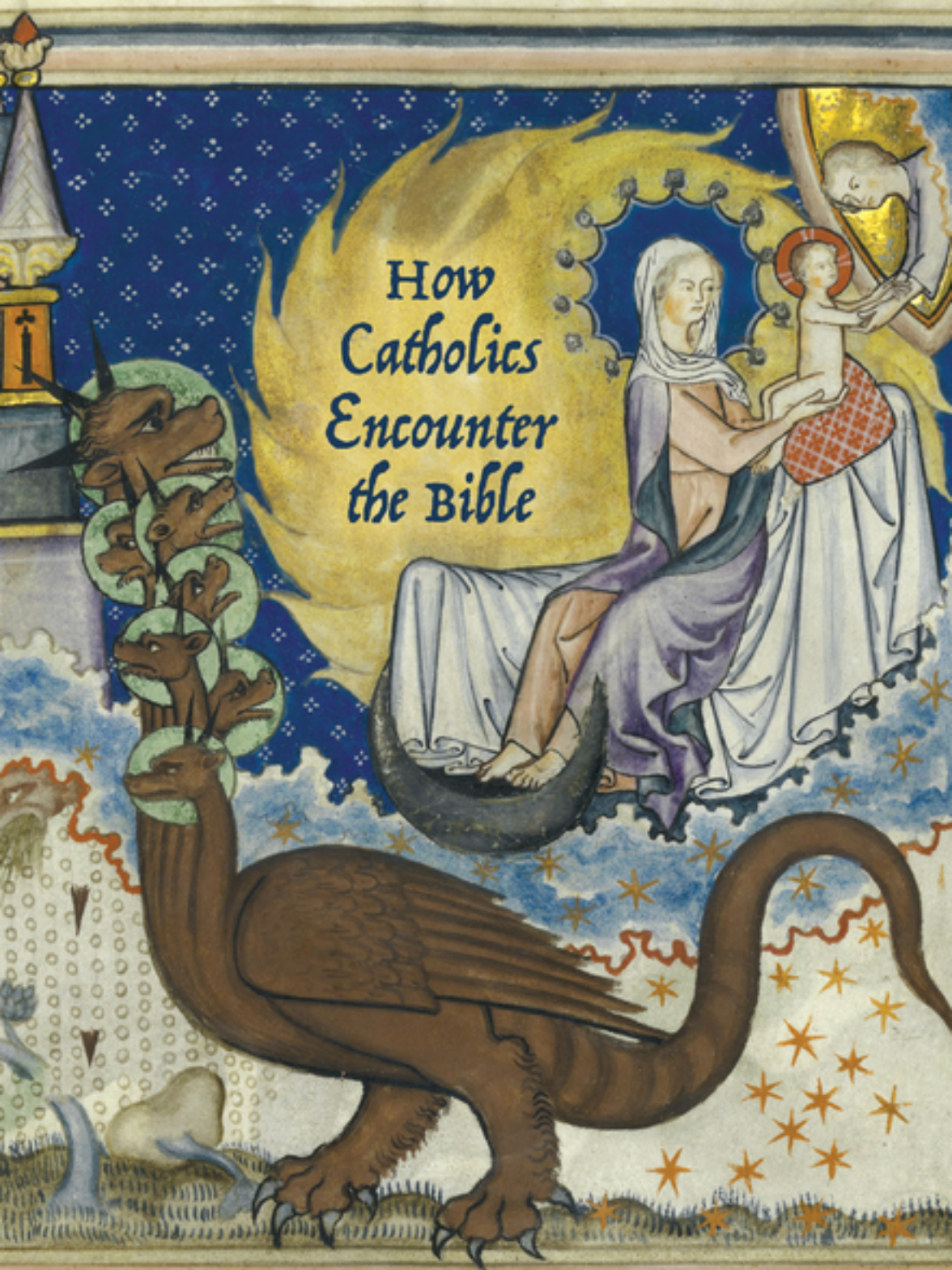


MICHAEL TEPPARD

How  
Catholics  
Encounter  
the Bible



# HOW CATHOLICS ENCOUNTER THE BIBLE







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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Peppard, Michael, author.

Title: How Catholics encounter the Bible / Michael Peppard.

Description: New York, NY, United States of America : Oxford University Press, [2024] |

Includes bibliographical references and index. | Identifiers: LCCN 2024031659 |

ISBN 9780190948696 (cp) | ISBN 9780190948726 (epub) |

ISBN 9780190948733 | ISBN 9780190948719

Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Study and teaching Catholic Church. | Bible—Liturgical use. |

Bible—Reading. | Catholic Church—Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BS587 .P46 2024 | DDC 220.07—dc23/eng/20240801

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024031659>

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190948696.001.0001

Printed by Marquis Book Printing, Canada



*To the theology departments of Fordham and Notre Dame*

*sapientia et doctrina  
vita, dulcedo, spes*



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## THE MISSING BIBLE AT MASS

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IMAGINE YOURSELF WALKING INTO A traditional Catholic church on a Sunday morning, slipping into a pew a few minutes before the Mass begins. You could be anywhere in the world: New York or Manila, Buenos Aires or Dublin. Smoky incense wafts heavenward, shifting colors with the sunbeams flowing through stained glass. A lone candle flickers above the tabernacle where the Eucharist, consecrated bread, is kept. In some churches, the organist intones a distant theme; in others, a guitarist quietly tunes her strings. Saints gaze down from side pedestals. In older churches, a central altar is flanked by two podiums: a smaller one from which lectors will deliver the day's readings, psalms, and announcements, and a larger one from which the presider will proclaim a Gospel reading about Jesus' life. Often the Stations of the Cross, a devotional prayer cycle represented by miniature, wall-mounted relief sculptures, surrounds the congregation. A crucifix hangs above. Those around you genuflect, light candles, settle children, mutter prayers.

But instead of praying, you are here as an observer, curious about Catholic life. And while surveying the interior, this gathering place for adherents of the largest Christian denomination on earth, you can't seem to find the holy book at the heart of Christianity. Where is the Bible in this Catholic church?

Most other kinds of churches that you've visited have Bibles. You search the racks in the pew: there's a hymnal, if the church has a decent budget, but no Bible. The rest of the parishioners don't seem to have brought Bibles with them. You see someone walk up to the smaller podium and arrange

some books for later. Is one of those a Bible? More likely that's a lectionary, which is a collection of biblical excerpts for Mass, or perhaps a music book for the cantor.

Suddenly the opening music pierces the silence, and the procession enters the nave. A young boy might be swinging an incense thurible, a young girl bears a cross, and an elderly woman carries a large ceremonial book aloft. There it is, finally! You note how, with pride of place in the procession, this grand book enters and is set upon the altar—except you'd be wrong about its contents. That ceremonial book is not the Bible but only a very small portion of the Bible's contents, selections from the four Gospels, out of which the presider will read later.

Now the Mass formally begins with the sign of the cross. And there is still no Bible in this church. Nor is there one coming. When the pastor preaches, he won't be reading from one and holding it up as a beacon, like preachers you've seen on TV. No one in the pews filling up around you will pull a Bible from a purse or a bag. No one will unzip a large, worn, note-filled Bible from a leather case, like those you've sometimes seen people carrying into the booth next to you at a nearby restaurant. The Mass will end, the leaders will recess out the back, and the Bible will never have made an appearance—at least not as a printed book, held in hand.

How can this be? Five hundred years after the world's most popular book came off the printing press, how can the world's largest biblical religion not have a Bible in the room? And if it doesn't, then how is the life of this people shaped by the Bible, though it is literally absent? How do those in the pews encounter it and learn to interpret it, when they usually don't have the text in front of them? Or, wait—do those people in the pews interpret it at all? Have things always been this way? Have any Catholics tried to change this situation? In short, what is the relationship between Roman Catholics and the Bible—the Bible that seems to be missing?



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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OVER SEVERAL YEARS OF TALKING about this book with friends and colleagues, I am surely forgetting some people who offered helpful feedback or pushback. But among that cloud of witnesses, I am especially grateful to Kevin Ahern, Alice Kearney Alwin, Sonja Anderson, Harold Attridge, Cavan Concannon, Michal Beth Dinkler, Jim Fisher, David Gelles, Sarit Kattan Gribetz, Felicity Harley-McGowan, Jill Hicks-Keeton, Greg Hillis, Christine Firer Hinze, Patrick Hornbeck, Andrew Jacobs, Lee Jefferson, Robin Jensen, Elizabeth Johnson, Patrick Landers, Michael Lee, Elizabeth Macaulay, Jim Martin, Jim McCartin, John McGreevy, Candida Moss, Brent Nongbri, Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, John Oksanish, Chris Pramuk, Kathryn Reklis, Shelly Russell, Jeanne-Nicole Saint-Laurent, John Seitz, Jennifer Udell, Larry Welborn, Molly Worthen, everyone at the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies, and the theology doctoral students from my course on the Varieties of Biblical Reception, especially Mara Foley, who let me include her great story about their “family Bible.”

At home, where most of this book was written, I am profoundly grateful to Rebecca for always listening and helping me to choose the best examples and eliminate jargon. To the kids, thank you for begrudgingly accepting that I cannot talk to you at each exact moment you want, but that I'll be right there after I finish this paragraph. As for my parents, you'll read about their influence soon enough, when you turn the page to the Introduction.

At Oxford University Press, I thank Steve Wiggins and his team for their vision and patience during the substantial delay caused by pandemic

homeschooling. He also found excellent peer reviewers who improved the project and saved me from errors. Rada Radojicic and Richards Paul attentively managed the production schedule. For research assistance with Vatican II archives, I thank the Special Collections of the Hesburgh Library at the University of Notre Dame. Over the past decade, I have had the honor of workshopping some of the ideas in this book as an annual teacher in Sacred Heart University's Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Thanks there to Ami Neville, Fr. Tony Ciorra, David Coppola, and Michael Higgins. Some sections of the book draw from my previous publications (noted where they occur), and I acknowledge *Commonweal*, Fortress Press, and *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* for first publishing those ideas.

By the time you hold this book in your hands, I will have taught for fifteen years as a professor in the theology department of Fordham University, the Jesuit University of New York. My exceptional colleagues and our students have made this a vibrant and fulfilling place to work, while Sue, Joyce, Anne-Marie, and Eric kept the place running smoothly and in good order. The first foundation of my academic career was laid during my undergraduate years at the University of Notre Dame. After dabbling in chemical engineering and music, I eventually majored in philosophy and theology. In gratitude for twenty years of learning within these two intellectual centers for theology and religious studies, I dedicate this book to the theology departments of Fordham and Notre Dame. As their university mottoes promise, they have given me "wisdom and learning" and "life, sweetness, and hope."

*September 30, 2023*

*Feast of St. Jerome, patron saint of biblical studies*

# Introduction

## Encountering the Catholic Bible

MY CHILDHOOD SEEMED TO BE half-full of the Bible.

My mother, an Evangelical Christian, would devour daily devotional readings in her Study Bible with the leather-zipped case. She brought it to church on Sunday, where the pastor held a Bible while preaching straight out of it and the people took notes in theirs. She brought it also to midweek Bible study, which had Bible workbooks, too, and leadership by lay experts on the Bible. Her shelves held Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, and Bible quiz games. Summer offered us Vacation Bible School or Bible camps in the mountains. And when, as a teenager, I came home late and tried to sneak in the house, my mom would still be awake on the couch, Bible open in her lap. “Sit and read with me,” she’d say, and sometimes I’d have to talk with her about whatever part of the Bible she had been studying. Now in her very old age, mind blurred by dementia, she still reads her Bible devotions. Bible this, Bible that, Bible every which way, every day.

As for my father, I have no memory of him ever once reading the Bible. I do believe he owned one late in life, but I never saw him touch it. Yet my Catholic father was at least as religious as my mother, and in some ways more so. His Bible was missing as a text, but it was present in other ways. His many years of Catholic schooling had been full of tales from the Bible. For periods of his life he went to daily Mass, where he heard portions of the Bible proclaimed and sung and preached upon. His ethical vision was deeply formed by the Bible, a balance of mercy and justice animated by



ancient narratives. After a bad cancer diagnosis, he led a parish cancer prayer group in Novenas, prayer cycles which used the rosary to meditate on biblical events in the lives of Jesus and Mary. But even after his passing, the Bible on his bookshelf appeared unread. “Take me to Mass,” he’d say, when he had become too feeble to drive himself. But even when facing the end, he never asked me to read to him from the Bible.

During my adolescence, I was trying to figure out my own religious identity amid these two parental influences. (Very different spiritualities, but married almost fifty years, I should add.) Once I asked my dad why he didn’t ever read the Bible—and how did he know what was in it, when he didn’t read it? “I know the stories,” he said. He didn’t say this defensively. To my surprise, he didn’t think my childhood was half-*empty* of the Bible. And he didn’t feel the need to prove himself to me, though he had correctly assumed that I was evaluating him in comparison to his wife. He knew the stories, and for him, that was enough. The stories, the Mass, the prayer . . . for him, that *was* the Bible.

It turns out that my childhood was not half-empty of the Bible, but completely full—and deeper than I had imagined.

### Story, Imagination, Sacrament

The pages that follow explore the paradoxical role of the Catholic Bible—a book central to Catholic tradition, but not in the form of a book. Catholics may not be a “People of the Book,” but they are a people of the *Story*. Every churchgoing Catholic can tell the basic story of the Passion narrative, the final days of Jesus’ life, even if having never held a printed Bible. Or when Mexican Catholics walk from house to house in the days leading up to Christmas, celebrating *Las Posadas*, they sing songs and re-enact stories of Mary and Joseph’s search for lodging, but a biblical text is unnecessary. They walk and sing the story, instead of reading it. When Catholics around the world pray the rosary or the Stations of the Cross, with various cycles of meditations on the characteristics of Jesus and Mary, they call to mind many biblical stories but do not read them from a book. You can’t read when your eyes are closed in prayer. The main chapters of this book aim to illustrate ways such as these in which biblical stories infuse Catholic life, even though the textual correspondences are not always made explicit.

