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Visualising the (Invisible) Prophets: Artistic Strategies for Representing Joel and Obadiah in Christian and Western Traditions

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Abstract

There are a number of challenges that artists face when attempting to portray prophets from the Book of the Twelve or the Minor Prophets. Not only are these books short and written in poetic form, but many of these tell us little about the prophets themselves. This essay explores the visual reception of two such ‘invisible prophets’, Joel and Obadiah, and investigates the ways in which artists from Christian and Western traditions have attempted to visualise and portray these prophetic figures. In doing so, it is suggested that artists have employed a number of artistic strategies in order to overcome the lack of biographical and narrative information concerning these minor prophets.

1. Introduction

There are some genres and forms of literature in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament that are well suited to visual representation. Narratives are particularly ripe for artistic depiction, with stories and events which can be vividly brought to life: the events of the exodus from Egypt and the stories of Israel’s monarchy come to mind. The same is true of depicting biblical characters. Some characters in the Hebrew Bible offer ample material for the artist, as can be seen in the many and varied depictions of Abraham, Ruth, and David.

Other genres are more difficult to depict visually, and indeed pose particular challenges. The prophetic literature, and especially the minor prophets, are a good example of this.² The books associated with prophetic figures known collectively as the Book of the Twelve or the Minor Prophets are primarily written in

¹ My sincere thanks to Amanda Dillon, Klaus Koenen, and the anonymous reviewers for the helpful feedback given on various drafts of this essay.

² Recent explorations of the reception of the Minor Prophets include Sawyer, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, and McEntire, *The Minor Prophets in Modern Culture*.

poetic fashion.³ Further, these texts tend to be relatively short texts and, apart from a few notable examples such as Jonah and Hosea, lack developed narratives or biographical elements concerning the prophets.⁴ The latter issues make it particularly challenging when trying to depict the prophetic figures themselves, because very often these prophets are not actually characters or actors in the books bearing their names; they are, in a sense, 'invisible' prophets.

How, then, do artists overcome these challenges when attempting to depict the prophetic figures from the Book of the Twelve? I suggest that artists in Christian and Western traditions employ a number of strategies in order to compensate for the lack of biographical information when visualising the prophets. These include: (1) drawing on the iconographic tradition with its generic artistic tropes related to religious figures, such as the portrayal of the prophet holding a scroll, sometimes inscribed with their own message; (2) attempting to portray the character or demeanour of the prophet, inasmuch as this can be gleaned from the biblical text; (3) inserting the prophet into textual elements of the prophet's message ('textualized' depictions); and (4) utilizing interpretive traditions, including intertextual associations, with which the prophet is associated.

The essay begins with a brief discussion of the four strategies noted above and how they are used to depict the prophetic figures when the prophets themselves are absent from the text as characters or actors. Utilising the above-mentioned strategies as heuristic categories, we turn to artistic representations of Joel and Obadiah, two 'invisible' prophets who are nonetheless depicted in numerous manuscript illuminations, paintings, statues, and other forms of visual representation. This essay does not attempt to offer a comprehensive catalogue of how these particular prophets have been received in visual traditions; rather, it draws on the visual reception of Joel and Obadiah in Christian and Western traditions in order to explore some of the strategies used by artists to depict the minor prophets when there is so little biographical or narrative information available.⁵

2. Depicting the Invisible Minor Prophets

As noted above, the poetic form of prophetic literature and the lack of biographical information about the prophetic figures can pose challenges when attempting to depict the prophets. Indeed, some prophets such as Joel and Obadiah are absent altogether from the text as characters or actors. How do artists compensate for these challenges when attempting to visually represent these figures?

³ For recent overviews of scholarship on the Twelve, see O'Brien, *Oxford Handbook*; Tiemeyer and Wöhrle, *The Book of the Twelve*.

⁴ On Jonah, see Tiemeyer, *Jonah Through the Centuries*.

⁵ Helpful investigations of the visual reception of other minor prophets can be found in Koenen, *Amos 1*; Fabry, *Habakuk*; and Kessler, *Micha*.

A common approach used in depicting prophetic figures is the utilization of artistic tropes that are common in the iconographic representation of religious figures. One such trope is the depiction of a prophet holding a text, either an unidentifiable scroll or codex, or one which includes a portion of the text from the book associated with the prophet. The rendering of a prophet with a scroll or text makes a visual connection between the prophet and notions of authorship and authority, as well as pointing to the assumed divine revelation of the message.⁶ However, as John Sawyer notes, the use of scrolls and books in visual representations of the minor prophets is particularly important given the lack of detail in the text about them.⁷

A second approach used by artists might be described as an attempt to depict the character, personality, or demeanour of the prophet, apart from any other contextual information. In such cases the representation often lacks any reference to the biblical text, or imagery from the prophetic book in question; rather, we must infer from the portrayal how the artist has understood the prophet's personality, demeanour, and bearing – as much as this can be drawn out from the biblical text. This is in many ways a more difficult task than other strategies which are employed, as it requires interpretive skill from both the artist and the audience.

A third strategy for visualising the prophets is to insert the prophet into textual elements of the prophet's message, even when they are not necessarily a 'character' in the text itself – what we might call 'textualized' depictions of the prophets. Such textualized representations are common with prophets such as Joel, where we have very little biographical information, but where captivating imagery (such as a locust infestation) is present in the book with which the prophet is associated.

