caricature of the Doctors by Tintoretto

In a large early painting (197 x 319 cm) executed around 1539 for an unknown recipient, Tintoretto (1518–1594) offers a swarming and caricatural interpretation of the episode that differs greatly from the biblical account (**Fig. 20**).

The large rectangular format of the canvas allows him to detail in a very free and anachronistic way the rendering of the Temple, designed in a Renaissance Venice fashion close to Sebastiano Serlio's works and which integrates the innovation of the *coro spezzato* (choir divided in two parts) adopted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice for the execution of sacred polyphonies.<sup>29</sup> Within the modernised building that Tintoretto painted similar to a Renaissance church, only Moses and the Decalogue that decorate the *bimah* or *tebah* (platform where the Torah uses to be read) recall the Jewish setting where the story is told to have occurred.



**FIG. 20** Tintoretto, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1539, oil on canvas 197 x 319 cm. Milan, museo del Duomo, inv. 234).

The painter seems to devote himself to an amplification of the story: he imagines a crowded, tumultuous Temple, whereas the Gospel insists on mutual listening between Jesus and the Doctors without alluding to a large audience.

Density and dynamic arrangement of the figures contribute to the vividness of the composition. The large differences in size between the figures, the variety of their postures and the orientation of their limbs and faces create an effect of din. In this respect, the painting also stimulates the hearing of the beholder, as sug-

<sup>29</sup> Kirschel, Tintoret, 86. Kirschel suggests that Tintoretto was inspired by a fresco by Girolamo Tessari, executed around 1526–1530 in the Scoletta del Carmine in Padua, which presents the same device of partitioning of the composition with columns that carve out the space and orient themselves towards Christ placed as a vanishing point on the vertical median axis. The space represented with the *coro spezzato* is reminiscent of the choir of San Marco.

gested by the multiplication of open mouths and gestures of the figures who call out to each other from one gallery to another or from various places in the temple. The muscular and agitated appearance of these multiple figures also highlights Tintoretto's emulation with Michelangelo. Recalling an exuberant germination, the arrangement of the faces in a row creates a more striking effect of accelerated depth than that created by Giotto. The *nonfinito* aspect of Tintoretto's composition (specialists have described it as an unfinished "fresco on canvas"<sup>30</sup>) still contributes to this animated effect. His alert brushwork that is particularly evident in the swift, swirling touch that forms the numerous beards and hairs of the Doctors (the visible trajectory then resembles the trace of a pencil or charcoal quickly wielded), suggests movement and convincingly conveys an effervescent atmosphere in the temple, in contrast to the narrative indications.

Like Perugino's *Christ giving the keys to St. Peter* in the Sistine Chapel c. 1482 (Fig. 21) and Pinturicchio in his *Jesus among the Doctors* for the collegiate church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Spello in Umbria, Tintoretto used the tiling floor plan to get an optical hollowing effect of the space with great mastery of geometrical perspective. Yet, one can be struck by the strangely dynamic construction of this space, due to the upward and rightward inclination of the geometric paving on the ground that shifts the perspective effect and



**FIG. 21** Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys* (c. 1482, fresco 330 x 550 cm. Rome, Vatican Sistine chapel).

seems to constitute the seated yet gesticulating Christ as the focus and vanishing point of the story. His majestic posture, dominating the Doctors and on the vertical median axis like the vanishing point of the perspectival construction, evokes the exegesis of Bede already mentioned, designating him as the co-eternal son of God enthroned in the Temple. The relationship between the Holy Family and the Doctors reveals the ideological orientation of Tintoretto's painting which departs from the traditional textual exegesis of the episode.

Despite this swarming crowd, the viewer manages to distinguish two protagonists: Jesus depicted haloed and placed on the vertical median axis of the painting (an echo of the *Lehrtypus*), and the monumental Virgin who instantly recognises her son among the crowd.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Krischel, Tintoret, 86.

<sup>31</sup> This detail which magnifies the Virgin would be inspired by the romantic rewriting of the life of Christ published by Pietro Arertino in 1535: *L'Humanità di Cristo*. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Painting Mary, Tintoretto shows originality by subverting the traditional and marginal function of the *repoussoir* figure (a character displayed on the edge of a composition). While set aside in the left lower corner of the painting, the Virgin is granted the status of a protagonist, with the gigantic size the artist shapes her, and with the complicity established between her and her son, the hero of the scene depicted haloed and seated in the centre. Through their exchange of glances and the deictic orientation of their hands, the two figures of Mary and Jesus seem to reach out to each other despite the crowd. Mary's face is oriented towards Jesus and at the opposite of the viewer, but her right ear is outstretched to the beholder's side. Thus, she appears as the one who listens to the Gospel word more than to the inflated words of the Doctors, because of the direction of her gaze. A clear outline similar to a luminous halo distinguishes her and indicates her divine nature, as if an aura were surrounding her. By this scopical relationship established between Mary and Jesus, Tintoretto achieves a narrative condensation that mixes both the dispute with the Doctors and the reunion of the Holy Family—even if it is difficult to identify Joseph for sure among the multitude (perhaps he is the massive yellow-clad man to the right of the composition).

Despite this narrative condensation, Tintoretto's painting deviates from the biblical text and provides through its licences an interpretation of the episode. Playing with the gigantic size of the Doctors' books (which are not mentioned in Luke's account), the composition seems to caricature their grandiloquent science. We are witnessing a "battle of books" (Roland Krischel), and this reckoned anachronism (of course books did not exist in Christ's time) makes the subject of Tintoretto's composition fit with its Venetian milieu of creation, the Serenissima being in the 16<sup>th</sup> century one of the largest printing and publishing centers in Europe.<sup>32</sup> Tintoretto's invention shows the Doctors absorbed in reading or in disputes, and all of them prove to be oblivious to the word of Christ, which only Mary is listening to. These features taunt the pedantry of the Jewish Doctors, who are depicted unconcerned with the Gospel message and prone to quarrels or overwhelmed by their printed books sometimes larger than they are. In this respect, Tintoretto's painting offers a satirical and original interpretation of the episode.