Catholics are also a people of the *Imagination*. Catholic art, music, and literature brim forth with biblical narrative and imagery—but often not in ways that correspond strictly to the biblical text itself. Consider, for

example, what is arguably the most famous example of Catholic biblical art in the world: the *Pietà* of Michelangelo (Figure I.1). This masterwork of sculpted marble is viewed currently by approximately ten million visitors per year, situated as it is in the nave of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. This means that, over time, perhaps one *billion* people have beheld its figures in person, not counting the billions who have seen a photograph of it. Countless people have reflected on the grief of mother Mary, as she held the lifeless body of her son Jesus. The viewer enters the world of the story of the Passion, marveling at the serenity on her face, as she nestles her adult child in her lap, like an infant.



FIGURE I.1 Michelangelo, *Pietà*, 1498–99. St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. Photograph by Stanislav Traykov. Wikimedia Commons.

Upon further reflection, the viewer notices something wrong with this picture. The ages of the figures are not realistic: her face is that of a *young* woman, of the age at which she gave birth to Jesus, not the age of his death. Thus the artwork causes time to flicker between two moments, between his birth and his death, between the young woman whose soul would one day be pierced (Luke 2:35) by the tragic fate of the infant in her arms and the older man whose body was pierced on the cross (John 19:34). The renowned sculpture captures the dual biblical mystery of Jesus' Incarnation (God become human) and Passion (his suffering and death). The *Pietà* is, in the words of Andrew Greeley's *The Catholic Imagination*, one of the "four New Testament scenes" that "have been seized on by the Catholic imagination."<sup>1</sup>

Exquisite art, to be sure. Catholic art, undeniably. But is it *biblical* art? Is it even a "New Testament scene?"

Those who read their Bibles carefully know that this scene—Mary holding Jesus' body after the Crucifixion—never happens in the text. This most famous piece of *biblical art* is *literally not in the Bible*. The texts of all four Gospels report Joseph of Arimathea as the one who requests Jesus' body and inters it. To find the *Pietà* in the Bible, a Catholic has to read between the lines of the text, has to allow a process of imagination to unfurl the folds of the story. The text does describe Jesus' mother there at the cross (John 19:25). So *of course* she held his body—what mother wouldn't? The vignettes and analyses of this book show how the Catholic relationship with the Bible has been shaped by this kind of imagination, how devotional meditations on suffering and grace draw on such biblical narratives, while going beyond strict correspondence to the text. The Catholic approach to the Bible also focuses in a dramatic fashion, arguably more so than any other Christian tradition, on the two figures of the *Pietà*: Jesus and Mary. Here they are together, in between the lines of the text: both suffering, both full of grace.

A third mode of Catholic engagement with the Bible is that which comes through *Sacrament*, especially through the liturgical settings of scriptures in the context of Sunday Mass and life-cycle events. The primacy of the liturgical setting of the Bible for Catholics is perfectly encapsulated by a line from John Dominic Crossan's memoir, *A Long Way from Tipperary*. A former Irish monk who became a leading American biblical scholar, Crossan reflected on his earliest exposure to the Bible:

When I first heard the words *Epistle* and *Gospel* they were not parts of a book, but sides of an altar. I begin here not to prove a point, but to

establish a setting. I did not know them as parts of the New Testament or the Bible, cannot even remember those latter terms coming up, and never saw either of them as a book until long after I entered the seminary. What I knew, knew very well, knew eventually by heart were the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, the ecclesiastical missal, and the monastic breviary. Biblical story came to me first as prayer in worship, and nobody spent any time insisting on its factuality, its inerrancy, or its literal truth . . . nobody ever insisted that all was literal or all was metaphorical, but only that all was prayer.<sup>2</sup>

For Crossan, as for almost all Catholics of his generation and most still today, neither “Epistle” nor “Gospel” primarily referred to certain pages of a Bible that he held in his hand. The book he held as that young altar boy was the missal book, which he faithfully transferred between sides of the altar. My own father’s *Concise Catholic Dictionary*—published in 1944, labeled with his name and “Grade 8” inside the front cover—defines “Epistle” not as part of the Bible but as “the lesson from Scripture read during the Mass between the collects and the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup> Thus “Epistle” and “Gospel” conjured liturgical settings in a church building, oral proclamations during the Mass, and interpretations by clergy—not parts of a book, but sides of an altar.

### Sides of an Altar

This book extends Crossan’s generative use of “sides of an altar” to express three pervasive facts about the Catholic relationship to the Bible. The first meaning is the same as Crossan’s own intention: for Catholics, the Bible is almost always and everywhere *framed by prayer and the liturgy*, especially the hearing of excerpts during worship. As this book’s Preface suggests, the Catholic Bible is, in one physical sense, missing at Sunday Mass. For the vast majority of Catholics, the Bible is incorporated into their prayer, but they are not reading it as a book. Some current studies of Catholic biblical interpretation reject this as merely a stereotype, searching for faint traces of Catholic Bible reading that resemble what is practiced widely by Protestants. Some scholars protest that Catholic Bible reading has expanded greatly since the Second Vatican Council (“Vatican II,” 1962–65) and that Catholic modes of interpretation have become more mainstream among Christian traditions.<sup>4</sup> There is a grain of truth to these claims, but the bigger picture does not show a world of Catholics poring over well-worn pages of Deuteronomy or Galatians in their personal Bibles.

Sociological studies report that the frequency of Bible reading among Catholics has not changed much since prior to Vatican II. One major study of Bible-reading habits in England found no change at all in Catholic Bible reading between two major surveys in 1954 and 2005. In both surveys, done fifty years apart, exactly 4% of Catholics self-reported reading the Bible at least once per week.<sup>5</sup> Considering the fact that survey respondents tend to overestimate their virtuous behaviors, that 4% could be interpreted as the maximum percentage of Catholics reading the Bible weekly in England. The number is higher in areas where Catholics are strongly influenced by Evangelicals and Pentecostals in their midst, as in the Americas, but it still remains much lower than all other Protestant groups.<sup>6</sup>

The frequency is so low, in fact, that sociologists who examine the Catholic Church rarely even study it. Over the past fifty years, the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University has produced nearly two thousand research documents about Catholics, but according to their archive, only one solitary study relates to the Bible.<sup>7</sup> It found that, even among the small percentage of parishioners who were “likely Bible study participants,” only 30% of that subsection self-reported reading the Bible at least once a week. Let me restate that scientific finding: even among those *few* Catholics who are *most likely* to participate in a Bible study group, regular Bible reading is rare. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the typical survey administered by CARA about Catholic parish life contains only one question (out of one hundred) that even mentions the Bible.<sup>8</sup> This is not a criticism of the excellent work that CARA does, but rather a way of demonstrating the lack of sociological interest in Catholic Bible reading and biblical interpretation. By contrast, the Barna Group, a sociological research organization which arose from and addresses issues pertinent to American Evangelicalism, has issued dozens of recent studies relating to the Bible, including its annual “State of the Bible” reports.<sup>9</sup> It issues an *annual* report on a question that sociologists of Catholicism barely ask.

Despite a modest rise in enthusiasm for private Bible reading since Vatican II in some locales, the fact remains that most Catholics encounter the Bible only through the orally delivered proclamations from the Sunday lectionary, events of the life cycle, prayer, and the arts. It may be surprising, then, that Catholics are strong in their biblical beliefs, professing above-average strength of conviction about, for example, the traditional narrative of the Nativity and the physicality of the Resurrection. “Given that

Catholics do not perform especially well in terms of Bible ownership or Bible reading,” remarked one sociological study, “their knowledge” of the Bible “is relatively sound.”<sup>10</sup> To understand how Catholics gained this sound knowledge of the Bible’s contents means first to understand how biblical stories and imagination are present in Catholic worship, prayer, and the arts.

A second important fact about the “sides of the altar” is that the left and right sides of the Catholic altar are unequal. Many traditional forms of Catholic church architecture have two pulpits: one for the Gospel reading, and one for all other readings, as described in Crossan’s memoir. Everything about Catholic liturgical structure and practice shows that the Gospels—the four narratives of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection—are more important than the rest of the biblical texts. The *emphasis on the Gospels* is established in the structure of the liturgical year, supported by the cycle of readings in the lectionary, and enacted in the procession of the Gospels and their blessing with incense. For those churches that still have two pulpits, the distinction is literally set in architectural stone. The narratives of the Gospels simply dominate Catholic interpretation. Therefore, when a Catholic doesn’t read the Bible but says, “I know the stories,” it is almost always the Gospel stories that are meant. That focus is by design, as the Second Vatican Council encouraged instruction in “the divine books, especially the New Testament, and above all the Gospels,” signaling to all Catholics the hierarchy of biblical witness.<sup>11</sup> The opening chapters of this book will thus treat the history and hermeneutics of the lectionary, with special attention on the Gospels and the relationship between the two testaments in Catholic interpretation. The centrality of the Gospels will be seen through every subsequent chapter of this book, every mode of encounter.

An altar doesn’t just have a left and a right side; it also has a front and a back. A third meaning thus concerns the *divide between clergy and laity* in Catholic biblical interpretation, between official interpreters who usually stand behind the altar and unofficial interpreters who kneel in front of it. With almost no public, official biblical interpretation done by lay Catholics, the final chapters of this book will ask: How do lay Catholics learn to interpret the Bible, and for what ends? What shapes their methods of interpretation? On the other side, how are official Catholic doctrines encouraging clergy to interpret the Bible and exhort their congregations? And what about professional biblical scholars, who are sometimes clergy



and sometimes laypeople? What is their role? In many cases, lay Catholics have different interpretations than their ordained clergy do. Historically speaking, the divide between the front and back sides of the altar has been as influential as that between the Gospel side and the other side.

Catholic biblical knowledge and belief are usually mediated through diverse means beyond the act of reading. The book thus uses story, imagination, and sacrament as modes in which to think about the Catholic use and interpretation of the Bible, while it builds on the “sides of an altar” metaphor to develop our understanding of key relationships between the Catholic Bible and the Catholics in the pews and the streets. While the book will eventually describe and explain Catholic methods of reading and scholarship, the majority of the chapters will illuminate how Catholic prayers, narratives, rituals, and artistic traditions are infused with biblical themes. That is to say, the Catholic Bible exists primarily in so far as it is proclaimed, prayed, embodied, and re-imagined.

### **Approach, Author, and Audience**

This book arises from the conviction that the Catholic Bible is not bound with the leather covers of a printed book, but with the liturgical binding of the sign of the cross, the wrought-metal framing of a stained-glass window, or the lyrical structures of a God-haunted poet. This study of Catholic biblical interpretation thus deemphasizes the act of private, individual reading and highlights authentically and uniquely Catholic approaches to the Bible—how biblical cultures are encountered through Catholic liturgy, ritual, art, music, literature, and ethics. How is the Bible encountered through the Holy Week liturgies? In the biblical art of Catholic Europe? During the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe? Through the decades of the rosary? Even in a Flannery O'Connor short story or a Bruce Springsteen ballad? The book's chapters are arranged according to their frequency in Catholic lived experience. Almost all Catholics participate in the biblical encounters of the early chapters; relatively few participate in those of the last chapter. In the end, the reader will see how the Bible thrives among Catholics as a proclaimed and incarnate Word, even if its printed text seems often to be missing.

For me personally—as a professional biblical scholar, historian of Christianity, and practicing Catholic who frequently visits Jewish synagogues and churches of Protestants and Eastern Orthodox Christians—this project emerges from decades of reflection on different

biblical cultures. Back when I was that questioning adolescent and finally got my driver's license, my parents let me choose which church I would attend. They meant for me to choose between *their* two churches, but I interpreted the license differently and instead chose to explore the rest of the churches of Denver, Colorado. (In hindsight, I was destined to become a religion professor.) Around south Denver, I heard sermons from Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Mormons, Unitarians, and not a few megachurch pastors. Later, I explored further north in the city and heard from Ethiopian Orthodox, Latino Catholics, and members of the Denver Rescue Mission. Though my own past will not be emphasized in the book, my experience with different forms of biblical religion will inform every page. Now middle-aged, I have been to church in almost all fifty of the United States and at least ten other countries. And my home of New York hosts a world of diversity in one catchment area. I have been a fieldwork researcher in urban church sociology, an archival researcher in university libraries, and an officially vetted biblical translator for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. I have heard approximately 2,500 sermons in my life, from grand cathedrals to soup kitchens to storefronts, spanning the dizzying swirl of Christian diversity.

I recount this not so much to tout my *bona fides* as to tell you where I'm coming from, in an academic field (religious studies) where readers are often suspicious of authorial intentions. The opening lines of this Introduction do sound like a memoir, and there will be anecdotes drawn from my personal and professional experience in the chapters that follow. I write in the first person with some trepidation, and I expect to be criticized by some in the scholarly community for that choice. But in the end, after consulting with trusted colleagues, I have decided the pros of some self-disclosure outweigh the cons (and I beg the reader's pardon if my personal examples are off-putting). My intended stance toward the material in this book resembles that of my university classroom: critical but not cynical, attempting to represent consensus views honestly and capture the spirit which animates a tradition. My analytical methods are shaped by a blend of secular training, theological frameworks, and engagement with Christians in pews and pulpits. Along with deductive argumentation, my classroom attends to storytelling and aesthetics.

An author can never be sure of a book's audience, but I hope this book will stimulate discussion in classrooms, parish discussion groups, and perhaps even seminaries. My scholarly colleagues will engage the book in



different ways, depending on their fields of specialization. No doubt my section on Dante will not satisfy scholars with three books on Dante, and the section on the history of the Catholic lectionary will not do much for those who have written their dissertations on the subject. For such scholarly readers, feel free to bounce around the text *ad libitum* (as if I could stop you). Aiming for an accessible reading experience for non-specialists, I have limited the footnotes to about 10% of the book's word count, with apologies to so many unmentioned scholarly giants on whose shoulders we stand.