A final approach taken by artists when depicting prophetic figures is the employment of interpretive traditions, including intertextual associations related to the prophet. Such interpretive and intertextual connections can be seen clearly in the visualisation of Obadiah, where the interpretive traditions long understood the prophet as the character of the same name found in 1 Kings 18. As we will see, because the Minor Prophets tend to be shorter books with little narrative context, artists have leaned heavily on the interpretive traditions of Judaism and Christianity in order to identify and flesh out these prophetic figures.

The four strategies outlined above are heuristic in nature: there is, of course, overlap between the approaches, and indeed some works of art incorporate several of these strategies at the same time. Nevertheless, these strategies can

⁶ Further reflections on this trope can be found in Altrock and Kapfhammer, *Hand-Bücher*.

⁷ Sawyer, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 279. In the case of the Minor Prophets, other artistic tropes include collective representations which show the Twelve pointing – often literally – to Jesus. In these collective representations, it is often difficult to ascertain which figure represents which prophet, with the precise number of figures represented (twelve) being the key interpretive element.

serve as useful categories in helping us think about the various ways in which artists overcome the lack of narrative and biographical information regarding these prophets. With this in mind, we turn to the visual reception of Joel and Obadiah, exploring how artists utilize these strategies when attempting to represent and depict these invisible prophetic figures. The examples which follow occur in different forms, including icons, illuminations, paintings, statues, stained glass, and relief sculptures. They are also found in diverse contexts, from manuscripts and printed Bibles, to cathedrals and churches, to private collections and libraries. These diverse forms and media give us a sense of the broad ranging ways in which these strategies and tropes have been employed by artists through the centuries as they have attempted to portray the invisible prophets Joel and Obadiah.

3. Joel

The book of Joel is a short, enigmatic book. The second book in the Hebrew ordering of the Book of the Twelve, Joel describes calamities besetting Israel, with the prophet imploring the people to lament and turn to God.⁸ We are told very little about the prophet, which has led to widespread disagreement about where Joel should be located historically. Pre-modern readers generally assumed that Joel should be situated among the 8th c. BCE prophets, most likely because of the book's placement in the Hebrew ordering of the Twelve between Hosea and Amos.⁹ There are, however, a number of elements in Joel which suggest a later date, including references to priests and cult but not to a king, mention of exile, and reference to Greeks. Coupled with the many references to other biblical texts found in Joel, scholars have increasingly come to view the book as a post-exilic creation.¹⁰ This, in turn, has led to reflection on the life setting of the prophet. The various calls to lament found in the book have led some to suggest that Joel may have been a cult prophet, leading the people in lamentation during a time of crisis.¹¹

And yet, despite these historical reconstructions, we know very little about the prophet. Given the lack of narrative or biographical elements in the text, how do artists represent Joel in artistic depictions? While the book lacks biographical dimensions, the vivid imagery in the book, as well as its use by Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2, has meant that it has been taken up by artists in interesting and creative ways, including textualized depictions which place the prophet within the message of the book and the highlighting of intertextual resonances.

⁸ See Crenshaw, Joel, and Wolff, Joel and Amos.

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Twelve Prophets.

¹⁰ Vatke, Die biblische Theologie; Bewer, Obadiah and Joel; Barton, Joel and Obadiah; Achtemeier, The Book of Joel.

¹¹ Rudolph, Joel, Amos, Obadja, Jona.

3.1. Representing Joel through Iconographic Artistic Tropes



Figure 1: Detail of Joel 1, 13th c., Bodleian Library MS. Canon. Bibl. Lat. 57, Oxford, England.

Depictions of Joel commonly draw on iconographic artistic tropes, including those which render the prophet holding a scroll or text. Such images highlight the prophet's role as author, scribe, or teacher, as well as identifying him with the text of the book bearing his name. A number of Latin manuscripts offer illuminations of the text, including at Joel 1, with broadly generic depictions of the prophet portrayed in this way. A 13th c. Latin manuscript from Italy offers a vibrant depiction of Joel holding an undecipherable scroll in one hand while the other hand is raised as he speaks to an unseen audience (see Fig. 1). Perhaps the most famous depiction

of Joel holding a scroll is Michelangelo's portrayal of the prophet in the Sistine Chapel, a representation that is known for its intense and thoughtful depiction of the prophet (Fig. 2). While we again are not privy to what words might be written on this scroll, John Sawyer suggests that the larger tableau indicates that the famous text of Joel 2:28, which Peter uses in his sermon at Pentecost, may be in mind.¹² A representation of Joel on Amiens Cathedral has him standing between Amos and Hosea, likely mimicking the order of the Twelve Prophets, again holding a contentless scroll (Fig. 3).



Figure 2: Michelangelo, Prophet Joel, 1508-12, fresco, Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican, Rome, Italy. Figure 3: Amos, Joel, Hosea, 13th c., statue, south end of the west façade, Amiens Cathedral, Amiens, France.

¹² Sawyer, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 281.

In other depictions we find Joel portrayed with a codex, rather than a scroll. The 12th c. Montpellier Bible has Joel holding a raised and opened book (Fig. 4). Here the prophet is standing on top of a large, hybrid creature that seems to have wings, and which may be a reference to the locusts which are found in the first half of the book of Joel. A 17th c. portrait of the prophet by Johannes Michael Dillherr depicts the prophet with several closed books, with straps that are unbound (Fig. 5). Meanwhile, a 19th c. stained glass depiction of Joel in a parish church in Gramastetten, Austria, shows the prophet enthroned, with one hand set on a closed book (Fig. 6).