By this differentiated treatment between the Doctors and Christ, the painter establishes a clear distinction between the Jewish Law and Jesus' teaching, according to a very hierarchical conception of history, traditional in Christian milieu in the early modern period, as proves the decree *Moyses vir* issued by Pope Eugene IV on September 4, 1439. This decree incited Christians to maintain a disruptive relationship with the teaching of Moses and the Old Testament, to the

---

<sup>32</sup> Krischel, Tintoret, 86.



benefit of Christianity, which was considered as more eminent than Judaism in these milieus: “the Church is holier than the synagogue and the vicar of Christ is superior in authority and dignity to the same Moses” (*ecclesia sanctior quam sinagoga, et Christi vicarius ipso Moyse auctoritate et dignitate superior*). By inventing a modernised Temple cluttered with anachronistic decorum such as books and Serlian architecture, Tintoretto thus proposes a modernised amplification of the narrative likely tinged with anti-Judaism<sup>33</sup> and marked by an exceptional dynamism in the iconography of Jesus among the Doctors.

### 3.2. Ribera: the Opaque Veil of the Law and the Blindness of the Doctors

In turn, yet with distinct procedures, José de Ribera and his workshop seem to construct an anti-Jewish exegesis of the episode. Several versions of Christ among the Doctors stem from José de Ribera (1591–1652), but specialists consider none of them as entirely authentic. The study focuses on the painting kept in the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna (**Fig. 22**).<sup>34</sup>



**FIG. 22** Jusepe de Ribera (attr.), *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1630, oil on canvas 129 x 175 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, 326).

<sup>33</sup> This remains an hypothesis since we still ignore for whom this painting was intended for. Still, anti-Jewish import of artefacts are observed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy. See for instance Geerd Blum, 2013, 557–577, Giovanni Careri, 2013 and Xavier Vert, 2015, 43–68.

<sup>34</sup> Paintings inspired by Ribera representing this subject are preserved in Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum), Glasgow, Nantes (Museum of Fine Arts), Caltanissetta, Rome (Corsini Gallery), Castres (Goya Museum).

Using a tight framing that shows only the upper part of the figures, the painter avoids depicting the space of the Temple. He pushed the figures in the painting close to the frame, pulling the viewer immediately to the participants of the story placed in the dark and undefined space.

This device borrowed from Caravaggio's fashion dramatises the confrontation between the figures displayed like in a frieze. Indeed, on the left part, five Jewish Doctors, who cast their gazes towards texts and the ground, constitute a confused group, while the Holy Family is set on the right with a dynamic ascent, through the gesture of Jesus pointing to the heavens with his right index finger. A table and a cloth that wraps a Doctor both divide the characters into two groups and reinforce their antagonism. On this table, like sheltered by a shadowy veil, four bearded Doctors are using a magnifying glass to look at a parchment, upon which Greek and Hebrew characters are legible. Below them, a glabrous Doctor examines at close range a printed book placed on a table. This variety of textual supports—the printed book proves to be anachronistic and indicates a modernist interpretation of the story of St. Luke—could emphasise the Doctor's knowledge (if not their pedantry). Perhaps this scroll refers to the Torah and the book to some text of rabbinic exegesis.

Equipped with a magnifying glass, the Doctor who wraps himself in his coat or a shawl to examine the parchment volume and moves away from the gaze of Christ, in a gesture of concealment, could condense a criticism of the blind synagogue. This conspicuous fabric that divides the composition in two parts (the Doctors on the left, the Holy Family on the right) could allude indeed to the veil of ignorance described by St. Paul. Through the metaphor of the veil, the apostle (2Cor 3:18) evoked the blindness of the Jews to Christian messianism. An Italian sermon contemporary of Ribera appropriates this negative metaphor of the veil, synonymous with blindness:

The Israelites who could not bear the splendour that stemmed from Moses' face, looked at it once it was covered with a veil; and up to today, they look at the mysteries of Christ with a veil on them, and the bark of their Scriptures, and like a sealed book with the seal of their figures and external ceremonies, without internalising the splendour of the spirit that is enclosed in them; and without taking off the veil of ignorance that they put on their hard heart. But we look at these mysteries with bare faces, uncovered, with no veil, and with open seals, so that in the holy gospel are expressed, and where we read like in an obvious book, we contemplate almost in a clear mirror that discovers all that it represents; and there we see the very glorious face of Christ, and the different forms that he took for us and we transform ourselves in them.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> "Gl'israeliti, che non potendo soffrire lo splendore ch'usciva dalla faccia di Mosè, la miravano coperta con un velo; & fino al dì d'hoggi mirano i misteri di Christo coperti con il vela, & cortecia delle loro Scritture, & come libro sigillato co'sigilli delle loro figure, & esteriori cerimonie; senza internarsi nello spelndor dello spirito -, ch'in quelli stà serrato; e senza tor via il velo dell'ignoranza, & incredulità c'hanno posta sopra il lor duro cuore. Mà noi altri miriamo questi misteri *revelatafacie*, alla scoperta, senza velo, & co'sigilli aperti, nel modo che nel sagro Evan-

Their heart remains veiled, with the veil of ignorance, they do not know the secret of the holy scripture, as says the Apostle in the second epistle to the Corinthians, that up to today, the veil is on their heart, so that when they read the divine scripture, they do not understand it.<sup>36</sup>

In the early modern era, this kind of speculation, opposing the light of the Christian Word to the alleged blindness of the Jews through the motif of the veil, was common in Catholic theological literature:

Such clarity emanated from Moses that he would need a veil when he would deliver speeches before the people. Saint Paul drew it in a mystical sense (2Cor 13–14) in obscure words that are not sufficiently understood. We can express what he means this way: Moses' face continued to shine, but it was not visible to the Israelites because of the splendour of its light. This light almost engulfed his face, just as in the Old Covenant it tightens the eyes more strongly by the severity of the laws and by the veil on the letters that removes them from Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Besides, the “veil of ignorance” is a set expression in Italian and in the European Romance languages. Its figurative translation appears in Cesare Ripa's *Iconology*, an iconographic code widely spread at that time in Italy.<sup>38</sup> Then, the use of the veil wrapped around the Doctors in Ribera's paintings could represent a sort of variation on the iconographic *topos* of the veiled and blindfolded Synagogue invented in



**FIG. 23** Anonymous, *Church and Synagogue* (1220–1235, carved stone, sculptures from the Strasbourg South façade Cathedral. Strasbourg, musée de l'Œuvre Notre-Dame).

gelo sono espressi, in cui come in libro patente *speculamur*, gli contempliamo quasi in chiaro specchio, che ne discopre chiaramente tutto chello che ne rappresenta; & ivi vediamo la gloriosissima faccia di Christo, & le diverse forme, che per noi prese, & ne trasformiamo in quelle” Ponte, Guida spirituale, 570–571.

<sup>36</sup> “[...] resta velato il cuore loro, col velo dell'ignoranza, che non conoscono i segreti della scrittura sacra, come dice l'Apostolo nella seconda a Corinthe, che fin al giorno d'hoggi il velo sta sopra il cuore loro, in modo che quando leggono la divina scrittura non l'intendono”, Poli da Storo and Suor Clelia Pia, *Razionale*, 73.

<sup>37</sup> Bartholin, *De morbis biblicis*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Ripa, *Iconologia*, 307. “il velo dell' ignoranza”.



**FIG. 24** Anonymous, *Synagoga* (14<sup>th</sup> century, carved stone. Freiburg im Breisgau, Freiburger Münster).



**FIG. 25** Gil or Diego de Siloé, *Synagogue* (early 16<sup>th</sup> century, polychrome wood, part of an altarpiece. Burgos, cathedral, chapel del Condestable).

the Middle Ages and surviving in the early modern period<sup>39</sup> (Fig. 23–25). According to this tradition, both exegetical and iconographic, the “veil” painted by Ribera or his follower and interposed like a screen between the Doctors and Jesus professing could implement the non-recognition of the Christian message by the Jews.

Taken up and amplified by Clement of Alexandria and then early modern theologians<sup>40</sup>, this metaphor of the veil also used to express the enigmatic and secret nature of Jewish theology (Kabbalah) and of the Old Testament (or Torah) in opposition to the alleged clarity of the gospel according to Christians. In the painting, the Doctor’s gesture of wrapping and concealing himself in order to examine a scroll strewn with Hebrew and Greek characters (two erudite languages that few of Ribera’s contemporaries mastered) could metaphorize the esoteric nature of Judaism in the eyes of Christians. This type of exegesis developed by St. Paul and relayed by the Fathers of the Church still circulated in Ribera’s entourage, as the Italian sermon quoted shows. This diffusion of such Christian interpretations of Jewish theology in Ribera’s milieu leads one to think that the painter’s invention could consist in a criticism of the Torah (or Law), unaware of Jesus’ wisdom and depicted as obscure and enigmatic with respect to Christian doctrine embodied by the bright adolescent.

<sup>39</sup> This allegorical figure used to face the triumphant Church in the portals of Gothic cathedrals (in Strasbourg and Metz, for instance), in altarpieces (in the chapels of Saint Ann and del Condestable in Burgos’ cathedral) and in illuminated manuscripts (Somme Le Roy, for instance).

<sup>40</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, V, 4 et V, 6; for the resonance of this exegesis among early modern Christians, see notes 48 and 49.

Indeed, Jesus on the right stands out by the clarity and by the youthful appearance of his face, as well as by his gesture directed towards heaven, unlike the group of the elderly Jewish readers plunged into darkness on the left. Ribera (or his follower) seems to make Jesus the Word/Light according to John's metaphor. He painted him in a majestic and imperious posture, taking heaven as his witness with his right hand, while sitting in a throne-like armchair whose left armrest is adorned with a lion that seems to bow its head under the pressure of the adolescent's left hand. This iconographic detail seems reminiscent of the throne of Solomon described in 1Kings 10:18–20 and tends to make Christ the new king of Israel, in accordance with the prophecy of the angel of the Annunciation: "God will give him [Jesus his Son] the throne of David his father" (Luke 1:32–33). The decorum thus confirms the messianic nature of the adolescent and fits with Bede's and Jerome's interpretations of the episode. The tendency to multiply in the iconography of Christ's childhood the signs that refer to his kingship in the lineage of David and Solomon is recurrent in early modern European iconography.<sup>41</sup>

Let us go back to the arrangement of Ribera's figures. On the left, a homogeneous, agitated and confused group of Jewish Doctors stands out, separated from the Holy Family and hidden by a veil. This veil casts a conspicuous shadow on the printed text consulted by a Doctor, and this detail in a painting made in a Christian milieu could indicate that this man does not perceive the full meaning of the Law. Indeed, according to Pauline theology, Jewish people would not receive the light of grace and would be isolated from it by an opaque veil. Therefore, Ribera's chiaroscuro in the painting could reflect an exegetical interpretation in the Catholic context of its creation.