I imagine the book will have an impact on different kinds of Christian readers in different ways. Catholics sometimes suffer from embarrassment about their lack of biblical literacy and absence of zeal for reading the Bible, even when they are otherwise deeply connected to their churches. Perhaps this book can demonstrate how they are indeed people of the Bible—that it's not just "a Protestant book"—even if Catholics are not a "People of the Book" in the ways their neighbors expect. For Protestants, this unveiling of how the Bible infuses the Catholic tradition might open up new avenues for exploring traditional biblical cultures, especially those that rely on sacramentality and imagination to carry forward the arc of biblical stories. For Eastern Orthodox Christians and for Jewish readers, many of the modes of Catholic engagement with the Bible may sound familiar, and I eagerly anticipate comparisons those readers might make. For readers unaffiliated with Christianity, know that I have tried my best here to portray the Catholic relationship to the Bible as it really is in daily life. This book uses neither the rose-colored lenses of a pious Catholic nor the blinders of a committed skeptic. Readers of all backgrounds will undoubtedly inform me of my mistakes—omissions, errors, caricatures—for which I will be grateful.

I have attempted to offer a curated highlights tour of the main ways that Catholics engage with the Bible, and every highlights tour is primarily an invitation to further exploration. With a topic as vast as this book's title—the Bible being the most influential book in human history and the Catholic Church being perhaps the largest human organization in history—choices of what to include and exclude were extremely difficult. I speak freely throughout the book about "Catholics" in ways that I know elide differences among chronological, regional, and ethnic varieties of a truly global phenomenon. But there is value in distinct genres of study; we need big-picture syntheses of traditions to stand on our bookshelves

alongside microhistories of particular times, places, and people. When faced with each decision of what to present and what to leave on the cutting-room floor, I have tried to keep in mind my most likely readers in North America. Thus examples of authors, artists, and church life are drawn primarily from Catholic cultures of European and Latin American influence, as these have the largest presence in North America. I have not engaged much with Catholic biblical traditions in Southeast Asia (especially the Philippines and Vietnam) or Africa (especially the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Uganda), though I acknowledge the growing and distinct populations of these Catholic communities and immigrants from these countries to North America.<sup>12</sup> For further reading, this book would be supplemented well with a recent global history of Catholicism and case studies of regional Catholic practices.<sup>13</sup>

### **Overview: Contexts of Catholic Biblical Encounter and Interpretation**

“Nobody ever insisted that all was literal or all was metaphorical, but only that all was prayer.” That memory of Crossan’s first biblical encounter remains true for the majority of Catholics, and thus the first four chapters of this book emphasize worship and prayer. Chapters 1 and 2 analyze the Bible as mediated by the Mass, especially the Sunday Mass. Substantial space will be given to the cycle of the liturgical year and the accompanying lectionary of readings, showing how the Gospel narratives of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection undergird the Catholic liturgical design. The Hebrew Scriptures of the Christian Old Testament are often interpreted only as predictions of later revelations, though the Psalms are sometimes allowed to speak for themselves in Catholic biblical proclamation. Detailed analysis of the patterns of relationship in the Sunday Lectionary pairings of Old Testament and Gospel demonstrate that the current Catholic approach to the Bible, while an improvement over some previous eras, remains underdeveloped in contrast to other Christian communities and even to the Catholic Church’s own official theological principles about the Old Testament. Particular attention will be given to the treatment of biblical women and the presentation of Jews and Judaism in the lectionaries for Mass.

Catholics also encounter the Bible through their prayer lives outside of Sunday Mass. Chapter 3 considers events of the life cycle, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Again, the Gospels take center stage, but there are surprising appearances from obscure parts of the Catholic biblical

canon, along with central roles played by biblically inspired poetry and song. Chapter 4 covers common devotional prayers, such as the rosary, the Stations of the Cross, and the prayers of the Divine Office (also called the Liturgy of the Hours). The rosary has been the most popular devotional practice, which draws Catholics into meditative visualization on biblical scenes, though these are interlaced with non-biblical scenes, too, especially those about the Virgin Mary. Prominent pilgrimages and festivals, such as *Las Posadas* and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe for Latin American Catholic communities, show how rich biblical cultures are embodied in narratives of Marian devotion and national identity.

The biblical visualizations of popular Catholic devotional prayers offer a segue to three chapters on the arts and imagination. A curation of images and literature highlights the specifically biblical themes that animate the Catholic imagination—vignettes that portray the divine presence immanent in creation, evoke power and its subversion, proclaim a divine calling to service, or show suffering and grace as two sides of the same coin. These chapters bring forth biblical examples that have energized Catholic artists, such as the tales of Genesis, the cries of the Psalms, and the adventure of Jonah; the birth of Jesus, other stories of Mary, and the Passion narrative; the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, the parables of Jesus, and the enigmatic “woman clothed with the sun.” These stories infuse not only Catholic liturgy and prayer, but also its art, music, and literature.

Chapters 5 and 6 first trace the origins of Catholic biblical art from the late Roman Empire, where artisans’ choices for sarcophagi, catacombs, and eventually grand mosaics established an artistic biblical canon. That cluster of biblical episodes initially focused on the power of salvation by God but, after the pivotal conversion of the emperor Constantine, gradually shifted toward the power of governance under God. Thus new biblical images rose to the fore, as David’s regal dynasty of old legitimated Christian rule. The kings of Judah and Israel became not only heralds of a coming Messiah but also divinely scripted patterns of glorious earthly monarchy. Glorious indeed, but the Catholic reception of the story also emphasized the suffering of the ruler, as the Passion narrative moved to center stage. The Bible of medieval Catholic art dwells on the paradox of Jesus: the universal ruler from birth who becomes the model of humble, pious pain. From the three “kings” to the “crown” of thorns, from a near-absent cross to a grisly, ever-present crucifix, from a pious Virgin Mary to a forlorn Mary Magdalene: the centuries of medieval Catholic

imagination largely created the dominant motifs of biblical visualization for later eras of Catholicism. Through it all, the reflexive relationship between the textual and artistic receptions of the Catholic Bible can be demonstrated, whether through glass, sculpture, painting, pilgrimage artifacts, or drama.

Chapter 7 returns to worlds of text, while continuing to dwell in the Catholic imagination. Certain Catholic fiction writers, imbued with biblical stories as a native second language, have created poignant biblical encounters for their readers (whether Catholic or not). The expansive cosmic drama of Dante remixed biblical characters in ways that influenced centuries of European theology and also, across the ocean, the prophetic parables of Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor in turn shaped the songwriting of Bruce Springsteen and the films of Martin Scorsese. Even popular superheroes on television have proven to be unlikely vectors for the Catholic biblical tradition, as the stories are re-interpreted and passed on through embodiment, performance, and re-imagination.

The final chapter covers what some readers of this book might have assumed the entire book is about. When Catholics do actually sit down to *read* the text of the Bible, how do they proceed and how do they interpret? Contexts of prayer still remain important, whether for Latin American “base communities” that study the Bible together or an individual listening to a chart-topping Catholic podcast about the Bible. Catholics have sometimes sought guidance from Bible reading to think through doctrinal controversies or illuminate ethical gray areas. As for scholarly approaches to the Bible, Catholics had long been transmitters and translators of biblical manuscripts but had been slow to adopt modern critical readings. The late twentieth century finally saw significant growth in this area, following papal approval of the modern discipline of “biblical studies.” But the Catholic Church continues to “think in centuries,” as the saying goes, and so it remains to be seen how much fruit the seeds of academic scholarship will bear in Catholic pulpits and pews.

If we’re looking for small seeds that yield a huge harvest, the book concludes by reflecting on a tiny biblical story with an outsized influence in Catholicism: the Annunciation to Mary. The many manifestations of the Annunciation, which shine through all eight chapters of the book, show how Jesus and Mary remain united at the center of the Catholic biblical tradition. When combined with the *Pietà* of this book’s Introduction, these two scenes encompass the biblical interpretation enacted by story,

imagination, sacrament—and, yes, occasionally by reading—during each church year and throughout a Catholic life.

### What's in the Catholic Bible?

The word “Bible” would seem to connote stability and certitude, but in fact the content and structure of “the Bible” have varied over time and still do today. There are many excellent introductory resources to the Bible as a canon of historical and literary texts, as an artistic object, as a cultural product, and as sacred scripture.<sup>14</sup> What follows here is the briefest of summaries to orient readers unfamiliar with the basic characteristics of the Bible for Jews and Christians.

The Jewish biblical canon has its own particular history, focused concentrically on the Torah. These first five books of the Jewish Bible depict: the creation of the world; the origin of the tribes and customs of the Israelites from the founding figures Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel and Leah; their liberation from slavery in Egypt, led by Moses; their wanderings, their laws, and their covenants with God; and their ultimate settlement in “the promised land.” Later texts collected as the Prophets (*Nevi'im*) exhort the people toward greater holiness and justice, and the collected Writings (*Ketuvim*) continue their history through narratives and psalms centered on figures like David and Solomon, the foundational kings of Israel, along with Ruth and Esther. These texts were written in Hebrew with some portions in Aramaic, another Semitic language.

But already several hundred years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, after the conquests of Alexander the Great (fourth century BCE), the Greek language had spread throughout the whole Mediterranean region. Enough Jews had begun to speak Greek as their first language that the ancient Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek. These collected Greek texts, which translated the Hebrew ones and added other Jewish writings to them, came eventually to be called the Septuagint (from the Latin word for “seventy,” which was the legendary number of people who did the translating). Thus the Jewish scriptures were handed down in multiple versions, in different languages. Jews from late antiquity through the present generally settled on an authoritative version of the Hebrew texts, usually called the Masoretic Text, though some ancient Jews—including some of those who became Christians—relied on Greek versions. Jews today generally agree on the contents of their biblical canon and use a combination of Hebrew and modern vernacular translations.

The formation of the Christian biblical canon (or rather, canons) is an even more complicated story.<sup>15</sup> For the first Christians—those followers of Jesus of Nazareth who came to believe in him as the promised “anointed one” (the Messiah, the Christ) of Israel; who proclaimed that through his death and Resurrection God made a new covenant, a new offer of salvation, to all the world; and who formed new interethnic communities of holiness to anticipate that day of salvation—for these first Christians, the sacred scriptures were the same as for Jews of their time. Even though the newly emerging Christianity (a word not yet coined) had included non-Jews very quickly as it spread outward from Judea and Galilee, the Gentiles who joined early Christian communities were taught to consider the revealed writings of God to Israel—the emerging Jewish Bible—as authoritative.

A few generations after the birth of Jesus, the first glimmers of a Christian canon, a new set of sacred texts in addition to the ancient scriptures of Israel, began to shine along two main pathways. How and why did this happen? First, the rapid and broad spread of Christianity, especially as led by a charismatic figure named Paul, who founded small house-churches (*ekklesiai*, literally “assemblies”) in the cities and towns of the Roman Empire, necessitated letter-writing correspondence between him and these communities. They had questions for him about what he had taught and what he hadn’t thought to teach. Can we marry outside of our group? Can we eat meat sold in the marketplace, if we think the animal had been partially sacrificed with prayers to a Greek god? Where did my grandmother go when she died? Paul’s letters in response dealt with matters of faith, ethics, prayer, ritual, and community leadership, and they gained authoritative status both within their respective assemblies and more broadly. One pathway toward a Christian canon was thus marked by occasional letters (epistles) from authoritative leaders, the contents of which were considered important enough to share beyond their initial recipients. Of the texts that eventually comprised the “New Testament” portion of the Christian Bible, twenty-three of the twenty-seven are either written in the genre of a letter or contain quotations from letters (the books of Acts and Revelation).

Another major part of early Christian evangelism was the telling of stories about Jesus of Nazareth: his wondrous beginnings, his powerful healings and miracles, his profound teachings, his tragic end, and his glorious Resurrection. The second main pathway toward a Christian canon was the writing, reading, and dissemination of these narratives, a genre



that came to be called “good news” in Greek and later “gospel” in English. (The Greek word for “good news,” *euaggelion*, is also the origin of the English words “evangelism,” “evangelical,” etc.) These narrative “Gospels” circulated orally from the beginning but emerged as written documents only late in the first century CE; they recount *events that occurred prior* to the letter-writing by Paul and others but were generally *written later* than the letters were. The New Testament canon eventually included four such Gospels—attributed to authors Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—but others circulated in antiquity, and some of them were quite popular, too. Further analyses of the when and why of canon formation can be found elsewhere, but suffice it here to say that a core of four Gospels plus letters attributed to Jesus’ followers Peter and Paul had mostly solidified by about two hundred years after Jesus.

The core continued to stabilize, but precise boundaries of the Christian canon remained fuzzy. In addition to the Gospels and the Epistles, texts in two other genres were added. The Acts of the Apostles, authored by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, is the oldest history of the early church after Jesus’ departure. The book of Revelation is an apocalyptic allegory written as an apostle’s vision granted by an angelic tour guide. Besides these canonical texts, there were other popular gospels attributed to important disciples of Jesus (such as Mary and Thomas), other letters attributed, and other revelations written down and disseminated. Some texts were widely read and yet not always included in early collections or lists, such as beloved stories of martyrs (e.g., Thecla, Perpetua, and Felicity), or Jesus’ post-Resurrection appearances to his disciples (e.g., the *Acts of Peter*, the *Gospel of Mary*), or well-known tales about the Virgin Mary (e.g., the *Protevangelium of James*), or polemical interpretations of difficult scriptures (e.g., the *Epistle of Barnabas*). An outlier such as the book of Revelation was shrouded in mysterious origins and coded meanings; and many eastern Christian churches were skeptical of its authority for centuries. In those early centuries, as still today, there were stories and texts from just outside the borders of the canon that were much better known than some from within the final boundaries.

The process toward the eventual twenty-seven books of the New Testament was thus paradoxical: relatively rapid and decisive with respect to some core Gospels and Epistles, while relatively drawn-out and haphazard with respect to the canonical boundaries. The first time that the

exact twenty-seven books of the New Testament were listed as we have them today was not until the year 367 CE, and even then the process was not really over. For example, the major codices (large-format books, which had come to replace scrolls) of the New Testament from the fourth and fifth centuries do not share exactly the same contents or order of texts, even though the core is stable. In any case, since private book ownership and reading were so rare in the premodern world, one could plausibly argue that Christian biblical canons were not really “closed” until the sixteenth century, after the printing press changed the world.