Figure 4: Joel, 12th c., Montpellier Bible, France. Figure 5: Portrait of Joel, 1662, In: Johannes Michael Dillherr, Propheten Schul. Das ist, Christliche Anweisung zu Gottseliger Betrachtung des Lebens und der Lehre heiliger Propheten Altes Testaments. Figure 6: Josef Kepplinger, Prophet Joel, 1883, stained glass window, Saint Lawrence parish church, Gramastetten, Austria.



Figure 7: David and Joel, 1240-50, miniature painting, Würzburg, Germany.

Some representations more clearly depict the prophet holding a specific text from the book of Joel. Not surprisingly, the text of Joel 2:28 is common in such depictions, due in no small part to Peter's use of this text in his sermon in Acts 2 at Pentecost (the connections with Acts 2 and Pentecost are discussed further, below). An interesting example is found in a 13th c. miniature painting from Würzburg, Germany (Fig. 7). Here Joel is placed alongside King David, and both figures hold Latin texts which connect them to the events of Pentecost – Joel's being 2:28 and the promise to pour out the spirit on all flesh. The image is part of a double page spread, with the paired image

depicting Pentecost. Joel is also depicted holding the text of Joel 2:28 in the 12th c. Worms Bible (Fig. 8). Here the prophet is situated within an ornately coloured initial ‘v’ (verbum), and is holding a scroll which contains the famous text referring to the outpouring of the Spirit.

We find Joel represented with other texts as well, as can be seen in an ivory relief from the 7–8th c. CE, likely originating in Syria or Palestine and now held in the Louvre, which depicts the prophet Joel holding a scroll, on which part of Joel 2:18 is shown in Greek (see Fig. 9). This dynamic ivory relief ‘shows Joel outside a great city, robes flowing wildly, his left foot forward dramatically, looking up and pointing with his right hand to heaven; on a scroll in his left hand are the Greek words for “The lord was jealous for his land, and had pity on his people” (Joel 2:18)’.¹³ A number of scholars have pointed out that the tone of the chapter (and indeed the book) shifts dramatically in 2:18, with the following verses offering promises of God’s provision.¹⁴ Given this change of tone in the book, it is fitting that this image uses this verse in depicting the prophet in a more confident and optimistic manner than do many other portrayals of the prophet, particularly those which focus on the calamity of Joel 1, as will be seen below.



Figure 9: The Prophet Joel, 7–8th c. CE (Syria), ivory relief.

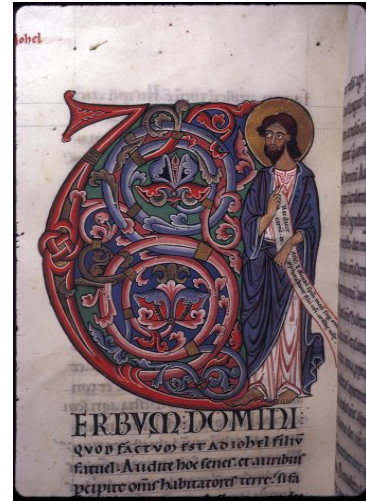


Figure 8: Joel in Initial V, 12th c., Worms Bible, Frankenthal, Germany.

3.2. Portraying the Character and Demeanour of Joel

Some artists attempt to portray Joel without any recourse to contextual clues or biblical texts that might identify the prophet. An interesting example of this is James Tissot’s portrayal of Joel (Fig. 10). While situated in a full and plush garden, the prophet is dressed in a contrasting dark garment which evokes a sense of foreboding. Indeed, Joel’s facial expression and body language are also telling: the brooding prophet has a stern face, and his crossed arms cover his upper torso, signalling self-protection and the message of warning which he delivers.

¹³ Sawyer, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 284.

¹⁴ Wolff, *Joel and Obadiah*.



Figure 10: James Tissot, Joel, 1896-1902, watercolour. Figure 11: John Singer Sargent, detail of Prophet Joel, 1890-95, oil on canvas, Frieze of the Prophets, West Wall, Zephaniah, Joel, Obadiah, and Hosea, Boston Public Library.

John Singer Sargent's portrayal of Joel in his 'Frieze of the Prophets' in the Twelve Prophets at the Boston Public Library also gives a sense of lament and foreboding (Fig. 11). The prophet is dressed in a dark garment, and is holding an even darker garment over his head, covering his face, which is turned away. The themes of lament, mourning, and warning run throughout the book of Joel, and one can see how and why these artists might depict the prophet in the ways in which they have, reflecting the demeanour of the prophet and his message. And yet, these two contemporaneous portrayals also contrast in important ways. Tissot's figure is much more contemplative than Singer Sargent's Joel, the latter

offering a more dramatic and dynamic representation of the prophet. While both can be seen as pointing to oncoming disaster, Singer Sargent's Joel seems to portray a heightened sense of urgency, as the prophet turns away and averts his gaze from the calamity.

3.3. Textualized Depictions of Joel

As noted above, the book of Joel offers little by way of narrative or biographical information. However, the book is full of rich and vibrant imagery which has proven to be inspirational for artists in attempting to depict the prophet, including references to locusts, moon and stars, and the blowing of the shofar. In many of these cases, artists depict the prophet within or alongside of this imagery from the book, offering a textualized version of Joel, even though the prophet himself is not a character within the text.

The subject of the first chapter of Joel is an invasion of locusts, while ch. 2 speaks of another incursion, this one understood either as referring to locusts again, or to an encroaching army. In Joel 1:4 we read, 'What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten; and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.' In Joel 2:2, meanwhile, we are told that 'Like blackness spread upon the mountains, a great and powerful army comes'.