Everything happens as if the light emanated from Jesus projected distinctly onto the printed book consulted by the Jewish Doctor so that this light could reveal its profound meaning. In other words, the principle of Christian exegesis seems inscribed in the composition itself and becomes properly artistic. Indeed, through this focused usage of chiaroscuro not mentioned in the Bible, Ribera's work (or that of his follower) likely offers a spectacular materialisation of allegorical logic: the New Testament (embodied by Jesus) sheds light on the "enigmas" and "obscure allegories" of the Law (according to common metaphors used by Christian theologians since St. Paul) that the Jewish Doctor is observing at close range. Here again, St. Paul's epistles make it possible to clarify a Christian meaning in Ribera's contrastive composition, since the apostle considers the Chris-

---

<sup>41</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish*, 143.

tian grace as the fullness and light of history, while he compares the Jewish Law to a shadow.<sup>42</sup>

The overall layout of the painting should not be overlooked. Ribera (or his follower) constructs a frieze-like space in which an antithetical and hierarchical confrontation of characters is spread out. On the one hand, the teaching of the Jewish Doctors is situated to the left, a side connoted negatively in Christianity. On the other hand, Christ and his parents are positioned to the right, a location connoted positively. This arrangement of the figures makes use of the lateral expansion which characterises the frieze format, and gives rise to the idea of temporal succession, the progress of history being organised and spatialised according to the direction of reading which dominates in early modern Christian Europe: from left to right. Most likely, the antagonistic confrontation of these figures in a frieze without any defined depth (the comparison with Serodine is enlightening in this respect) conveys here a finalistic conception of history. The Grace of the Gospel personified by the young Jesus depicted on the right and brightly illuminated in his dialogue with heaven succeeds the esoteric Jewish Law represented and even caricatured through these figures of busy old men, gathered under a veil on the left, in darkness, deciphering a complex volume and a great erudite book.

### 3.3. Champagne, the Obsolescence of the Law and the dedication to the Christian God

Philippe de Champaigne (1602–1674) painted in 1663 a canvas of Christ among the Doctors originally placed in the chapel of the infirmary of Vauvert's Carthusian monastery in Paris (**Fig. 26**).<sup>43</sup> As a token of its success, this painting was later displayed on the high altar of the conventual church and



**FIG. 26** Philippe de Champaigne, *The Finding of Jesus in the Temple* (1663, oil on canvas 244 x 170 cm. Angers, fine arts museum).

<sup>42</sup> “For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things” (Hebr 10:1) and “Which [old Jewish ceremonies] are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ” (Col 2:17).

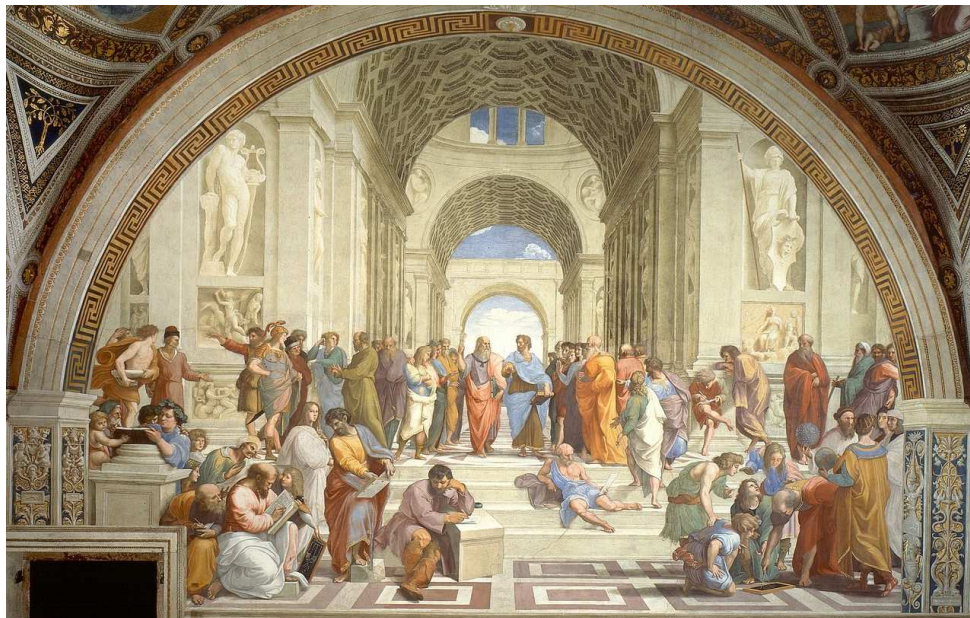
<sup>43</sup> Dorival, Champaigne, 32–33, Tapié and Sainte-Fare-Garnot, Champaigne, 296–299.

surrounded by twelve paintings of miracles by Christ. All of them were executed by famous members of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture.<sup>44</sup>

Champaigne's composition differs from the dominant iconographic tradition in the West by its vertical format, which limits the evocation of the Temple space. The painter gives a Greco-Latin aspect to Jerusalem and the Jewish edifice, which indicates a first interpretative intervention with respect to the letter of the biblical text.

Moreover, Champaigne's painting represents an event occurring after the dispute itself: the composition focuses on the Holy Family and the psychological exchange between its members, the only standing characters. The striking eloquence of their gestures, inherited from ancient rhetoric (*actio*), reveals the surprise of Jesus' parents: their hands are open and moved in contradictory directions to suggest their astonishment; they impart emotional dynamic to the composition. The colouring of these three figures—saturated blues, and warm tones for the Virgin and Joseph—breaks the cold and dull tones of the whole painting and singles them out clearly from the Doctors. This rupture in the tones likely marks them out as the crucial figures of the story.

The arrangement of the figurative elements converges towards Christ, whom Champaigne treats as a majestic "sacred hero" (Lorenzo Pericolo).<sup>45</sup> One can be struck by the isolation of this adolescent Jesus, dressed in celestial blue, untouched, whom most of the characters look at and who dominates the composi-



**FIG. 27** Raphael, *The School of Athens*, detail (1509–1511, fresco. c. Vatican, stanza della Segnatura).

<sup>44</sup> Tapié and Sainte-Fare-Garnot, Champaigne, 296.