This brings us finally to the “Catholic Bible,” a term which gains its primary meaning after the printing press and subsequent Protestant Reformation established a Protestant Bible. In short, for over a thousand years leading up to the Reformation, the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions had been using basically the same New Testament and, as their “Old Testament,” either the Greek Septuagint or the Latin “Vulgate” (an ancient translation of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures into Latin) for biblical proclamation and interpretation. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther and other reformers began to be imbued with the spirit of their age, the “return to the sources” (*ad fontes*) ethos of Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus, who had published an updated translation of the New Testament. In following their righteous zeal to recover ancient forms of Christian texts in Hebrew and Greek, some humanists and reformers developed the idea that Christians should only use the Hebrew texts of ancient Jewish scripture—the same texts that Jews had come to consider *their* Bible—as the canon of the Christian Old Testament. The other texts of ancient Judaism that had been handed down in the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate were thus expunged by the reformers, including some texts that had significant influence on Christian theology and tradition (e.g., the final chapters of Daniel, the Wisdom of Solomon, or the books of the Maccabees). The Protestant Bible was then effectively canonized by wide dissemination of individual copies of translations into German and English and other vernacular languages, while Catholics and Eastern Orthodox retained their traditional practices, rooted in the Septuagint and the Vulgate. Thus emerged the different Christian biblical canons that we know today: a New Testament shared by all Christians and a Christian Old Testament that depends on how many of the ancient Jewish scriptures certain Christian denominations regard as authoritative.



*What Should We Call the “Old” Testament?*

Here let me make a brief note about terminology for the first part of the Catholic Bible. In recent years, Catholic liturgy and doctrine have grown increasingly sensitive to their treatment of Jews and Judaism (see chapters 2 and 8). One frequently debated topic has been the use of the term “Old Testament” to refer to the inheritance of scriptures from the Jewish people. Labels for the parts of the Christian Bible are each imperfect in their own way. The term “Old” Testament has sometimes been interpreted to imply supersessionism, the idea that something old was considered obsolete and replaced by something new. Supersessionism is not a sound Catholic stance toward Judaism. (See chapter 2 for further explanation of this.) But the term “old” does not need to be understood in a supersessionist way, or even to be pejorative at all. Prior to the Scientific Revolution and the modern era, for something to be “old” was usually considered a positive quality. Indeed, one of the things that non-Jews in antiquity respected about Jewish writings and customs was precisely their old-ness. Even so, some Christians have opted instead for the term “First” Testament. To my mind, this nonetheless seems to imply a “Second” one and does not resolve the problem of supersessionism.

In academic contexts, such as a university curriculum, the term “Hebrew Bible” is often used, in order to avoid “Old Testament” and also to distinguish it from the Christian biblical canon. Alternatively, when speaking and writing in shared contexts with both Jews and Christians present, especially contexts of joint scripture study or interreligious dialogue, the term “Shared Testament” can be very useful to designate the shared heritage of the “Tanakh” (a Hebrew acronym for the Jewish Bible).<sup>16</sup> In some ways, “Shared” Testament is the best option, but both “Shared Testament” and “Hebrew Bible” only work perfectly with respect to the Jewish and Protestant biblical canons, because the Protestant canon uses the same Hebrew scriptures (in translation) as the Jewish Bible. Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, however, derive their versions of the Old Testament from the Hebrew along with additional ancient Jewish texts in Greek (the Septuagint), and so these are not precisely “shared” with the Jews. Finally, some propose the terms “Jewish Scriptures” and “Christian Scriptures” to refer to the two testaments. But these do not solve the problem of terminology, because they can lead to a false dichotomy of the Christian canon, in which the older scriptures are *theirs* and the newer

are *ours*. That position, associated with a second-century figure named Marcion, was rejected by mainstream Christianity centuries ago (see chapter 2).

Taking all this into account, my own convention for labeling the ancient scriptures from the Jewish people is to use different terms, depending on the context in which one is talking: “Tanakh” or “Bible” in Jewish contexts, “Shared Testament” in explicitly Jewish-Christian contexts of dialogue or shared study, and “Old Testament” in Christian-only or general audience contexts, *with the essential clarification that the term “Old” is not negative* (not old as in “outdated”) *but positive* (old as in “venerable” and “enduring”).<sup>17</sup>

### Bible and Tradition

Readers well-versed in religious history might perceive a seeming paradox in a book about Catholic biblical traditions: that is to say, some renditions of the history of Christianity portray a tension, even a conflict, between the “Bible” and the “tradition.” Let me offer an explanation and some caveats. According to a simplified (yet mostly accurate) version of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, reformers such as Luther began to discern significant differences between the teachings of Jesus and his apostles in the Bible and the teachings that had been passed on by centuries of tradition in European Catholic Christianity. Luther was specifically scandalized by the elaborate systems of penance that had developed—most famously, the practice of indulgences, a form of absolution that seemed to be offered in exchange for good deeds or money. When Luther and others read their Bibles closely, individual copies of which had become more widely available with the invention of the movable-type printing press, they found no such systems of penance, nor did they find many other features of what had become Christianity. Therefore, one of the main pillars of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*, the idea that revelation of God’s will ought to be learned “by scripture alone” and not by human tradition. If something was not found in the Bible, they argued, it was not part of God’s revelation but rather part of human tradition and thus unnecessary, or even harmful.

The reformers were certainly right about many things. The lure of power had led Christian leaders astray, as so many times before and since. Even most Catholics today would view the Reformation era as a necessary

course correction in the history of Christianity. But I would argue that the attempt to split off the Bible from tradition has been among the least successful features of the Reformation. Historical research over the ensuing centuries has shown, rather, that the Bible *is* tradition. It is a curated library of discrete texts, each of which was handed down for different reasons (*traditio* means “to be handed down, to convey”). And each text of the library contains within itself oral and written traditions that developed prior to their ancient forms and certainly prior to their modern forms. As already explained, the canonical boundaries of the Bible were not firmly established in the premodern periods, and many texts inhabited the borderlands of what counted as sacred scripture. (This is not even to mention the diversity of biblical translations from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and then all the languages of the world.) In short, each part of the Bible is tradition; the shape of the collection as a whole is tradition; and the attempt to draw a stark contrast of “Bible vs. Tradition” breaks down under historical scrutiny.

This dichotomy encounters further problems in the realm of biblical interpretation. Despite occasional claims to the contrary, the Bible does not and cannot interpret itself, just like any text or system of signs and symbols cannot interpret itself. With any language system or text, there are always interpretive traditions handed down, consciously or unconsciously, by those doing the talking and writing, the listening and reading.<sup>18</sup> Ways of hearing and reading texts are passed on, such that some find certain allegorical, numerological, ethical, or mystical interpretations to sound obvious while others find them foreign. And when interpreters disagree about meaning, there arise appeals to interpretive authority—the dominance of one biblical text over another, or of a method, a person, a school of thought, an actual school, etc. The Reformed traditions did not give up on the idea of interpretive authority; they often modified it from a priestly authority to a more prophetic or even entrepreneurial model, one rooted in personal charisma and independent study (and then often ratified by seminary credentials). Yet different Reformed traditions have different ways of interpreting the same Bible; the elimination of hierarchical authority has not resolved the problems of interpreting scripture.<sup>19</sup> For all of *sola scriptura*’s benefits as a course correction in Christian history, the endless splintering of Protestant denominations has been a historical demonstration that the principle has not led—indeed, could not lead—to a unified, provable version of Christian doctrine and salvation.

I say all this not to inflame an interpretive conflict between Protestants and Catholics—I'm not trying to start an imaginary fight between my mom and dad—but to explain my view that the Bible has been, is now, and ever shall be inseparable from tradition. While I believe this to be true and demonstrable even among my Protestant friends and colleagues, it is especially true for Catholics, the subject of this book. Beyond the contrast with Protestant traditions, this book could be enhanced by a comparative approach with the biblical cultures of Jews and Eastern Orthodox Christians.<sup>20</sup> Focusing primarily on the Catholic tradition on its own terms and then pondering comparisons with Judaism and Orthodox Christianity helps to show the influence of the Protestant Reformation on how other biblical cultures have been usually understood. When Jewish, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian traditions are juxtaposed with one another, instead of simply contrasting, say, a Catholic Dad and an Evangelical Mom, the overall picture of “biblical” religion changes dramatically.

By offering in this section a simplified glimpse of only one aspect of the Reformed traditions—those that are vigorously *sola scriptura*—I run the risk of painting a caricature. In fact, many Protestant denominations (especially Anglican and Lutheran) are far from *sola scriptura*, having retained or reclaimed key features of “tradition,” such as Lent or priestly authority or weekly Eucharist or prescribed daily prayers or even some Marian devotion. I do not aim to make a “straw man” version of Protestantism, which emphasizes only the unmediated printed Bible, clutched in hand and individually interpreted. Nor do I aim to frame Catholic encounters with the Bible defensively or only by contrast to Protestant modes of engagement. Other scholars have analyzed in detail the various forms of biblical interpretation and liturgical use among Protestant denominations; but these same scholars concede that, the diversity of Protestant churches notwithstanding, there remain real and significant differences between a Catholic form of biblical interpretation and a Protestant one.<sup>21</sup>

I concur and contend that some aspects of the severance between scripture and tradition attempted by the Reformation abide strongly to this day. According to the 2006 “Faith Matters Survey,” one of the largest sociological studies of religion in the United States, approximately 29% of Catholics reported reading the Bible at least once per week (with the caveat that most of these are reading the same lectionary excerpts that will be heard in Mass), compared to over 60% of White Evangelicals and over 66% of Black Protestants. (Hispanic and Latino respondents were not separated for this

question.) Among the Christian groups in the study, Catholics were by far the highest to say they “never” (34%) read the Bible.<sup>22</sup> In other words, it remains easy to imagine a devout Protestant reading the Bible frequently and a devout Catholic never reading it, while the opposite is virtually unheard of. For Catholics, though, whether the printed Bible is read or not, it is always already a part of tradition. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, “Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture together form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church.”<sup>23</sup>

### (How) Do Catholics Read the Bible?

A final word about the book’s title: when I was initially discussing options for it with the editors, they were gently pushing me toward a title that included the words “read” or “reading.” Something like *How Catholics Read the Bible*, they suggested. I see why they wanted that, and perhaps it’s catchier. But I simply would not give in. I would not write a book built on a false foundation. On the whole, throughout Catholic history and even around the globe right now, the vast majority of the world’s Catholics are assuredly *not reading* the Bible.

So how does the Bible inhabit their tradition? In what other ways are Catholics encountering it?

# I

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## The Bible in Catholic Worship

### The Proclaimed Word

The late biblical scholar Daniel Harrington used to tell a story from his childhood, growing up Catholic around 1950. He overheard two men at the front door, talking to his mother. They called themselves “ministers of Christ”—evangelists of some Protestant denomination—and wanted to discuss the Bible with the Harrington family. His mother gave them “the response that most good Catholics of that time would have given: ‘We’re Catholics. We don’t read the Bible.’ The conversation was over.”

The story is certainly funny and captures some of the religious contexts of Harrington’s youth. But his subsequent explanation of the event’s meaning becomes muddled. He goes on to claim:

In fact, Catholics then did read the Bible. Only most of them probably did not realize it. Whenever they attended Mass, the Scriptures were read. But the texts were in Latin, and most people could understand them only if they had an English translation known as a “missal.” . . . That incident [at the front door] intrigued me. I wanted to know why Catholics did not read the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

This vignette has stuck with me for years—not because of the story itself, which portrayed a common enough sentiment, albeit tartly expressed by his mother. What sticks with me, rather, is Harrington’s struggle to situate the meaning of the story in the context of his own argument, at the beginning of a book called *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?*

In other cases a gifted storyteller and renowned scholar, Harrington here confuses several concepts. “In fact, Catholics then did read the Bible,” he claims, but in the following sentences he changes the basic meanings of the verb “read” and the noun “Bible.” How can one read *without realizing it*? Next they are not reading but *being read to*; and the text is not the Bible but *the Scriptures*, sacred portions of text excerpted from the Bible into a book called a *lectionary* and *proclaimed publicly at Mass*. Moreover those proclaimed words were in a language the people did not usually understand (Latin), and so what they *were* reading—if anything—was actually *a liturgical aid*, a translation of *an exceedingly small portion* of excerpts from the Bible. The lectionary from that era contained only about 20% of the Gospels about Jesus’ life, only about 10% from the rest of the New Testament, and less than 1% of the rest of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Finally, many of those in the pews were not even reading those translated excerpts, but just sitting there calming restless children or gazing at stained-glass windows or thumbing through rosary beads, while *listening to words in a foreign language*. Harrington’s cognitive dissonance with his own story becomes evident as he tries to move on from it: his explanation that began with the affirmation “Catholics did read the Bible” concludes with his desire to learn “why Catholics did not.”

We can resolve this dissonance. Harrington’s affirmation that “in fact Catholics then did read the Bible” is a classic case of “protesting too much.” That’s the Shakespearean idea that when a person exaggerates while trying to defend an unlikely proposition, the effect on the listener is the opposite of the speaker’s intention. Harrington knows intuitively that Catholics did *not* read the Bible, but protests too much by trying to turn the proclaimed snippets at Mass into the Bible itself. The related yet distinct truth, which Harrington means to express, is that the public proclamation, prayer, and preaching of Catholic liturgy then was—and is now even more—infused with the words, the images, the stories, the values, and the transformative revelations of the Bible. For Catholics, these words are not primarily means of digesting “the Bible,” in whole or in part, but of encountering the living Word of God, the person of Jesus Christ, during the Mass. As Normand Bonneau writes in *The Sunday Lectionary*, “Scripture’s home is the liturgy, for in liturgical proclamation scripture becomes fully what it is, the living Word of God present and active in our midst.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Catholics are not a people of the Book, but they are a people of the Word. They encounter the Bible as an *oral / aural* experience



much more than a *written / read* event of revelation.<sup>4</sup> The Word of God as proclaimed through Catholic liturgy is for most practical purposes the Catholic point of contact with “the Bible,” and this proclaimed Word communicates “the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation.”<sup>5</sup> All the readings and snippets of scripture aim toward that communication, and thus an authentic analysis of “the Bible” in the Catholic tradition begins from a study of the proclaimed Word in public prayer, especially in the Mass.