There has been significant diversity in the interpretation of these chapters, with questions around whether these chapters refer to the same or separate

locust attacks, or if one (or both) speaks figuratively about military incursions.¹⁵ While locating such an invasion in a precise historical context has proven difficult, from antiquity readers have given evidence to suggest that such a locust infestation was possible and accurate in its description.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the imagery of locusts recurs in the New Testament in Rev. 9:1–11, where they are portrayed as an attacking army at the fifth trumpet blast, though the Apocalypse also seems to be drawing on the depiction in Joel 2.



Figure 12: Joel with Locusts, 12th c., Admont Giant Bible, Salzburg, Austria.

The visual reception of Joel also reflects the diversity of the interpretive traditions, though the imagery of locusts has received more attention. An exquisite example of this is found in the 12th c. Admont Giant Bible which depicts the prophet receiving a divine message while trying to ward off encroaching locusts (Fig. 12). The 12th c. Roda Bible also depicts Joel in the vicinity of locusts (Fig. 13). In this manuscript illumination, Joel is portrayed receiving a divine message, and then relaying this message to a group of men. This is followed by an image of a locust infestation. Another example of this theme is a 1704 woodcut by J. Sturt in a history of the Old

Testament presented in verse. Here the prophet stands speaking next to a as a swarm of locusts approaches (Fig. 14). As noted above, it is not clear if one or both of the invasions noted in Joel 1 and 2 should be understood as referring to an encroaching army. A woodcut from a 17th c. German pictorial Bible by Christoph Weigel seems to understand at least part of the book of Joel as referring to an attacking army (Fig. 15). Here the prophet delivers a message of warning to a group of men, as an army approaches on a distant hillside.

¹⁵ On the various interpretations of these chapters regarding locusts and armies, see Hadjiev, Joel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Jerome, *Libri Commentariorum*; Pusey, *Minor Prophets*.



Figure 13: Joel and locusts, 12th c., Roda Bible (Biblia Sancti Petri Rodensis), Catalonia, Spain. Figure 14: J. Sturt, Joel surrounded by locusts, 1704, woodcut, in: Samuel Wesley, The History of the Old Testament in verse. Figure 15: Der Prophet Joel thut eine Vermahnung an die aeltesten, 1695, woodcut, in: Christoph Weigel, Biblia Ectypa: Bildnüssen auß Heiliger Schrifft Alt- und Neuen Testaments.



Figure 16: Joel sees withered vine and fig tree, 13th c., relief sculpture, south end of west façade, Amiens Cathedral, Amiens, France.

Beyond the attacking locusts and armies, artists have drawn on other imagery from the book in offering a textualized portrayal of the prophet. This can be seen clearly in a number of representations of Joel on Amiens Cathedral.¹⁷ One of these depictions of Joel portrays the prophet looking mournfully at a withered vine and fig tree (Fig. 16), a reference to Joel 1:7 where we are told that the invasion ‘has laid waste my vines and splintered my fig trees...’ Another portrayal of Joel at Amiens depicts the prophet with the sun and moon (Fig. 17), drawing on the imagery of Joel 2:10: ‘The sun and the moon are darkened, and the

stars withdraw their shining’ (cf. Joel 2:31). The imagery of sun, moon, and stars was picked up by other artists. A 1564 woodcut by Froschauer depicts the prophet delivering a message to a late medieval city – which certainly means Jerusalem – with a large, darkened sun above it (Fig. 18). Finally, a statue of the prophet at Amiens shows him blowing a horn, drawing inspiration from Joel 2:1: ‘Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain!’ (Fig. 19). It is not immediately clear upon reading Joel 2:1 who is to blow this shofar; most

¹⁷ For further discussion on the depiction of the prophets on Amiens Cathedral, see Katzenellenbogen, The Prophets on the West Façade.

scholars suggest military or religious leaders may be in mind.¹⁸ Here, however, the artist envisions the prophet himself blowing the trumpet, again offering a textualized depiction which places the prophet into the message and imagery of the book bearing his name.



Figure 17: Joel with sun and moon, 13th c., relief sculpture, south end of west façade, Amiens Cathedral, Amiens, France. Figure 18: Joel, 1564, in: Christoph Froschauer, *Die gantze Bibel*. Figure 19: Joel blowing trumpet, 13th c., statue, archivolt, south transept portal of St. Honoré, Amiens Cathedral, Amiens, France.

There are, then, a number of ways in which Joel is portrayed in a ‘textualized’ fashion, in order to visualise the prophet. This includes placing him in the midst of a locust invasion, as well as alongside imagery from his book such the vine and trees, the sun and moon, and the shofar.

3.4. Joel and Pentecost: Intertextual Resonances

In Christianity, the prophet Joel is most well known because Joel 2 is quoted at length by the apostle Peter as part of his sermon at Pentecost recounted in Acts 2. In particular, Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:17–21 uses a full quotation that is very close to the Greek LXX of Joel 2:28–32. Using the rhetoric of the coming of the spirit and the imagery of a new era to describe the contemporary event of Pentecost, Luke, the author of Acts, offers an ‘actualized reading of the prophetic books’ that was common in this period.¹⁹ In short: for Luke, Joel’s words are fulfilled with the coming of the spirit at Pentecost.²⁰

Early Christian commentators were quick to draw on Joel 2 when discussing Acts and the broader notion of the Holy Spirit.²¹ And yet, the relationship between the past and the present – and thus the Old Testament and the New – has been

¹⁸ See discussion in Crenshaw, Joel, 117.

¹⁹ Troxel, Joel, 4; cf. Strazicich, Joel’s Use of Scripture.

²⁰ We also find allusions to Joel 2:28 in Acts 10:45 and Titus 3:6, which speak of the Spirit being poured out.