<sup>45</sup> Pericolo, Champaigne, 284.

tion. He is not, strictly speaking, *among* the Doctors and does not belong to the *Lehrtypus* or the *Diskussionstypus*. He is the highest figure in the canvas and the aerial gesture of his right arm borrowed from Raphael's Plato in *The School of Athens*,<sup>46</sup> indicates the divine nature of his origin and preoccupations, while his left palm open towards the ground makes him look like Aristotle, painted in the same Vatican fresco, and could refer to his human nature (**Fig. 27**). In short, this particular representation could highlight Jesus' double nature as a messiah: divine *and* human, in accordance with the already cited exegeses of Jerome and Bede.

Yet the chromaticism used by Champaigne to depict his characters is a clue of his special relationship to history. While the Holy Family is standing, in movement, and made of saturated, warm and lively tones, four old seated Doctors, the Temple and that which relates to the Jewish Law or the Old Covenant, are relegated to the background and painted in dull tones. These chromatic contrasts could suggest the historical relevance and presentness of the Holy Family in relation to the old Jewish Doctors depicted in a dull chromatic range and confined in the half-light background of the painting. One of these Doctors resembles a seated, passive Moses holding the tablets of the Law in the recess of Christ's enlightened hand. This illuminated hand protrudes from the shaded area of the tablet (or book) and appears to be the bright succession of the Mosaic teaching. In this detail, as in the general distribution of shades, a teleological, hierarchical and Christocentric relationship to history likely emerges, apparently conforming to the Catholic exegesis of the Bible prevailing among Champaigne's contemporaries. At that time, Catholics were accustomed to perceiving the Old Testament as a narrative that contains only imperfectly and obscurely the truth of Christian doctrine formulated in the Gospels. The Capuchin Benoît Laugeois (died in 1689) gives a clear insight into this approach to the Bible:

The Gospel being nobler & more excellent than the Law, JESUS-CHRIST infinitely above Moses, the Angels & all creatures, just as light dispels darkness & truth abolishes figures, one must follow his Doctrine & precepts, practice the celestial virtues he teaches us.<sup>47</sup>

The Jansenists whom Champaigne frequented adopted a similar point of view:

---

<sup>46</sup> Dorival, Champaigne, 33.

<sup>47</sup> L'évangile étant plus noble & plus excellent que la Loy, JESUS-CHRIST infiniment au dessus de Moïse, des Anges & de toutes les creatures, comme la lumiere dissipe les tenebres, & la verité abolit les figures, on doit suivre sa Doctrine & ses préceptes, pratiquer les vertus celestes qu'il nous enseigne", Laugeois, *Science universelle*, 4.



The law of the Gospel has perfected the most excellent things in the law of innocence, in the law of nature, & in the old law [of Moses].<sup>48</sup>

Once displayed above the high altar of the convent church and surrounded by twelve paintings of Christ's miracles distributed in the side chapels, Champaigne's painting represented in a heroic and spectacular way the starting point of Christ's public life on earth supposed to give completion to the Jewish doctrine. Jesus' aspect likely stemmed from Renaissance and Antique models of Greek philosophers and his dominant and heroic posture crystallised his extraordinary and messianic nature. When hung in the infirmary of the Carthusian convent—the painting's pristine place of display—, its purpose was probably to show the patients the primacy of belonging to God over family and earthly contingencies.<sup>49</sup> (In this respect, the ostentatious gesture of Jesus pointing with his right index finger at the sky and turning the palm of his other hand towards the earth, as if to appease it, is limpid, and refers to the answer he gives to his parents: "Wist ye not that I must be about my father's businesses"? Luke 2:49).

The painter thus probably developed a particular exegesis of the episode, distinct from the interpretations formulated by the theologians and based on a more general and dichotomous approach to the biblical text, in which the Old Testament is reduced to the rank of a dull and imperfect prefiguration of Christian doctrine. Besides, by choosing to focus his composition on the psychological exchange between Jesus and his parents instead of the theological disputation with the Doctors, Champaigne stressed the necessity for the beholder to dedicate himself or herself to the Christian God and to spiritual issues, not to family or mundane topics.<sup>50</sup> This is a suitable invention for a painting that initially adorned the chapel of an infirmary. Yet, by moving this painting to the high altar of the Carthusian Monastery and by surrounding it with posterior representations of Jesus' life, it appeared rather as a solemn first self-revelation of his messianic nature. This change of display finally shows how its context can reshape the meaning of a work of art.

### **3.4. Anti-Judaism Despite Naturalism in Visual Arts**

William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite school of painting along with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais. Painting with a vivid and colourful palette, striving to translate light, his works sometimes bordered on photographic realism thanks to the precision of

---

<sup>48</sup> "913. La loy de l'Evangile a perfectionné ce qu'il y avoit de plus excellent dans la loy d'innocence, dans la loy de nature, & dans la vieille loy [de Moïse]", Arnauld d'Andilly, *Instructions chrestiennes*, 291.

<sup>49</sup> Tapié and Sainte-Fare-Garnot, *Champaigne*, 296.

<sup>50</sup> Christ's gesture towards heaven seems indeed to recall, "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).



**FIG. 28** William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of Our Saviour in the Temple* (1854–1865, oil on canvas. Liverpool, Lady Lever Gallery, WAG 246).



**FIG. 29** William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of Our Saviour in the Temple* (1854–1860, oil on canvas 85,7 × 141 cm. Birmingham, Museums and Art Gallery, 1896P80).