But isn’t this a book about *the Bible*, not the Lectionary or the Mass? Indeed it is! But we are here to explore how the Bible actually functions in the Catholic tradition. And that means we are not going to begin by describing how the Bible, as a printed collection of texts, might rest on a Catholic bookshelf (usually collecting dust), or about how it is studied individually (rarely) or in small groups (sometimes). At the end of the book, questions about those modes of engaging with the Bible will be addressed: When, how, and why do Catholics read the Bible—the printed one? When Catholics read the Bible as a book, how do they interpret it? What are Catholic scholarly approaches to the Bible? But before we get to those topics, our focus will first be on the primary ways in which the Bible lives in the Catholic tradition, how it is usually encountered and received by the Catholic faithful. The structure of my book is thus the opposite of Harrington’s. The final chapter of his book concerns “the Bible in Catholic life,” but that is where mine begins.

The main encounter of Catholics with the Bible is the “Liturgy of the Word” of Masses for Sundays and some solemnities (other important Holy Days, such as Christmas, Good Friday, etc.). The Liturgy of the Word comprises approximately the first half of each Mass and includes a cycle of short readings and psalms that are usually followed by a homily (another word for sermon). Therefore, the driving questions for this first chapter are: What is the lectionary’s cycle of readings, and where did it come from? What perspective on the Bible does it show to Catholics? What does it leave out? What are other biblical aspects of Catholic worship?

### The Lectionary and the Bible

Christians in the pews on Sunday mornings—whether Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox—do not often give thought during worship to why certain readings from the Bible are used and not others. Some forms of Protestant Christianity simply rely on the pastor’s vision for



choosing a text on which to preach from week to week, or from season to season. But most of the world's Christians use some form of lectionary, the simplest definition of which is an "orderly sequence of selections" from the Bible "to be read aloud at public worship."<sup>6</sup> Those presiding or reading at services do not usually explain or justify why these texts have been chosen, and congregants typically take the choices in stride, presuming that there are good reasons for the selections and that the Bible is being presented fairly, more or less. On certain holidays, the rationale for a text's selection is clear enough, but for most other liturgies, the reasons are obscure and both pastor and congregation move straightaway toward interpretation and exhortation. In fact, though, Christian lectionaries have detailed internal structures and significant historical causes—both ancient and modern.

The current Catholic lectionary for Sundays and solemnities was developed during the Second Vatican Council ("Vatican II," 1962–65) and began to be used in the early 1970s. It was a major revision of the lectionary that had been in place for four hundred years. For each Sunday and solemn Holy Day, it prescribes three readings to be proclaimed in plain speech and one psalm to be proclaimed in a call-and-response chant or song. The readings are excerpted from different portions of the Catholic biblical canon. The first reading comes usually from the Catholic Old Testament, followed by the sung psalm (usually but not always from the biblical book of Psalms), then a second reading usually from one of the Epistles (letters) of the New Testament, and finally a reading from one of the Gospels (narratives about Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection). There is also a different cycle of prescribed lectionary readings for weekdays, but the vast majority of practicing Catholics attend Mass only on weekends; the lectionary for Sundays and solemnities is by far the most frequent Catholic encounter with the Bible.

The most frequent encounter, to be sure, but the Sunday lectionary is *not* the complete Bible—far from it. It does capture the contents of the New Testament (especially the Gospels) reasonably well, but the quantity and characteristics of the Old Testament selections are not representative and deserve extended discussion throughout this and the next chapter. Despite the Catholic Church's stated hope that through the lectionary "the treasury of the word of God will be opened up in such a way that nearly all the principal pages of the Old Testament will become familiar to those

taking part in the Mass on Sundays,” and despite improvements in the presentation of the Bible after Vatican II, the fact remains that enormous and influential portions of the Bible’s core are missing.<sup>7</sup>

One scholar laments the neglect of the Old Testament’s epic stories from Joshua to 2 Kings. “These Bible stories have been shared by generations of Jews and Christians. . . . It is a shame, therefore, that on Sunday mornings the walls of Jericho never fall (Josh 6:20) and that David’s cry: ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom!’ (2 Sam 18:33) is never heard.”<sup>8</sup> This plea is not simply a cry for more “biblical literacy” about famous stories such as these (although that would be a welcome development). The criticism becomes more startling and incisive when one looks for the patriarchs and matriarchs in the lectionary. How can the committee that redesigned the lectionary claim to present a “more representative portion” of the Bible without Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Esau, Joseph, and Aseneth? Indeed, Catholics are more likely to know about Joseph’s “coat of many colors” through the Broadway musical that re-imagined its story.<sup>9</sup>

### *The First Reading*

The first readings are drawn from the Old Testament, except for the fifty days of the Easter season, during which they are drawn from the Acts of the Apostles. The first fundamental observation about the Catholic incorporation of the Old Testament into liturgical proclamation is this: these readings are short—*very* short. The average length of an Old Testament reading is about five verses, and many of them are a scant three verses. This is hardly enough time in which to tell a story, a fact which points toward the second fundamental feature of the Old Testament readings at Mass: their intention is not usually to tell a story, but to supplement another story. They are not meant to be interpreted on their own terms, but rather as partners of the Gospel narrative that will be read at the end of the Liturgy of the Word. The brevity of these readings, combined with their dependence on as-yet-unproclaimed readings from the Gospels, has an effect on the listener’s overall interpretation of the Old Testament. The texts are presented, without historical or biblical contextualization, as preparation for something else: prophecies to be fulfilled, customs to be explained (or overturned), metaphors to be unlocked.

*Frequency of Old Testament Books in the Sunday Lectionary*

Isaiah	49
Genesis	21
Exodus	16
Ezekiel	10
Deuteronomy	10
Jeremiah	9
Sirach	9
Wisdom of Solomon	8
1 Kings	7
Joel	6
Numbers	4
1 Samuel	4
Baruch	4
19 books	3 or less
13 books	not used
<i>Total</i>	<i>189 readings from OT</i>

This list shows the sources of the Old Testament readings (excluding psalms) that a Catholic who attends Sundays and solemnities will hear over the course of three years.<sup>10</sup> The choice of Old Testament lections can be criticized for some grave imbalances. Almost half the lections (86 of 189) are from the three books of Isaiah, Genesis, and Exodus. Moreover, some substantial books are never proclaimed, notably Ruth and Esther. The representation of the traditional wisdom literature genre (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) is weak, receiving only 6 lections total, while Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon receive 9 and 8 lections, respectively. Of the readings that a faithful parishioner hears in the lectionary cycle, over 25% are from the prophet Isaiah, 49 out of 189. This eclipses the 43 lections from all the other prophets combined. Within the prophet Isaiah, 27 lections are from chapters 40–66 (a discrete unit of oracles sometimes called Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah), so that this one *portion* of Isaiah still has more lections than any other Old Testament book. Furthermore, only 20% of the Isaiah quotations are fixed by premodern liturgical traditions, so this imbalanced representation of Isaiah cannot be based substantially on the desire to keep those traditions. As stated above, the relationships between the lectionary pairings of these Old Testament

readings and Gospel readings require explanation by the homilist, and the next chapter will treat in detail this somewhat thorny matter of how the two testaments correspond.

### *The Psalm and Epistle*

Like the first reading, the psalm is usually but not always from the Old Testament, is relatively short, and is dependent on other factors—chosen because of its suitability to partner with one of the other readings or the occasion of a particular Holy Day. The congregational experience of the psalm differs, though, since it is responsorial and usually set to music. The reader or cantor intones a chosen line from a psalm, which the congregation repeats as a refrain. Verses of the rest of the psalm are interlaced with the refrain, for a few repetitions. Sometimes the psalm's connection is only through a catchword that it shares with the Gospel reading or the liturgical celebration. Other times the psalm expresses a theme that is picked up by another reading, as when the “vine” metaphor of Psalm 80 connects to Jesus' parable of a vineyard's tenants (Matt 21:33–43). And in some cases, the psalm is chosen because it is directly quoted, interpreted, or applied within the Gospel reading. The psalm has arguably a larger influence on a Catholic congregation than the Old Testament reading does, since it is set to music, it invites active participation, and its refrain is repeated. This connects suitably to the historical Catholic tradition from before the printing press, in which the Psalms and the Gospels had been the most widely copied and used portions of the Bible.

The second reading is drawn, with few exceptions, from one of the Epistles of the New Testament (hence also called the readings from the Apostles). These readings are somewhat longer than the Old Testament selections but are still relatively short. Nevertheless, an attentive listener acquires a much more coherent sense of the Epistles than of the Old Testament readings because the Epistle lections maintain some continuity from week to week. Whereas the Old Testament readings are chosen by thematic correspondence with a Gospel reading, such that one week comes from Isaiah, the next from Deuteronomy, and the next from Genesis, the Epistle readings are arranged semicontinuously. For example, one part of the cycle includes seven readings in a row from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, followed by sixteen in a row from his letter to the Romans. Even though they remain excerpts which omit many verses in between lections, over the course of a

three-year cycle the congregation hears substantial and sequential sections from Paul's letters, the anonymous text called Hebrews, and the letters of Peter, John, and James.

### *The Gospel*

Following the second reading from the Epistles, the design of the Liturgy of the Word focalizes the listener's reverent attention on what comes next: a sung acclamation to herald a procession of a book of the Gospels. Having been previously carried in during the opening procession and placed upon the altar, it is now brought to the ambo (Latin word for "pulpit"), accompanied by candles and often incense. "The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the liturgy of the word," states the official introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, and the other readings "prepare the assembly" for the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> Whereas the first and second readings had little liturgical accompaniment and the psalm uses only a spare melody and instrumentation, the Gospel reading is, in many Catholic churches, a full sensory experience. The Gospel Acclamation takes the form (in most liturgical seasons) of an exuberant "Alleluia," with brighter and louder musical accompaniment; flaming candles flank the procession of the book and illuminate the sides of the ambo during its reading; the smells of refreshed incense might spread outward from the area; and the deacon or priest kisses the book.

The congregation responds to the sensory invocations by standing for the duration of the reading, whereas it remained seated during the other readings and psalm. The candles illumine the sight, the incense activates the sense of smell, and even the sense of touch is expressed by the congregation, each of whom touches her or his forehead, lips, and chest to remind oneself of keeping the words of the Gospels in mind, speech, and heart. The sacramental experience leaves no doubt that the proclamation of the Gospel reading is the first of two high points of each Mass: here the Catholic encounters the Word of God in the narrative of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection; later through the consecration of the bread and wine of the Eucharist. These are the primary Catholic encounters with God's Word made flesh, and "the faithful should be keenly aware of the one presence of Christ in both."<sup>12</sup>

By far the most significant readings in the Mass, the Gospel readings are also the most substantial. They are on average twice as long as the Old Testament readings and, over a three-year cycle, a devout congregant on

Sundays and Holy Days will hear about 70–75% of the teachings and stories in the Gospels. When a Catholic who doesn't read the Bible says, "But I know the stories," these are usually the stories that they mean. This is especially the case for the Passion narrative, the final events of Jesus' life. For example, a Catholic who attends Mass on Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter) and Good Friday (the Friday before Easter) will hear the full (and *long*) interactive account of Jesus' final days proclaimed *twice*, from a different Gospel at the two services. Due to this focus during well-attended services, the Passion narrative is probably the one part of the Bible that Catholics tend to know better than Protestants do.

Since there are four canonical Gospels, one might expect a four-year cycle of Gospel readings, and indeed the committee assigned to the task of redesigning the lectionary during Vatican II—called "Study Group 11"—was initially in favor of that idea.<sup>13</sup> But the decision for the three-year cycle and, to some degree, the selection of particular readings within that cycle arose from the integration of the results of scholarship on the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—as a unit often called the "Synoptic Gospels." These three Gospels share significant overlaps in content, structure, and vocabulary. While they have important differences among them, they are generally more like one another than any one of them is like John.

With the three-year cycle of readings from Matthew consistently in year A, Mark in year B, and Luke in year C, the attentive listener can gain a sense of each Gospel's distinctive emphases. For example, we hear the "Sermon on the Mount" and memorable allegorical parables in year A, Jesus' miracles over nature and the confusion of his disciples in year B, and exceeding compassion for the marginalized and "parables of the lost" in year C. The very structure of the cycle encapsulates some of the main results of modern New Testament scholarship on these Gospels. At the same time, the Gospel of John has been set apart to be reflected upon at crucial seasons of the year, especially during Lent, the forty-day preparatory period before Easter, a setting that resurrects ancient traditions. The Gospel of John narrates fewer events than the Synoptics do, but it takes longer to tell the stories it tells. This Gospel is less receptive to being excerpted, and so longer lections are used for these more solemn occasions. One long episode of John's Gospel (usually called the "Bread of Life discourse," from John 6) fills out part of year B, supplementing the sequence of Mark's Gospel (which is the shortest of the four).