²¹ See examples in Ferreiro, *The Twelve Prophets*, including comments from early Christian authors such Chrysostom, Ambrose, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, and Origen.

difficult to navigate. Some interpreters focus on the historical context of Joel, and understand 2:28 as pointing to a time after the exile. Other readers pass over the issue quickly: Luther opines that the prophet simply skips here from his own time to the time of Christ.²² However, a number of Christian commentators would struggle with how to relate Peter's use of the text to the historical sense of the passage. Jerome, for example, notes that Peter sees the message of Joel as



fulfilled with Jesus and Pentecost. And yet, he also comments that it is difficult to untangle how this relates to the time of the prophet, the apostles, and the future.²³

Not surprisingly, works of art in the Christian tradition have also attempted to visualise the relationship of these texts and events. Such renderings are common in Christian representations of Joel, and have attempted to fuse the horizons of these texts, bringing together the prophet Joel and the events of Acts 2. A vivid example of this is Ludwig Glöttle's depiction of Joel in Salzburg Cathedral. Here the prophet is seen reclining, holding a scroll and pen, as he receives a vision that includes Jesus, Peter, and a dove representing the Holy Spirit (Fig. 20). A similar collapsing of time can be seen in Hans Brosamer's 1562 woodcut from a Luther Bibel (Fig. 21). Placed just under the title of the book of Joel, the image shows Peter in the background speaking to a crowd, with the prophet



Figure 20: Ludwig Glöttle, Vision des Propheten Joel von der Ausgießung des Heiligen Geistes – Gesamtansicht, 1888, painting, Dom Sankt Rupert und Virgil, Heilig-Geist-Kapelle, Salzburg, Austria. Figure 21: Hans Brosamer, Joel and Pentecost, 1562, woodcut, from the Luther Bibel.

in the foreground pointing (literally) to a crowded gathering as the spirit descends on them in the form of a dove. Here Joel and Pentecost are brought together, with the prophet pointing to the fulfilment of his own prophetic message.

²² Luther, Lectures on the Minor Prophets I.

²³ Jerome, Libri Commentariorum.

Similar representations are found throughout the Reformation and early modern periods (see Figs. 22 and 23).

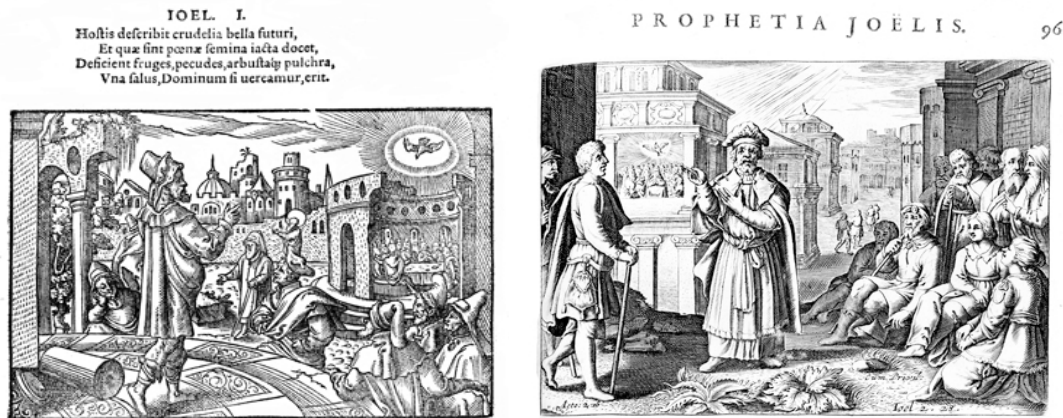


Figure 22: Joel and Pentecost, 1570, in: Haeredes Arnoldi Birckmanni, *Biblia, ad vetvstissima exemplaria*. Figure 23: Joel and Pentecost, 1700, in: *Afbeeldingen der voornaamste historien, soo van het Oude als Nieuwe Testament*.

In these various intertextual depictions, artists have attempted to collapse time in order to bring the prophet Joel into line with the story of Pentecost, highlighting Peter's use of this prophetic text in his sermon found in Acts 2. In doing so, they highlight the rich tradition within Christianity of reading the New Testament in light of the Old. And yet, as resonant as these connections might be for Christians, care is needed in such representations as they are also themselves acts of interpretation, with implications for how the Bible is understood: if not handled carefully, such works of art run the risk of reducing and ignoring the message of the prophet himself, and collapsing the Jewish Scriptures into the Christian story.²⁴

3.5. Visualizing Joel

Despite the fact that we know nothing about the prophet and he is not a character within the book bearing his name, artists have employed a number of strategies in order to depict Joel visually. While many have used iconographic tropes such as the prophet holding a scroll or codex, others have attempted to portray the personality and demeanour of the prophet based on the message of the book. Also common in representations of Joel are textualized depictions that place the prophet within the imagery that is found in the book, along with intertextual portrayals that situate the prophet in conversation with the events of Pentecost as recounted in Acts 2.

²⁴ Claman, *Jewish Images in the Christian Church*.

4. Obadiah

At just 21 verses, Obadiah is the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible. This brief prophetic text is an oracle against Judah's neighbour Edom, outlining its crimes against Judah and the punishment it will incur because of this behaviour.²⁵ As is the case with Joel, we are given very little information about the prophet himself – he is another invisible prophet, absent from the book as a character or actor. Because of this, when attempting to bring Obadiah to life, artists have again relied on a number of strategies.

4.1. Iconographic Tropes in the Depiction of Obadiah



Figure 24: Obadiah, 11th c., Menologion of Basil, Constantinople.