**FIG. 30** Auguste Blanchard after William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of Our Saviour in the Temple* (c. 1863–1867, etching 53,1 × 75 cm. Art market).

the brushstrokes and the commitment to rendering the smallest details. Little known at the beginning of his career, he became a fashionable painter in the 1880s, particularly with *The Light of the World*, a work he reproduced several times, a late version of which (1900) is on display in St. Paul's Cathedral in London. This somewhat soppy painting is a kind of archetype of Victorian spiritual aesthetics.

Yet it is an artistic manifesto devoted to an extremely precise theology. Hunt's return to a realistic depiction as advocated by his Pre-Raphaelite friends is part of the fascination for the East in Victorian society and serves as an expression of what is meant to be a genuinely Protestant way of painting. Indeed, if the painter renounces "Raphaelite" painting, it is also to turn his back on Catholic representations of the divinity of Jesus, based on the ideality of the figures, a host of symbolic markers (the halos, the nimbus, the ample floating tunics, etc.) and the coded artificiality of the poses. For him and for the *evangelical* theology rising to prominence in his time, the Incarnation takes place at the very heart of a world that must be rediscovered as accurately as possible.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Landow, Hunt and Typological Symbolism, 191–193.

He therefore chooses to represent a space without mystery, with as little depth and as little chiaroscuro as possible in order to show what he believes to be the bare reality. Therefore, he travelled to the East to reproduce with a somewhat maniacal fidelity not only the costumes and interiors of Palestine, but also the objects exhumed by the emerging scientific archaeology. He paints the Holy Family according to models found in situ, probably chosen because they differ from the usual canons. To the Protestant *sola scriptura* corresponds a kind of *sola terra*, in which Raphael's celestial creatures have no place. This taste for authenticity is, of course, totally arbitrary: Hunt used the Alhambra Court at the Crystal Palace in London as a model for the interior of the Temple (**Fig. 28–30**)!<sup>52</sup>

Hunt learns from the Flemish artists he admires; for them, painting with realism does not mean renouncing symbolism, as the right-hand side of the painting, which accumulates significant details, proves. On the door there is an inscription in Latin and Hebrew: 'the Lord whom you seek shall suddenly come to his Temple' which shows that the represented episode fulfils Malachi 3:1. Birds above the head of Jesus might allude to the dove of the Holy Spirit violently bursting into the discussion. At the foot of the door is a blind man, a prefiguration of the healings that Jesus will carry out in his public ministry. Finally, in the background, a construction scene in which the workers look suspiciously at a stone might allude to the Psalm quotation (Ps 118:22) applied by Matthew 21:42 to Jesus: "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner."

Like the right-hand side of the painting, the background is also allegorical as it shows the procession of a lamb leading to the sacrifice for a child held by his mother before the eyes of a moneychanger. One can recognise the evocation of the Law of Leviticus represented by the rabbis in the foreground. But we can also see a series of allusions to Jesus: the Presentation in the Temple, the Sellers driven out of the Temple, and above all the metaphor omnipresent throughout the New Testament of the Lamb of God, sacrificed for the sin of the world; the confrontation with the Doctors, narratively prefiguring the appearance before the high priests who will condemn Jesus.

The figure of Christ astonished his contemporaries the most because it breaks completely with the previous canons of representation. Indeed, he is a young teenager with odd features and thick red hair. He plays familiarly with the buckle holding the wide belt fastening his fringed tunic. Although he has just been interrupted in the middle of a discussion, he remains a stranger to his parents, who isolate him from the circle of rabbis while he distractedly holds his mother's forearm. One can read the mutual incomprehension between him and his family, which is marked in the dialogue ending with "they did not understand what he

---

<sup>52</sup> Giebelhausen, *Painting the Bible*, 166.

was saying to them” (Luke 2:50). However, at the same time, he seems to take the spectator as a witness through a silent interrogation by looking him straight in the eyes. By this admonishing process, the spectator becomes involved in the scene and, according to Protestant doctrine, has to take a personal stance with regard to the biblical text represented here. Which side is he on? Is he on the side of the priests rejecting him or on the side of Mary and Joseph seeking to confine him to the family circle?

According to the description of the painting by his friend Frederic George Stephens, Hunt seeks to represent different psychological portraits of resistance to Christ. His comments reveal that the painting shows the same opposition between the rabbis and Jesus as found in Tintoretto or Ribera. The first is the “blind, imbecile, and decrepit” high priest who clings to the Torah “strenuously yet feebly” and who represents, “obstinate adherence to the old and effete doctrine and pertinacious refusal of the new.”<sup>53</sup> His attitude is reinforced by the one next to him “holding the phylactery-box, that contained the promises of the Jewish dispensation in one hand, touches with the other that of the blind man, as though to call his attention to, and express a mutual satisfaction in, their sufficiency, whatever may come of this new thing Christ in conversation has suggested.”<sup>54</sup> For him, the old man embodies a moribund doctrine, his healthy companion represents a conservative establishment that will not allow itself to be disturbed by newness.

The one next to him argues passionately with the text in hand: he is the image of strong spirited people who resist with all the resources of their intelligence to the message of Jesus. On the contrary, his companion, stylus in hand, with a large phylactery on his forehead, seems to represent the judgemental Pharisee. The fifth rabbi is a jousting man, who, with a cup of wine in hand, seems to want to calm the debate, in contrast to his suspicious neighbour, with his cornered gaze, and the last rabbi, who seems to be interested only in the Virgin. The musicians, behind, show all the nuances of mockery and contempt.

These peremptory and somewhat shocking remarks for a contemporary reader show that the alleged objectivity that Holman Hunt claimed to achieve through his naturalistic style and his field trips did not exist. The traditional criticism of the Temple that the painters practised in rupture with the exegetical reading did not cease. It even metamorphosed into a sharp criticism which, as one can sense from the reading of his contemporaries, reached the whole of Judaism and not only the Temple. We are thus at the limit of this anti-Judaism so particular to the Victorian era, which does not take the same forms nor the same references as the anti-Semitism of the continent, but proceeds by caricature and types.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Stephens, Hunt and his Works, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Stephens, Hunt and his Works, 64.