While technically a three-year cycle, in some ways the readings are experienced like an annual cycle. This experiential perspective has two

causes: first, the Catholic liturgical year is prominently signaled in liturgy, announcements, homilies, and parish bulletins—a year that begins with Advent and Christmas, hits its low point / high point during Lent and Easter, continues through “Ordinary Time,” and circles back to the next year’s Advent. Second, the three different years of the cycle often narrate the same events, and sometimes even the same readings, making the lectionary a hybrid of a one-year and a three-year cycle. Of the sixty-nine annual Sundays and Holy Days, the Gospel readings are the same each year for sixteen of those days.<sup>14</sup> Many of these commemorate specific occasions (e.g., Acts 1:1–11 for the Ascension). But others follow seasonal traditions, such as the placement of three lengthy readings from John during the latter part of Lent. The third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent for year A prescribe Jesus’ dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), his healing of the man born blind (John 9), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11). This placement resuscitates ancient Christian traditions of using these readings as part of spiritual preparation for catechumens, those about to be initiated at Easter. Though other readings are supplied for years B and C of these Lenten Sundays, a frequent practice is to use the A readings also in those years, “especially in places where there are catechumens.”<sup>15</sup>

For other Sundays, even though different versions of certain events are narrated, the basics of an episode are sometimes repeated from year to year; that is to say, in successive years the congregants sometimes hear Matthew’s, Mark’s, and Luke’s versions of the same event. Even though there is a three-year cycle, Catholics hear a version of the following *every year*:

- John the Baptist’s prediction of the coming Messiah
- the Annunciation to Mary of her miraculous pregnancy
- the birth story of Jesus, also called the Nativity
- the Baptism of Jesus
- the summoning of his first disciples
- Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah
- the “greatest commandment” to love God and love one’s neighbor
- the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes
- the events of Jesus’ final week and Crucifixion—the “Passion narrative”
- Mary Magdalene and other women at the empty tomb
- Resurrection appearances to the disciples
- the Ascension into heaven
- Pentecost, at which the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus’ apostles



We could say that, if the Gospels overall are the “canon within the canon” for Catholics, the annual readings of these episodes from the Gospels constitute a “canon within the canon within the canon.”

### Liturgical Use of Scripture: A Brief History

The liturgical proclamation of excerpts from the Bible during worship is not the same as “the Bible,” to be sure. And the way we usually talk about this relationship—even the way I just did—implies that “the Bible” was a stable unit from which excerpts have been used in liturgy. But the reality is that, for most Catholics historically and still today, those liturgical proclamations are *not excerpts from* but *are, in effect, their functional Bible*. What is more, the Bible as a printed book has been more dependent on liturgy than liturgy has been dependent on the printed Bible. As the esteemed historian of manuscripts Christopher de Hamel has shown, it was the liturgical use of discrete, grouped biblical texts over many centuries that generated the very forms of the Bible as a book and artifact that we have come to take for granted. The aforementioned central role of the Gospels in the liturgy meant that “manuscripts of the four Gospels account for almost half of all biblical manuscripts surviving from before the ninth century.”<sup>16</sup> After the Gospels, other bound groups of biblical texts included the so-called Octateuch (eight texts from Genesis through Ruth), the books attributed to Solomon, the Prophets, the Psalms, the Epistles, and sometimes Acts and Revelation bound together.<sup>17</sup> Thus when we say, as a shorthand, that “the Bible” was the most common book in the pre-modern world, we are not speaking precisely; rather, books containing the four Gospels (“Evangelaries”) were the most common type of book prior to the printing press. Such liturgical “canons within the canon”—especially the Gospels and the Psalms—generated the Christian biblical canon itself, and not the other way around.

As with so much of Christian history, the Jewish religious tradition provided a model that Christians adapted in their own format. Ancient Jews were already a “People of the Book,” building their individual lives, families, and communities upon the Torah, the first five books of what became the Jewish Bible. Prior to late antiquity (fifth–seventh century CE), specific evidence for how Jews read and used scripture in liturgy is scant.<sup>18</sup> (In fact, the oldest description of an ancient Jewish synagogue service comes from the Gospels: the description of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth, from Luke 4:16–30.) But it does seem clear that, especially after the destruction of



the Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 CE, Jewish community life and spiritual life in the diaspora—a term for Jews outside of Judea—centered around study of Torah in homes and synagogues (a Greek word meaning “gathering place,” a building for diaspora Jews to gather and stay connected as a community). Jews in Mesopotamia (the Babylonian tradition) created a one-year cycle for reading the entire Torah during Sabbath services, while Jews in Palestine (the Palestinian tradition of Judaism) used a three-year cycle. Over time, the one-year cycle was used broadly, just as the Babylonian version of the Talmud (an anthology of commentary on Jewish laws and teachings) also became the more prevalent Talmud. Thus the way that the Catholic lectionary for Sundays and solemnities manifests a hybrid one-year/three-year cycle has august precedent in ancient Jewish usage. The continuous reading of the Torah portions in Jewish tradition has to some degree been imitated by the semicontinuous readings of the Synoptic Gospels and Epistles over a three-year cycle, combined with the annual retelling of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection.

In addition to the Torah reading (or “Torah portion”), Jews from late antiquity to the present also hear a second reading (the *haftarah*) excerpted from the Jewish corpus of prophetic writings, which is assigned as a complementary reading to the Torah portion. Each *haftarah* (meaning “parting” or “dismissal,” and sometimes transliterated as *haftorah*) was selected because it is in some way “comparable” to the Torah portion, and it is up to each rabbi to explain how comparison should be interpreted (or not).<sup>19</sup> There are obvious similarities with the Catholic lectionary’s attempt to correspond its Gospel reading with its Old Testament reading, even as the homilist must do the interpretive work of explaining it (or not). Indeed, the meeting minutes from Study Group 11, the Vatican II committee which established the current lectionary, report a discussion of the comparisons with Jewish use of scripture.<sup>20</sup> A difference in liturgical use is that the Jewish readings feature the Torah portion first and the prophets later, as a commentary on the Torah; the Catholic approach is to read the complementary text first (often from the prophets), as a preparation for the Gospel to be read later. This distinction expresses well the different roles of prophecy in the Jewish and Catholic uses of scripture in liturgy: for Jews, the prophets are frequently situated as social critique and moral exhortation (as “forth-telling”), while for Catholics, they are more frequently set up as prediction (as “fore-telling”). The twin roles of prophetic speech—*fore-telling* and *forth-telling*—are thus somewhat separated in the two religious

traditions, like fraternal twins separated by the split of Christianity from Judaism in antiquity. (See chapter 2 for further analysis of the prophetic genre in the Catholic lectionary.)

It is difficult to know how the earliest Christians used scripture in their assemblies.<sup>21</sup> We know from the New Testament that the apostles referred to stories from ancient Israel, such as those of Abraham or the Exodus, and that the Psalms and prophets were frequently cited, too. But even through the second and third centuries of Christianity, we have remarkably little evidence of how scripture was used. The author of the letter to the Colossians asks its recipients to have letters read aloud and shared among neighboring churches (Col 4:16), and a letter attributed to Peter refers to debates about the interpretation of Paul's letters (2 Pet 3:16). Paul does refer often to scripture in his lengthy letters, such as Romans and 1 Corinthians, and proposes his own interpretations, but he does not describe how his communities are usually encountering these texts.

Our first substantial account of Christian worship comes from Justin Martyr in the mid-second century. During his spare description of a Sunday assembly, he states that "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits."<sup>22</sup> It stands to reason that the apostles' *memoirs* are Gospels, though perhaps some Epistles could have been included. The writings of the *prophets* probably included multiple genres of the Old Testament beyond what we now call "the prophets," since Moses was thought to be the author of the Torah and considered a prophet, while David was thought to be the author of the Psalms and also considered a kind of prophet.

What Justin describes is an orderly worship, but not a fixed one. And other descriptions of ancient liturgy—texts often called "church orders"—focus on ritual actions of Eucharist, prayers, initiations, and ordinations much more than on the liturgical proclamation and interpretation of scripture.<sup>23</sup> The seasons of Easter (and the preparatory period of Lent) emerged relatively early, as did other holidays like Epiphany; the celebration of the Nativity (Christmas) and its corresponding preparatory period of Advent developed somewhat later and unevenly. Over time, to accompany these calendrical evolutions, lectionaries begin to appear in Greek, Latin, and Syriac. And in the case of some well-preserved texts of famous preachers, such as Augustine, a church's lectionary can be somewhat reconstructed through analysis of the sermons.<sup>24</sup> In Bonneau's words, lectionaries "put biblical flesh on the skeleton of the calendar"—the calendar comes first and

provides the basic shape of biblical encounter.<sup>25</sup> His summary statements again serve us well: “Evidence of prescribed and organized readings to celebrate the liturgical seasons dates from the fourth century, with patterns showing a mixture of both sequential and selected readings. There was no uniformity among the Churches. Many traditions favored three readings at the Sunday Eucharist, one from the Old Testament, one from the apostolic writings, and one from the gospels. Some traditions had four, five, even six different readings on Sunday.”<sup>26</sup> Subsequent centuries saw the production of liturgical books with readings arranged according to the liturgical year, that is, lectionaries as we would use the term. But during the medieval era, the sense of a lectionary tied to the liturgical year was fading, as the readings were “totally absorbed into the missal and became the province of the priest alone. Many prescribed readings were reassigned; traditional Sunday readings were relegated to weekdays; saints’ day readings replaced Sunday readings; the practice of sequential reading fell away. Already by the seventh century, the Old Testament reading had been eliminated almost totally. Clearly there was need for reform.”<sup>27</sup>

The catalyst for internal reform of the Catholic use of scripture was the Protestant Reformation—a reform that became a kind of revolution. The Catholic Counter-Reformation and its Council of Trent (1545–63) established the “Roman Missal” of readings on an annual cycle, which lasted for four hundred years, from 1570 until Vatican II. Through this reform, each Sunday had one Epistle and one Gospel; the Old Testament was read on only three holidays of the year. There was limited sequential reading, and most readings were tied to seasons or holidays. But the fuller, necessary reform was held in abeyance until Vatican II, during which Study Group 11 was tasked with research and development for a renewed liturgical use of scripture—a new lectionary.

The basic structure of the current lectionary was described above and will be further analyzed below. Liturgical scholar Elmar Nübold has discerned the principles that undergirded the work of Study Group 11: they affirmed the central role that scripture plays in the Catholic liturgy; they prioritized Sundays and feast days over the weekdays and other saints’ days; they wanted to increase the overall quantity of scripture, while also retaining emphasis on salvation history that culminates in Jesus Christ; they wanted to update the readings in connection with a renewal and reform of the liturgical year; and they took into account ancient traditions of biblical proclamation, preserving those patterns when they could.<sup>28</sup> The reform of the

lectionary was one of the most significant actions of the twentieth century for Christian ecumenism, since many Protestant denominations—whose existence had been partially predicated on the rejection of the Catholic approach to the Bible—subsequently adapted the renewed Roman Catholic lectionary format in their own denominations.<sup>29</sup>

During each era, the liturgical use of scripture has undeniably shaped the Catholic perspective on how to interpret the Bible. In our own day, consider some big-picture examples of how today's churchgoing Catholics learn to understand how to interpret the Bible, just through regular attendance and participation alone. The Catholic view of the Bible's inspiration is as "the Word of God in the words of men" (in an older manner of speaking), or "the Word of God in human language."<sup>30</sup> The way that Catholic liturgy frames its readings encapsulates this viewpoint. The first and second readings are introduced with reference to their human authors, thus situating them as "the words of men," the words of real people in real-life contexts: "A reading from the prophet Isaiah" or "A reading from Paul's letter to the Romans." After each of these readings, the lector declares the divine sanctioning of the human words: "The word of the Lord," to which the people respond, "Thanks be to God." The Gospel reading adapts the format slightly, beginning with the human author and ending with "the Gospel of the Lord." Through declarations, acclamations, and responses, biblical revelation is embodied as simultaneously and equally "the Word of God" and "human words," just as the Catholic mystery of the Incarnation presents "the Word of God" as becoming "human" in the person of Jesus.

While that framing is influential in a subtle way, the single most obvious feature of the experience, as already mentioned, is the orchestrated preeminence of the Gospel reading. Marked by a changed posture of prayer, acclamation, gestures, processions, incense, candles, and music, the Gospel reading presides over the Liturgy of the Word, just as its themes had presided over the shape of the lectionary overall and the specific selections of the Old Testament readings. Second, the liturgical use of the psalm causes the biblical book of Psalms to achieve an elevated role within the biblical canon, featuring accompanying ritual actions of music, repetition, and participation. These two traditions help to explain the historical precedent that, along with books of the collected Gospels, books of the collected Psalms ("Psalters") were also widespread in the premodern world. Regarding the Epistles, an attentive congregant gains a coherent sense of the apostolic writings and especially of Paul's two longest letters,

1 Corinthians and Romans. The liturgical emphasis on these two fairly represents the fact that, throughout history, these two have also been the most significant of the Epistles for Christian doctrine and ethics. Though the Catholic lectionary and accompanying liturgy can be criticized on some counts, one can affirm that it encourages, on the whole, engagement with the most influential topics in the New Testament and a much greater portion of the Old Testament than it did prior to Vatican II.

### **Patterns of Omission: Women in the Lectionary (or Not)**

Yet the lectionary has its faults, some of which significantly shape the Catholic perspective on the Bible. Attentive listeners have criticized the types of texts which the lectionary omits. Already we have noted the omissions of almost all the longer narratives of the Old Testament involving the patriarchs of ancient Israel, such as Jacob and Joseph, and memorable events of Israelite history, such as the tumbling walls of Jericho. A primary reason for these omissions seems to have been the time it takes to tell such stories, but the trend also relates to how Old Testament readings are used in preparation for the Gospel (about which, see chapter 2).

Another consequential pattern of omission concerns biblical women, as Regina Bosclair has catalogued and analyzed in detail. Catholics are missing not only Jacob and Joseph, but also Ruth and Esther—and a whole lot more.