As is the case with Joel, representations of Obadiah often use common iconographic tropes when portraying the prophet, notably those that depict the prophet with a scroll or codex and which associate the prophet with authorship, authority, and revelation. Some works of art show the prophet holding a closed scroll or codex, where the text is not evident or visible. An exceptional example of this is the depiction of Obadiah in the Menologion of Basil, an 11th c. Byzantine il-

luminated manuscript, now held in the Vatican Library. Here the prophet stands in front of a walled city, with gold background, holding a rolled scroll which is partially visible (Fig. 24). An 18th c. statue in Antwerp portrays Obadiah holding an open scroll, on which a text is inscribed which is no longer decipherable (Fig. 25). Obadiah is sometimes placed alongside other prophets, again holding a scroll. An 18th c. Russian icon has Amos and Obadiah next to one another, holding closed scrolls (Fig. 26). Although the prophets look very similar in this image, there is also an element of inversion. Both figures are bearded and hold a scroll in their right hand; and yet, the colours of their garments are reversed (red over green / green over red), and Amos' downward pointing hand is juxtaposed with Obadiah's hand raised in blessing. Likewise, a 1704 painting in the Sankt-Lukas-Kirche in Mühlberg



Figure 25: Alexander van Papenhoven, Obadiah, 1734-47, statue, St Paul's Church, Antwerp, Belgium.

²⁵ See Wolff, Obadiah and Jonah; Raabe, Obadiah; Renkema, Obadiah.

presents Obadiah alongside Jonah and Micah, with each of these prophets holding a codex (Fig. 27).



Figure 26: Amos and Obadiah, 18th c., Russian icon. Figure 27: Propheten Micha, Jonas und Obadja, 1704, fresco, Sankt-Lukas-Kirche in Mühlberg (Drei Gleichen), Germany.



Figure 28: Obadiah, 12th c., Worms Bible, Frankenthal, Germany.

Other portrayals which draw on this iconographic trope visualise the prophet holding a specific text from the book of Obadiah. One such image is found in the 12th c. Worms Bible (Fig. 28). Here the prophet is located in a brightly illuminated initial 'v' (*visio*), holding a scroll which has an abbreviated text from Obadiah 1. A nother example of this is the depiction by Melozzo da Forlì on the vaulted ceiling in the Sacristy of St. Mark Basilica of Santa Casa, Loreto (ca 1477–82). Here Obadiah holds an engraving which quotes part of Obad 7 in Latin, which speaks of those allies which will turn on Edom: 'Your confederates have prevailed against you...' (see Fig. 29). Along with the prophet's pointing finger, the textual engraving seems to reiterate the retribution to come on Judah's

neighbour Edom, a theme which is at the heart of Obadiah's message. A 12th c. fresco from Bergen auf Rügen (which was restored at the turn of the 20th c.) depicts Obadiah holding both a scroll and a book (Fig. 30). While the open codex faces toward the prophet, the scroll faces outward with a quotation from Obad 17, which promises deliverance upon Mount Zion. Unlike da Forlì's depiction, this

fresco chooses to focus on the message of deliverance and salvation found at the end of Obadiah, rather than the theme of retribution which dominates the earlier parts of the book.



Figure 29: Melozzo da Forlì, Obadiah, ca. 1477-82, fresco, Sacristy of St. Mark Basilica of Santa Casa, Loreto, Italy. Figure 30: Obadiah, 12th c. (restored 1896-1903), fresco, Saint Mary church, Bergen (Rügen island), Germany.



An interesting variation on this trope can be seen in an example where the prophet is holding a text which is not a quotation from the book of Obadiah, but points instead to an intertextual resonance. In one early 20th c. Russian icon, Obadiah is holding a scroll which quotes 1 Kgs 18:10 (Fig. 31). This verse is part of larger story concerning the prophet Elijah and a servant of King Ahab named Obadiah. As will be outlined below, the equation of the prophet Obadiah with the character of the same name in 1 Kings was a common interpretation in both Jewish and Christian tradition from antiquity through the Middle Ages. This interpretation would become less common in the modern era; nevertheless, this connection is still recognized in some Orthodox churches, as can be seen in this iconic representation of the prophet holding the text from 1 Kings 18.

Figure 31: Nikolai Sergeyevich Emelyanov, Obadiah, 1912, Russian icon.

4.2. Portraying the Character and Demeanour of Obadiah



Figure 32: James Tissot, Obadiah, c. 1896–1902, water-colour.

As was the case with Joel, some artists attempt to capture Obadiah's personality or demeanour based on the message of the book. An example of this is the work of James Tissot, whose Obadiah is an elderly, bearded man standing in a grove of trees (Fig. 32). Holding a staff and staring straight ahead with a furrowed brow, Tissot's Obadiah wears an expression of concern and worry, perhaps representing the prophet's feelings concerning the fate which has befallen Jerusalem. Tissot's characterisation of Obadiah is strikingly different than his representation of Joel, discussed above. Features such as hair and robe colour, stance, and facial expression all differentiate these prophets. Tissot's use of a staff presents Obadiah in the vein of a shepherd motif, while his Joel is a darker and more ominous figure.