<sup>55</sup> Cardaun, Antisemitism in England and Britain: A History of Prejudice and Divided Responses.

## 4. Conclusion

This study aimed at demonstrating that who is interested in the historical reception of the Bible and in its exegesis can enlarge the spectrum of her or his inquiry, non-confining it to the texts, but considering also the works of art as they enrich the literary interpretation of the biblical history by reshaping it with a stimulating coloured materiality.

The analysis of some representations of the episode of Jesus among the Doctors shows the complexity of artistic exegesis, sometimes independent from the speculations developed by the theologians. These representations are more in tune with the milieu of their addressee than with the “scholastic,” “academic” and “cultivated” exegesis that the Fathers and, following them, the medieval and then modern theologians developed and who did not read in the pericope an opposition between the Old and New Covenant, as they were accustomed to do in many other passages. On the contrary, for the traditional exegesis it was the moment of revelation of the divinity of Jesus. Several artists (Tintoretto, Ribera, Holman Hunt especially) demonstrate a rupture between the discourse of the clerics (then the scholars) and the practice of the artists. Using different compositional devices such as the arrangement of the figures, the *parerga* (sometimes anachronistic), they constructed a conspicuous hierarchy between the Doctors and Jesus. These artists, seeking to please their commissioners or buyers, may have favoured more popular interpretations, in the cases studied here, more permeable to certain historical forms of anti-Judaism, or even anti-Semitism. And Champaigne provided a more eschatological interpretation of the episode, in resonance with the original destination of his painting: an infirmary. One should not exclude aesthetic criteria, susceptible to motivate the divergence of artistic representations of the biblical history with the dominant tradition of its written exegesis. Contemplating the satirical representations invented by Dürer, Tintoretto or Ribera, one might think that this scene may have flattered a certain taste for the picturesque, irony, mockery.

Completing the silences of the Gospel on the concrete circumstances of the episode (aspects and disposition of the figures, objects and places of the narrative), the artefacts examined reshape the Christian history and finally offer a precise survey of the Christian imaginary.

## Bibliography

- a Lapide, C., *Commentarius in Evangelium S. Lucæ et S. Ioannis*, 1639  
Arnauld d'Andilly, R., *Instructions chrestiennes tirées par Monsieur Arnauld d'Andilly des deux volumes de lettres M. lean du Verger de Haurane, abbé de S. Cyran*, 1672, vol. 1.2, letter 45  
Bartholin, T., *De morbis biblicis miscellanea medica*, 1672  
Bovon, F., *Luke (Hermeneia)*, 2002, vol. 1  
Brawley, R.L., *Luke: A Social Identity Commentary (T&T Clark Social Identity Commentaries on*

- the New Testament), 2020
- Brown, R.E., *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Anchor Bible Reference Library), 1993
- Calvin, J., *L'Institution de la religion chrétienne*, 1553
- Cardaun, S.K., *Antisemitism in England and Britain: A History of Prejudice and Divided Responses*, in: S.K. Cardaun (ed.), *Countering Contemporary Antisemitism in Britain* (Jewish Identities in a Changing World 25), 2015, 37–59
- Carroll, J.T., *Luke: A Commentary* (The New Testament Library), 2012
- Chazelle, C.M., *Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles*, *Word & Image*, 6 (1990), 138–153
- Dorival, B., *Philippe de Champagne 1602–1674. La vie, l'œuvre et le catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre*, 1976, vol. 2
- Frilingos, C.A., *Parents Just Don't Understand: Ambiguity in Stories about the Childhood of Jesus*, *Harvard Theological Review*, 109 (2016), 33–55
- Giebelhausen, M., *Painting the Bible: Representation and Belief in Mid-Victorian Britain* (British Art and Visual Culture), 2006
- Green, J.B., *The Gospel of Luke* (New International Commentary on the New Testament), 1997
- Jouanny, Ch., *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, *Archives de l'art français*, V, 1911, 20–22
- Krischel, R., *Tintoret, naissance d'un génie. Album de l'exposition* [Paris, Musée du Luxembourg-Sénat, 6 mars-1er juillet 2018; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum-Fondation Corboud, 6 octobre 2017–28 janvier 2018], 2018
- Landow, G.P., *William Holman Hunt and Typological Symbolism* (Studies in British Art), 1979
- Laugeois, B., *La science universelle de l'Écriture Sainte, fondée sur l'union et la concordance de l'Ancien Testament avec le Nouveau*, 1675
- Mâle, É., *L'Art religieux du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en France: étude sur l'iconographie du Moyen Âge et sur ses sources d'inspiration*, 1910
- Mossman, T., *The Great Commentary of Cornelius a Lapide*, 1908, vol. 4
- Osteneck, V., *Zwölfjähriger Jesus im Tempel*, in: E. Kischbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, 1968, vol. 4, 583–589
- Panofsky, E., *Early Netherlandish Painting; Its Origins and Character* (The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1947–1948), 1966, vol. 1
- Pericolo, L., *Philippe de Champagne*, 2002
- Plummer, A., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (International Critical Commentary), 1903
- Poli da Storo, P. and Suor Clelia Pia, *Razionale anzi Tesoro delle sette ore canoniche . . .*, 1621
- Ponte, L., *Guida spirituale in cui si trattadella oration, meditatione, e contemplation...*, tradotta dall'lingua Spagnola nell'Italiana da Monsignor Alessandro Sperelli, 1628
- Ripa, C., *Della novissima Iconologia di Cesare Ripa Perugino*, 1625
- Ruskin, J., *La Bible d'Amiens* traduction, notes et préface par Marcel Proust (Collection d'auteurs étrangers), 1904
- Stephens, F.G., *William Holman Hunt and his Works. A Memoir of the Artist's Life, with Description of his Pictures*, 1860
- Tapié, A. and Sainte-Fare-Garnot, N., *Philippe de Champagne: entre politique et devotion*, 2007