Women are absent from many of the stories told in the Lectionary, hidden in very long selections, or dropped from suggested shorter readings. For example, First Readings from the Old Testament include only eight selections that introduce only four women as participants in the stories of Israel. While the Gospel selections include the stories of the male followers of Jesus from more than one Gospel, only the stories of the women's discovery of Jesus' empty tomb are included from all three synoptic Gospels in the Lectionary. In addition, the only story of Jesus' healing that is not included in the Lectionary is that of the bent woman from Luke (13:10–17), the woman Jesus identified as a "daughter of Abraham," who likely suffered from osteoporosis. The story of the woman who anoints Jesus' head in a symbolic declaration of Jesus as the Son of God, the woman of whom Jesus says "wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her," (Mark 14:9), is hidden in the very long Passion narrative on Palm

Sunday in Year B. Her story is omitted from Matthew's account in Year A and absent from the approved shorter Gospel reading for Year B.<sup>31</sup>

Bosclair's concerns are entirely warranted. Jesus' declaration about the woman who anoints him is virtually a commandment to his followers to retell the story of what she had done; yet for the many churches that use the optional shorter reading of Mark's Passion narrative, her story vanishes. Bosclair is not alone in emphasizing the irony of the situation: the story's occlusion or omission was the springboard for a modern classic of biblical scholarship, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her*.<sup>32</sup> The omission of Jesus' healing of a disabled woman on the Sabbath also leaves one wondering about the lectionary committee's judgment. This distinctive story in Luke is one of the only healings in which Jesus heals someone without their even asking; it is paradigmatic of the compassionate characteristics of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus reaches out to her specifically to include her in the story of God's mercy, but her story is not included in the Gospel that Catholics proclaim on Sunday.

To build on Bosclair's line of argument, let us examine other influential women in the Bible who are missing from the lectionary.<sup>33</sup> Besides the abysmal lack of representation of household names like Ruth and Esther, the lectionary's Old Testament deletes other pivotal women from the history of Israel. The beginning of the story of the Exodus—the single most important narrative of ancient Israel—offers a clear case study. When the Egyptian Pharaoh became afraid that the Israelite slaves had grown too numerous in his land, he increased their hard labor and ordered the extermination of all Israelite infant boys to cull the population. He ordered two Hebrew midwives who assisted both Egyptians and Israelites with childbirth, named Shiphrah and Puah, to let the Israelite infant girls live but to kill the boys. "The midwives, however, feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt had ordered them, but let the boys live" (Exod 1:17). When confronted by a frustrated Pharaoh, they lied and said, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are robust and give birth before the midwife arrives" (Exod 1:19). God then blesses Shiphrah and Puah with healthy families, on account of their actions (Exod 1:20–21). Having been thwarted by their cunning, Pharaoh ultimately resorts to telling all his subjects to throw any Hebrew infant boy into the Nile River, which leads to the story of Moses' miraculous salvation in a floating basket.



This powerful story of the midwives' subterfuge spurs many reflections among the Jewish people still today, who hear it every year in the Torah portion and may ponder it anew on the feast of Passover. The Protestant *Revised Common Lectionary* includes it during a Sunday of Year A. But the Catholic lectionary includes nothing from Exodus 1 on a Sunday and, what's more revealing, the weekday lectionary omits *exactly this story* from its context when Exodus 1 appears (even though weekdays usually have *longer* Old Testament readings than Sundays do). It includes the story of Pharaoh's harsh oppression (Exod 1:8–14) and then skips directly to Pharaoh's command to throw the boys in the river (Exod 1:22). In the lectionary's version, this is a story entirely composed of men: of a male tyrant, of male slaves, of infant boys, and of a coming male savior in Moses. What's lost is a tale of successful nonviolent women's resistance to tyrannical power, standing up to a murderously toxic masculinity. The midwives trade on their feminine knowledge of childbirth and exploit Pharaoh's masculine ignorance of the delivery room. In the long view, what's lost is a clear case of women's ingenious and brave intervention in salvation history. Without their sly deceit, there is no basket in the river, no Moses, no Exodus, no Torah, no promised land.

The midwives spoke a righteous lie in the face of earthly power. The Catholic lectionary also eliminates women who spoke righteous truths. Key women prophets of the Old Testament do not gain a hearing, such as Huldah of Jerusalem. Her story is told in two biblical versions (2 Kgs 22:14–20; 2 Chr 34:19–28), neither of which appears in the Sunday lectionary. The weekday lectionary, however, includes the setup and conclusion of the version from 2 Kings (22:8–13; 23:1–3), while deleting Huldah's pivotal prophetic role from the middle. Without getting into too many details of the historical context, King Josiah was one of the righteous kings of Judah, revered for consolidating worship in one Temple in Jerusalem and recovering the Torah there (both the scroll itself and obedience to it). When Josiah heard the contents of the rediscovered book of the law—and realized the people had not been following it—he tore his garments in penitence and commanded Hilkiah the priest to “go, consult the Lord for me, for the people, for all Judah, about the stipulations of the book that has been found” and about why the Lord has been angry with Judah (2 Kgs 22:13). The king's command to his priest was to “go, consult *the Lord*.” What happens next, in the part omitted from the lectionary? The priest and his assistants went to “the Second Quarter in Jerusalem, where the

prophetess Huldah resided" (2 Kgs 22:14). She then utters to the group of male couriers two prophetic oracles in the pattern of "Thus says the Lord." The first explains the reasons for God's anger; the second explains God's honoring of Josiah's humility. Hilkiah returns with these messages from Huldah—from the Lord—and reports them to the king.

It's difficult to overstate how egregious this omission is. Here we have a story involving the main sources of power in the Old Testament: Torah and Temple; God, king, priest, and prophet. The one omitted is the woman, the prophet who, like the midwives, is the key to the story. Without Huldah's oracles, the lectionary's version makes it seem like, after the male king tells the male priest to consult the Lord, the priest just goes off in private prayer and comes back with an answer. What actually happens in the biblical version is that all six of the men involved—Josiah, Hilkiah, and his four assistants—know that Huldah is a conduit of God's will, and none of them question her words. What's lost is a distinctive voice of female authority during a crucial period of religious reform, a voice that was trusted by all the men in the halls of power.

As Bosclair and others have noted, the lectionary does better with inclusion of women in the Gospel readings, but not by much. The unique appearance of the resurrected Jesus to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11–18)—so famous in the history of art—is inexplicably omitted from the Sunday lectionary of the Easter season, skipping instead from the empty tomb to the subsequent scene with "doubting Thomas" (John 20:19–31). Sometimes the women of the Gospels are regrettably relegated to the optional longer versions of certain lections: for example, the prophetess Anna in the Temple (Luke 2:36–38) and the woman in Jesus' parable of the yeast (Matt 13:33) are considered optional when their day occurs. Patterns of omission continue in Acts and Paul's epistles, where none of the key women partners in Paul's ministry appear in the Sunday lectionary.<sup>34</sup> Foremost among these is Prisca (also called Priscilla), named six times in the New Testament, whose name is never read out on Sunday morning. Even taking the minimal interpretation of her significance, she and her evangelistic partner Aquila (possibly her husband) were leaders at three of the main centers of early Christianity: playing host to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18), then later leading house-churches in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19) and Rome (Rom 16:3–5). What's more, of the six times the pair occurs, Prisca's name is mentioned first four times. That means that when Paul greets people in the early Roman church at the end of his letter to the Romans, *literally the first person he greets is*



*Prisca*, who “risked her neck” for his life (Rom 16:3). Other women leaders of urban churches, such as those named at Philippi—Lydia (Acts 16), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4)—are also not mentioned on Sunday. Lydia’s story appears in the weekday lectionary, but even there the crucial verse about her role as host of the house-church in Philippi is omitted (Acts 16:40). That’s two women who appear to be hosting house-churches at the birth of Christianity, yet Catholic listeners don’t meet them on Sunday. On the other hand, the Sunday lectionary found space to include the admonition, “Wives, be subordinate to your husbands” (Col 3:18), as part of the readings for the Sunday after Christmas, the Feast of the Holy Family, in Year A. Difficult editorial decisions needed to be made, but the fact is that many positive and dynamic examples of authoritative biblical women have been left on the lectionary’s cutting-room floor.

One example of this pattern of omission merits special recognition in light of Catholic debates about women’s leadership. There is one shining instance when Paul unequivocally singles out a woman, unattached to a man’s name, for commendation and gratitude, and in so doing he refers to her as a “deacon” or “minister” of “the church at Cenchreae” (a town near Corinth in Greece). “I commend to you Phoebe our sister,” he writes, and calls her *diakonos* (deacon, minister) and *prostatis* (leader, benefactor). This comes near the end of his letter to the Romans (16:1–2), immediately after the body of the letter concludes. This is relevant because when ancient writers followed the conclusion of a letter with a commendation for a person, that person—in this case, Phoebe—was the letter’s courier.<sup>35</sup> Paul trusted her, presumably accompanied by an entourage, to carry his most weighty theological letter from Greece to Rome. And since she was not yet known to the Roman Christian assemblies, Paul offers this note of commendation to vouch for her status. So where is Phoebe in the lectionary? She is nowhere, and I mean nowhere. Even in the weekday lectionary, which covers almost all of the New Testament, there was no room to be found for her. That lectionary’s semicontinuous reading of Romans begins chapter 16 instead with verse 3 (the greeting of Prisca and Aquila). Through the weekday lectionary one does hear the names Prisca and Lydia, but Phoebe—the woman called “deacon” and carrying Paul’s letter to Christians at Rome—is left completely out of the Roman Catholic proclamation.

In Phoebe’s case, the lection excludes some verses by omitting them from the beginning, but other dubious lections have excised verses from within a text, rendering them in some cases incoherent or even changing their original meaning—as we saw with the Hebrew midwives and Huldah

the prophet. The designers of the lectionary acknowledge the interpretive pitfalls inherent in a lection that omits verses:

Admittedly such omissions may not be made lightly, for fear of distorting the meaning of the text or the intent and style of Scripture. Yet on pastoral grounds it was decided to continue the traditional practice . . . , but at the same time to ensure that the essential meaning of the text remained intact. One reason for the decision is that otherwise some texts would have been unduly long. It would also have been necessary to omit completely certain readings of high spiritual value for the faithful because those readings include some verse that is pastorally less useful or that involves truly difficult questions.<sup>36</sup>

These interpretive principles are consequential, yet ambiguous and unevenly applied. What constitutes “unduly long” or “pastorally less useful” or “truly difficult questions?” Readings from the Gospel are much longer and often engage truly difficult questions, such as the anti-family sayings of Jesus (Luke 12:49–53), or many teachings about giving away all one’s possessions. It is true that readings have been excised elsewhere from the lectionary for being unsuitable pastorally, such as the infamous scene where Jesus refers to some of his Jewish opponents as “children of the devil” (John 8:43–50, which never appears in the lectionary, even for weekdays). But what could be unsuitable pastorally about a woman acting with cunning to uphold God’s covenant? About a priest seeking God’s will from a woman, who speaks truth to power? About a woman “risking her neck” to host a house-church in Rome? About a woman being entrusted with the delivery and interpretation of a weighty theological letter to the Romans? Asking the questions in these ways suggests already their answer.

To conclude, let us consider the Old Testament passage that ends the book of Proverbs, an ancient repository of wisdom. In the widely used *Catholic Study Bible*, the passage is titled “The Ideal Wife.”<sup>37</sup> (I hasten to add that these headings are not in the ancient manuscripts.) From this idealized vision of mature femininity, what does the Sunday lectionary include (or not)? On the thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time in Year A, this is what the lector proclaims:

A reading from the book of Proverbs. When one finds a worthy wife, her value is far beyond pearls. Her husband, entrusting his heart to her, has an unfailing prize. She brings him good, and not evil, all the days

of her life. She obtains wool and flax and works with loving hands. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her fingers ply the spindle. She reaches out her hands to the poor, and extends her arms to the needy. Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting; the woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her a reward for her labors, and let her works praise her at the city gates.<sup>38</sup>

Into what image of femininity is the listener drawn? What makes this wife “worthy,” with “value” that makes her a “prize” for a man to “find?” She is good, especially in the domestic labor of making textiles and garments. She is charitable to others, not concerned with her physical appearance, and has religious zeal. She is praised in public for her labors (of weaving) and works (of charity). Undoubtedly this is a positive vision for a person, but it’s a limited vision for feminine virtue. The lection leaves no impression that its biblical excerpt jumps from verses 10–13 to 19–20 and then to 30–31. It has omitted almost two-thirds of this famous biblical passage (whereas the Protestant *Revised Common Lectionary* contains the whole thing).

What’s lost in the omissions is a full sense of this woman’s strength, leadership, intellect, and abundant provision for her family and neighbors. She is not simply stuck at home, but her business is part of a global network (“like merchant ships, she secures her provisions from afar,” 31:14). She has noteworthy upper-body strength (“girt about with strength, and sturdy are her arms . . . clothed with strength,” 31:17, 25). Her success as entrepreneur and manager has earned her surplus to invest in real estate and diversify her businesses (“she picks out a field to purchase; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard,” 31:16). The financial stability *she* has provided causes her husband to be prominent (and not vice versa) and thus frees the family from worry about the future (31:23, 25). All of this derives not just from her manual labor, as the lectionary implies, but from her “wisdom” and “counsel” that guided her entrepreneurial success (31:26).

The lectionary pairs the text with the Gospel reading of the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30), thereby making its omissions not only disappointing but also ironic. Jesus’ parable of the talents praises characters who take the money they’ve received and increase it through the world of commerce. (A *talanton* in ancient Greek referred to a sum of money by weight and only later became a term for a gifted ability, based in large part on allegorical interpretations of this parable.) But the lectionary’s scissors have cut out the many details of this woman’s success in commerce.

*She* is one of those to whom the master of Jesus' parable would have said, "Well done . . . I will give you great responsibilities" (Matt 25:21), but the listener at Sunday Mass doesn't hear any of the reasons why. To the listener at Mass, the Bible's "ideal wife" is not managing multiple global businesses and securing her family's financial future. She is weaving at home, not fussy about her looks, and sometimes volunteers with the needy.

Through these omissions that run throughout the lectionary, especially in the first and second readings for Mass, we see an undeniable pattern: the Bible may be an androcentric book, but sadly, the Catholic lectionary is worse.