Another example of an attempt to convey the personality and demeanour of the prophet can be seen in John Singer Sargent's portrayal of Obadiah in his 'Frieze of the Prophets', a mural of the Twelve Prophets at the Boston Public Library (Fig. 33). Far from a prophetic voice that exults in castigating its neighbour, Singer Sargent's partially-robed Obadiah seems to be in pain, huddled close to the ground with head bowed. We are not given access as to what motivates this response, whether it is the plight of his fellow people, or the severity of the message he has to deliver. Whatever the case, Singer Sargent clearly focuses in on the humanity and agony of the prophetic figure. The sketches and drafts of this work (now at Harvard Library) reinforce the fact that the artist was intent on depicting this dimension of the prophetic vocation (see Fig. 34).

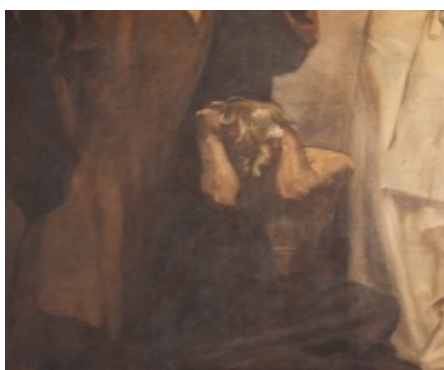


Figure 33: John Singer Sargent, Detail of Prophet Obadiah, 1890-95, oil on canvas, Frieze of the Prophets, West Wall, Zephaniah, Joel, Obadiah, and Hosea, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA, United States. Figure 34: John Singer Sargent, Study for the Prophet Obadiah, 1890-95, charcoal sketch, Harvard Museum, Cambridge, MA, United States.

4.3. Intertextual Resonances and the Prophet Obadiah

One of the more intriguing aspects of the reception history of Obadiah is how readers have understood the book's historical setting and the circumstances to which it might refer. The book itself gives few overt clues as to its setting or origins. From the Reformation onward, the majority of interpreters have situated Obadiah in the exilic or post-exilic periods.²⁶ In this reading, the prophet is speaking out against Edom's complicity in the Babylonian destruction of Judah and Jerusalem which led to the Babylonian exile.

However, for much of history, this was not the dominant reading. Indeed, in both Jewish and Christian tradition, a common interpretation for much of pre-modern history was that this book represents the words of the character named Obadiah found in 1 Kings 18, during the time of the prophet Elijah. A servant of King Ahab, this Obadiah assisted the prophets of YHWH by hiding and feeding them during a time of persecution by Ahab's wife Jezebel:

Ahab had summoned Obadiah, his palace administrator. (Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord. ⁴ While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.) ... ⁷ As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground, and said, "Is it really you, my lord Elijah?" (1 Kgs 18:3-4, 7)

In this reading the prophet and his message would be situated in the 9th c. BCE. This interpretation is widely represented in pre-modern Jewish tradition, including the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Sanhedrin), Josephus (*Ant.* 8:316), and Rashi (Miqr'a'ot Gedalot), as well as in Christian tradition, as seen in Jerome's commentary and the medieval compendium known as the *Glossa Ordinaria*.²⁷

Interestingly, a number of visual representations of Obadiah have also associated the prophet with the steward of Ahab named Obadiah whose story is recounted in 1 Kings, and in particular the feeding of the hidden prophets. We find this association in a number of medieval manuscripts, including the Roda Bible (Fig. 35) and the Winchester Bible (Fig. 36), both dating to the 12th c. CE. In both of these cases, the prophet is depicted as feeding the prophets hidden in a cave, and the illustration accompanies the text of the book of Obadiah.

²⁶ Luther, Lectures on the Minor Prophets I; cf. Anderson, The Reception of Obadiah.

²⁷ An interesting addition to this idea is found in b. Sanh. 39b, which says that Obadiah was an Edomite proselyte, and thus was delivering this difficult message to his own people.



Figure Fig 35: Obadiah feeding prophets, 12th c., Roda Bible (Biblia Sancti Petri Rodensis), Catalonia, Spain. Figure 36: Initial V with Obadiah feeding the prophets, 12th c., Winchester Bible, Winchester, England.

We also find this connection in a number of representations of the prophet Obadiah on Amiens Cathedral. Examples on the cathedral include two portrayals of Obadiah feeding the prophets whom he had hidden from Jezebel (Fig. 37 and 38), and one further image of Obadiah meeting Ahab alongside Elijah (Fig. 39).



Figure 37: Obadiah feeding hidden prophets, 13th c., relief sculpture, southern entrance, west façade, Amiens Cathedral, Amiens, France. Figure 38: Obadiah feeding hidden prophets, 13th c., statue, south transept portal of St. Honoré, Amiens Cathedral, Amiens, France. Figure 39: Obadiah and Elijah before King Ahab, 13th c., relief sculpture, left of southern entrance of west façade, Amiens Cathedral, Amiens, France.

There are, then, several pre-modern representations of Obadiah that equate the prophet with the servant of King Ahab founds in 1 Kings 18, both in manuscripts and in ecclesial statues. As noted above, this was a common tradition in

both early Judaism and Christianity, and it seems to have had a significant influence on the visual reception of the prophet in the pre-modern era.

4.4. Textualised Portrayals of Obadiah

Although the book of Obadiah is short and does not offer much by way of biographical or narrative context, the book is full of vibrant imagery. Artists have drawn on this imagery and other textual elements when attempting to depict the prophet.

The book begins with an introductory clause: 'The vision of Obadiah' (Obad 1). While most commentators suggest that the term 'vision' should be understood as similar to the announcement of a prophet receiving the 'Word of the Lord', a number of medieval visual representations depict the prophet asleep in bed, receiving a divine message in his sleep. This theme can be found in a 13th c. manuscript from Bourges (Fig. 40), and the 15th c. Bible of Jean XXII (Fig. 41).