## Table of Figures

- Fig. 1** Anonymous, *Baptism and Jesus among the Doctors* (5<sup>th</sup> century, ivory, 17,5 cm width. London, British Museum, 1856,0623.3).
- Fig. 2** Anonymus, *Jesus among the Doctors* (late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Français 400, fol. 85r).
- Fig. 3** Albrecht Dürer, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1494–1497, oil on panel 62,5 × 45 cm. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie, 1877).
- Fig. 4** Bernard van Orley, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1513, oil on panel 54,4 × 33,3 cm. Washington, National Gallery, 1952.5.47.a).
- Fig. 5** Veronese, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1560, oil on canvas 236 x 430 cm. Madrid, museo del Prado, P000491).

- Fig. 6** Frans Francken II, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1586, oil on panel. Antwerp, Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe Kathedraal).
- Fig. 7** Giotto, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1300–1305, fresco, 200 x 185 cm. Padova, Scrovegni Chapel).
- Fig. 8** Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1616, oil on canvas 67 x 88 cm. Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana).
- Fig. 9** Giovanni Serodine, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1626, oil on canvas 145 x 224 cm. Paris, musée du Louvre, RF1983–1984).
- Fig. 10** Rembrandt's circle, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1648, pen wash and highlighted with white, 16,3 x 21,2 cm. Art market).
- Fig. 11** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1652, feather, ink and highlighted with white, 18,9 x 25,9 cm. Paris, musée du Louvre).
- Fig. 12** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1630, etching, 8,9 x 6,8 cm. Amsterdam, Rijkmuseum).
- Fig. 13** Carel Fabritius, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1640, wash, black ink, pen highlighted with white, 22 x 29,5 cm. Winterthur, Oskar Reinhart's collection).
- Fig. 14** Joseph Schmidt after Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1780–1810, etching with aquatint, printed in colours à la poupée, 19,6 x 26,9 cm. London, British Museum, 1895,0915.1433).
- Fig. 15** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1652, etching and dry point, 12,6 x 21,4 cm. New York, Metropolitan).
- Fig. 16** Rembrandt, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1654, etching and dry point on Japanese paper, 9,5 x 14,4 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum).
- Fig. 17** Leonard Bramer, *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1640s–1650s, oil on canvas 51 x 38 cm. Private collection).
- Fig. 18** Leonard Bramer, *Jesus among the Doctors* (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas 33 x 44 cm. Private collection).
- Fig. 19** Maître de l'Annonce des Bergers, *Jesus among the Doctors* (17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas 97,5 x 127,5 cm. Nantes, fine arts museum, inv. 332).
- Fig. 20** Tintoretto, *Jesus among the Doctors*, c. 1539 (oil on canvas 197 x 319 cm. Milan, museo del Duomo, inv. 234).
- Fig. 21** Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys* (c. 1482, fresco 330 x 550 cm. Rome, Vatican Sistine chapel).
- Fig. 22** Jusepe de Ribera (attr.), *Jesus among the Doctors* (c. 1630, oil on canvas 129 x 175 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, 326).
- Fig. 23** Anonymous, *Synagoga* (1220–1235, carved stone. Strasbourg, Cathedral, South façade).
- Fig. 24** Anonymous, *Synagoga* (14<sup>th</sup> century, carved stone. Freiburg im Breisgau, Freiburger Münster).
- Fig. 25** Gil ou Diego de Siloé, *Synagogue* (early 16<sup>th</sup> century, polychrome wood, part of an altarpiece. Burgos, cathedral, chapel del Condestable).
- Fig. 26** Philippe de Champaigne, *The Finding of Jesus in the Temple* (1663, oil on canvas 244 x 170 cm. Angers, fine arts museum).
- Fig. 27** Raphael, *The School of Athens*, detail (1509–1511, fresco. c. Vatican, stanza della Segnatura).
- Fig. 28** William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of Our Saviour in the Temple* (1854–1865, oil on canvas. Liverpool, Lady Lever Gallery, WAG 246).
- Fig. 29** William Holman Hunt, *The Finding of Our Saviour in the Temple* (1854–1860, oil on canvas 85,7 x 141 cm. Birmingham, Museums and Art Gallery, 1896P80).
- Fig. 30** Auguste Blanchard after William Holman Hunt, *The finding of Our Saviour in the Temple* (c. 1863–1867, etching 53,1 x 75 cm. Art market).

## Impressum

Herausgeber / Editors:

Prof. Dr. Régis Burnet, [regis.burnet@uclouvain.be](mailto:regis.burnet@uclouvain.be)

Prof. Dr. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, [s.gillmayr-bucher@ku-linz.at](mailto:s.gillmayr-bucher@ku-linz.at)

Prof. Dr. Klaus Koenen, [koenen@arcor.de](mailto:koenen@arcor.de)

Prof. Dr. Martin O’Kane, [m.okane@tsd.ac.uk](mailto:m.okane@tsd.ac.uk)

Prof. Dr. Caroline Vander Stichele, [C.H.C.M.VanderStichele@uvt.nl](mailto:C.H.C.M.VanderStichele@uvt.nl)

„Bible in the Arts“ is a project of the German Bible Society.

„Die Bibel in der Kunst“ ist ein Projekt der Deutschen Bibelgesellschaft

Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft

Balinger Straße 31 A

70567 Stuttgart

Deutschland

[www.bibelwissenschaft.de](http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de)