Elsewhere, illustrations of Obadiah frequently present the prophet as speaking to a mountainous region, attempting to place the prophet within the message of the book and drawing



Figure 40: God appearing in a dream to Obadiah, 13th c., BM - ms. 0007, Bourges, France. Figure 41: The Vision of Obadiah, 15th c., in: The Bible of Jean XXII, Montpellier, France.

ing on the imagery within the text which speaks of high places related to Edom. We find this imagery, among other places, in Obad 3, where we read: 'Your proud heart has deceived you, you that live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is in the heights.' This imagery recurs near the end of the book, where we find reference to 'Mount Esau', which is to be dispossessed as part of the exultation of Mount Zion (v. 19). Depictions which portray the speaking prophet placed in or near a mountainous region can be found in a number of Reformation era and early modern depictions, including Christoph Froschauer's 16th c. portrayal of Obadiah overlooking a city on a hill (Fig. 42), and Johann Christoph's woodcut of Obadiah from the *Biblia ectypa* (Fig. 43). The depiction from Froschauer may be an attempt to portray the prophet speaking to Edom from an even higher elevation, perhaps pointing to the juxtaposition of Mount Zion and Mount Esau found in the book.



Figure 42: Christoph Froschauer, Obadiah overlooking city on a hill, 16th c., woodcut. Figure 43: Der Prophet Obadja, 1695, woodcut, in: Christoph Weigel, *Biblia Ectypa: Bild-nützen auß Heiliger Schriftt Alt- und Neuen Testaments*.

Another textualized element that is common in depictions of Obadiah is the imagery of a bird, drawing on v. 4: 'Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord.' A number of images of Obadiah include a bird in the background, presumably the eagle mentioned in this verse. An example of this is the portrayal of Obadiah in the nave of the basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome, where Obadiah is looking skyward to a bird in flight, while he holds a stone tablet (Fig. 44). Not surprisingly, a number of portrayals of the prophet bring together several of the images described above, such as Johann Melchior Bocksberger's depiction of Obadiah from a 16th c. Luther Bibel. Here the prophet, with hand outstretched, delivers his message to a city at the foothills of a mountainous region, with an eagle soaring above the scene (Fig. 45).

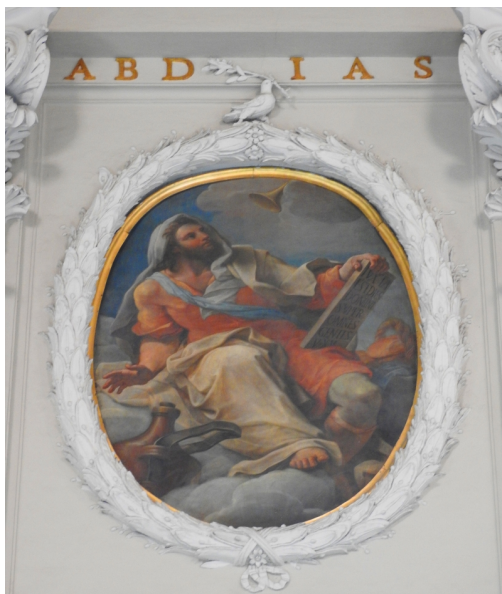


Figure 44: Giuseppe Bartolomeo Chiari, Prophet Obadiah, 1718, nave of the basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome, Italy. Figure 45: Johann Melchior Bocksberger, Obadiah, 16th c., woodcut, in Luther Bibel.

4.5. Visualizing Obadiah

In spite of the book's brevity, artists have found numerous ways of bringing the prophet Obadiah to life, including portrayals of the prophet with a scroll citing his message, as well as attempts to depict the character and demeanour of the prophet. Following interpretive traditions of the day, a common approach in pre-modern representations of the prophet was to equate the prophet with the figure named Obadiah found in 1 Kings 18. Over time this interpretation became less popular, and this is reflected in the visual reception of Obadiah: from the Reformation period onward, artists began to focus on textualized depictions where the prophet is placed within the message of his book, for example speaking to a mountainous region or to an eagle which, symbolizing Edom, is to be brought low.

5. Conclusion

Artists face a number of challenges when attempting to depict the prophetic figures from the Book of the Twelve. The books associated with these minor prophets are relatively brief and written in poetic form. Further, most of these books lack biographical or narrative information on which artists might draw. Indeed, in many of these minor prophets, including Joel and Obadiah, the prophetic figures are absent from the text altogether: while the message may be attributed to them, we are told little about these prophets, and they are not characters or actors in the books bearing their names. Looking at examples drawn primarily from Christian and Western traditions, I have suggested that artists overcome these challenges by employing a number of approaches and strategies: (1) using iconographic tropes, including portrayals of the prophets holding a scroll or codex, often bearing a text from the book associated with the prophet; (2) attempting to depict the character, personality, or demeanour of the prophet based on the book's message; (3) offering 'textualized' portrayals of the prophets, which place the prophetic figures within the imagery of their books, even if they are not themselves present as actors in the text; and (4) utilizing intertextual and interpretive traditions in order to identify the prophets and offer a fuller picture of these figures.

Across a range of forms, media, and time periods, the depictions discussed above make clear that in spite of the lack of biographical and narrative information concerning Joel and Obadiah, artists have employed a number of creative and imaginative strategies in order to visualise these prophets. Indeed, the representations of these 'invisible prophets' are themselves important acts of interpretation and exegesis, and serve as a reminder that these, too, are a vital part of the rich and multivalent reception of these prophets and the books bearing their names.²⁸

²⁸ On this, see O'Kane, *Painting the Text*.

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