### The Bible at Mass, Beyond the Lectionary

Besides the biblical Word proclaimed from the lectionary, some Catholics might have also prepared the readings in advance with their "small Christian community" or "base community," Bible study groups which are especially common in Latin America (see chapter 8). And most Masses also have a homily (sermon), which is crafted anew by each priest or deacon who preaches. There is such a wide variety of approaches to homiletics (preaching) that it would be impossible to generalize, save to say that most Catholic homilies focus on the Gospel reading and downplay the others (see chapter 2).<sup>39</sup> Biblical quotations and allusions are also embedded in prescribed prayers and responses uttered by the presider or the congregation. The biblical sources for these parts of the Mass have been compiled well in books and websites by others, so here I will conclude the chapter by summarizing just a representative selection, in order of their appearance during a Mass.<sup>40</sup>

The invocation "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit" and the subsequent words of the presider to greet the congregation are all biblical (Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13). The penitential rite of confession and reconciliation draws from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:23–24) and the epistle of James (5:16). The traditional "Gloria" prayer is replete with biblical quotations, starting with the words of the angels who greeted the shepherds on Christmas (Luke 2:14). The Creed, too, is almost entirely biblical, except for the term denoting Jesus' divine relationship that is translated "consubstantial" or "one in being." (The fact that the Greek word *homoousios* was not from the Bible is why it caused so much debate at the Council of Nicea in 325, the meeting of bishops which established the most influential Christian creed.)

Many of the prayers surrounding the Eucharist are biblical, such as the “Sanctus” (“Holy, holy, holy,” Isa 6:3) and “Benedictus” (Mark 12:9–10). The “words of institution” of the Eucharist are recited each and every Mass, drawing from Jesus’ last supper in the Gospels. Some versions of the Eucharistic Prayer go deeper into Old Testament stories of sacrifice, referencing the offerings of Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek (Gen 4:4; 22:12; 14:18). Just before the congregation receives the Eucharist, the “Agnus Dei” quotes from the Gospel of John (“Lamb of God,” 1:29), and the people respond with a quotation of the centurion whose servant Jesus healed: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul [servant] shall be healed” (Matt 8:8, adapted). The “servant” of that Gospel story is thus re-embodied as the “soul” of the one encountering Jesus in the Eucharist, who will “enter” as bread and wine “under the roof” of the recipient’s body. From the opening rites of blessing and penitence through the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Bible resounds as a proclaimed Word—even if there is not a single printed Bible to be found in the room.

### *A People of the Book?*

Recently one of my graduate students told me a story that seems a fitting way to conclude this chapter on the Catholic encounter with the Bible through Mass. She was the only member in her large Catholic family to have an academic interest in religion, and so relatives tended to offer her heirlooms from the Irish Catholic lineage. Among the objects that her elders wanted to pass on to her, they kept talking about “the family Bible” that she would get. Eventually someone would get it to her mother, they said, and then her mother could pass it on to her. Finally, the object arrived, and she curiously opened up the large book. To her surprise, it was definitely *not* a family Bible. In fact, it was not a Bible at all, but an old Roman Missal—the book out of which a priest reads when presiding at Mass. Not one of the members of her Catholic family had known the difference between a Bible and a book of prayers proclaimed at Mass. In their lived experience, was there a difference?

## The Old Testament and the Gospel

ANY TWO SIMILAR THINGS SET side by side can invite comparison: the colors of two kinds of trees in bloom, the temperaments of two siblings, the flavors of two salsas. When you behold only one flowering tree, spend quality time with just one child, or have only one salsa to taste, you interpret it more on its own terms and are pulled less toward comparison. Comparison between two juxtaposed specimens of the same group may be inevitable, but it can also lead to value judgments and negativity for the side perceived less positively. (For details, just ask any set of siblings.) During the Catholic Mass, the listener is presented not only two biblical specimens, but three or four from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles, and Gospels. The lectionary overall is like a curated museum tour of classic biblical texts. The lectionary's design, however, encourages specific comparison between just two of them: the Old Testament and the Gospel.

This chapter analyzes the juxtaposition of these two biblical readings, which sometimes also implies underlying assumptions about the overall relationship between Judaism and Christianity. How best to compare (or contrast) the two testaments of the Catholic Bible is a crucial, unique, and fraught challenge—a kind of sibling rivalry.<sup>1</sup> As the largest Christian denomination, with a globally influential lectionary, Catholicism has a big role to play in negotiating the relationship between the two testaments. At its best, the Catholic tradition can honor its historically preferred styles of interpreting the Old Testament without limiting the Old Testament to merely a preparatory role. There are high stakes for getting this relationship

right: ecumenical relations with Protestants regarding biblical literacy; respect for Judaism as a living tradition with its own valid interpretations of its Bible; and integration of the arguments of mainstream biblical scholarship into Catholic culture. Most importantly for Catholics, an oversimplified mode of comparing the Old Testament to the Gospel prevents listeners in the pews from discerning a main goal of the readings: a faithful Catholic characterization of God.

### Thematic Pairings

The most complicated way that the Catholic liturgical use of scripture shapes Catholic biblical interpretation concerns the *thematic pairings* of Old Testament readings with Gospel readings.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned already (chapter 1), the Catholic lectionary is governed by the principles of “harmony” and “semicontinuous reading.”<sup>3</sup> The Gospels and Epistles are usually read semicontinuously, but the Old Testament readings are always chosen because they are thought to bear some affinity with either the liturgical season or the Gospel lection of the day. It is worthwhile to spend considerable time analyzing what kinds of interpretations the lectionary pairings tend to generate—what kind of “harmony” between the Old Testament and the Gospel is proclaimed in Catholic liturgy.<sup>4</sup>

According to the official statement of principles undergirding the lectionary, “The best instance of harmony between the Old and New Testament readings occurs when it is one that Scripture itself suggests. This is the case when the doctrine and events recounted in texts of the New Testament bear a more or less explicit relationship to the doctrine and events of the Old Testament.”<sup>5</sup> By “more or less explicit,” the committee means a quotation of the Old Testament in the New (e.g., Isa 42:1–4, 6–7 and Mark 1:6b–11; Year B-Baptism of the Lord) or an allusion (e.g., Isa 5:1–7 and Matt 21:33–43; A-27).<sup>6</sup> These frequently provide helpful details for interpreting the Gospel reading, as with the allusion just cited, in which Jesus’ parable about a vineyard presumes a listener’s prior knowledge of Isaiah’s “Song of the Vineyard.”

In some cases, the method by which the lectionary offers an Old Testament quotation or allusion can reveal the form of biblical interpretation which it encourages. Consider the famous quotation of Isaiah at the beginning of Matthew: “the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Isa 7:10–14 and Matt 1:18–24; Advent A-4). Should the lectionary reproduce the proof-text method, giving only a short snippet of one text (the Old Testament) in order to prove the validity of



another (the Gospel)? Or should it provide a fuller context of the older text, so that the listener can understand and interpret its original context and mode of revelation? The lectionary offers the proof-text, so that the listener is encouraged to interpret Isaiah's prophecy to be about (and *only* about) the conception and birth of Jesus. But lectionaries from other Christian denominations offer a longer lection from Isaiah: the listener to a longer version could thus understand that, while Isaiah's prophecy carries a valid Christian interpretation in the birth of Jesus, the original author also believed the prophecy to be fulfilled centuries earlier through the family of King Ahaz.<sup>7</sup> The Catholic Church endorses such historical-critical approaches to the Bible in academic study (i.e., situating biblical units in their historical contexts, see chapter 8), but the liturgical use of scripture does not often reflect that.

When there is no opportunity for harmony with a quotation or a liturgical season—as in many Sundays of Ordinary Time—the Old Testament readings are chosen “above all to bring out the unity between the Old and New Testament . . . in such a way that they would be short and easy to grasp . . . to ensure that many Old Testament texts of major significance would be read on Sundays . . . not according to a logical order but on the basis of what the Gospel reading requires.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly they are “short” and do not follow any “logical order,” but on close examination, the other principles are satisfied less well. The “unity” of the Testaments is sometimes superficially presented, and too frequently a *disunity* is juxtaposed. And the “texts of major significance” are determined only by their relationship to the life and teachings of Jesus, not their stature in the history and theology of ancient Israel.

Let's step back a moment: when any two texts are juxtaposed because they are seen to correspond through some kind of thematic correspondence or harmony, the compiler of the texts has made decisions or assumptions that each text is about something singularly identifiable that can be clearly determined and abstracted from the text. In the lectionary this can be either a concept (faith, sin, hospitality, etc.) or a percept (water, bread, vineyard, etc.). The lectionary's framers have decided what concept or percept Gospel lections are *about*, theme “X,” and then searched the “treasury” of the Old Testament for one that is also *about* X (or in some cases, about *not* X). Representative examples specifically discussed in the meeting minutes of Study Group 11 include the concepts of sin, faithfulness, and covenant and the percepts of water and light.<sup>9</sup>



For some transparent texts, the decision that it is *about* X might be justifiable, but for the majority of lections (especially narratives, parables, spiritual teachings, and poetry), this presupposition is untenable. For example, one Sunday features some of Jesus' teachings on prayer in the Gospel of Luke (11:1–13; C-17). The X here is "prayer," and rightfully so—it is among the most transparent of Gospel passages. So what did the lectionary committee see in the Old Testament lection, which is the narrative of Abraham's dialogue with God about the fate of Sodom? This is one of the longest Old Testament readings in the entire Sunday lectionary (Gen 18:20–32), and it cannot be easily reduced to the X of "prayer." The dialogue is more about *the tension of mercy and justice*, or about *theodicy* (explanations for human suffering in a world governed by a God who is good) than it is about prayer. Even if we were to say it is about prayer, the blunt fact is that God subsequently *destroys* Sodom and Gomorrah: the next morning Abraham "went to the place where he had stood in the Lord's presence" and "saw dense smoke over the land rising like fumes from a furnace" (Gen 19:27–28). Is the listener thus encouraged to think that the intercession of Abraham was a failure, while the intercession of Jesus' disciples will be successful?

One might respond to these criticisms by saying that lectionary pairings do not coercively determine one's interpretation of these texts. I grant that the meaning of an Old Testament lection is not *exhausted* by whichever X the committee thought it was about, but the meaning is substantially *framed* by the pairing. Since the lectionary is a curated set of texts—with framing devices and thematic juxtapositions—perhaps an analogy to another type of curation might help us. The curator of an art museum or exhibition might choose to arrange individual paintings by their geographic origin or by their artistic school or by their chronology or even by their size, but sometimes she might choose to arrange them based on a perceived thematic correspondence. She might choose a percept like "blue" or a concept like "joy." In one gallery the viewer sees a blue guitar, a blue tree, and a blue geometric design. If one beheld each painting on its own—or as part of a different juxtaposition—one might never decide that the *color* of the guitar, tree, or design had a bearing on what the respective paintings were *about*. But when grouped together, the viewer has limited ability to avoid the striking connection of color, which at least initially guides the encounter. In another area, the curator might group paintings of a celebratory picnic, a victorious runner completing a race, and an ecstatic mother with

her newborn. The concept of joy, which has been abstracted from these paintings and used to connect them, might limit the viewer's experience, at least initially, to this singular concept. One result is that the viewer misses other salient aspects of the paintings, which would be clearer when viewed on their own terms: the excluded family member on the periphery of the picnic; the urban blight surrounding the footrace; the hyper-technological machinery dominating the birthing room. The juxtapositions, which allow us to see certain connections between the objects, also make it difficult to see other elements of each.

Back to the world of the lectionary and the liturgy: the texts seem to be presented to the congregation as *uninterpreted*, proclaimed without introductory remarks about literary genre or historical context; in reality, though, they are *pre-interpreted* by the use of boundaries, omissions, and the abstracted themes that guide one's encounter with the paired texts. While the method of lectionary pairings does bear some interpretive fruit, it also restricts one of the lectionary's best qualities. Ideally, each parishioner would return to these biblical texts over and over with a new set of ears, as the listener matures and integrates new experiences into interpretation. Many congregants could hear something new upon hearing a familiar parable again, or hearing the story of the Exodus once more. But thematic text-pairing tends to trap the listener in one pattern of meaning, especially about the Old Testament.

### The Old Testament and the Catholic Understanding of Jews and Judaism

In some cases, the way the Old Testament is presented—what X its texts are about—presents theological problems for the Catholic understanding of God's covenant with the Jews, and how it relates to God's revelation in Jesus. Consider the Sunday of Ordinary Time for which the lectionary prescribes readings from 2 Samuel and Luke (2 Sam 12:7–10, 13 and Luke 7:36–8:3; C-11). The historian Walter Sundberg recounts an especially poignant experience of these texts in the practical life of his Christian community. The congregation was enraptured by the drama of the Old Testament reading, a portion of the David and Bathsheba story: deceit, lust, coercive sex, betrayal, indictment, and conviction. What would the homilist do? What was the word of God trying to say to that congregation at that time? But soon, after a totally unrelated reading from Galatians, the readings continued with another dramatic story: the

deeply penitent woman who anoints Jesus with her tears and perfume. Sundberg writes:

After hearing 2 Samuel, many of us had a sense of being convicted by the law. Now after the reading from Luke, we were encouraged to identify with an extravagant act of repentance and Jesus' forgiveness. . . . I was not surprised when, after the service, one person even offered a Marcionite reading of divine behavior based on a comparison of the texts: "The God of the Old Testament kills babies," he said; "Jesus forgives those who weep." The lectionary had done its disruptive work yet another week.<sup>10</sup>

This story is anecdotal, but it captures a troubling truth about the liturgical use of the Bible: the lectionary frequently propagates problematic views of the Old Testament among Christians.

The Christian relationship with the scriptures of ancient Israel has been complicated since at least the second century of Christianity, when a Christian named Marcion—the historical figure referred to by the epithet "Marcionite" in the quotation above—gained a following for his extreme views.<sup>11</sup> In short, Marcion believed that the written scriptures of Israel were the revelations of a different God than the God revealed in the person of Jesus. He argued that the doctrines propagated by the God of Israel through their scriptures and by the God of Jesus through the memoirs of his life were actually antithetical to each other. Indeed, the theological work for which Marcion became famous was a list of these "antitheses." In tandem with his beliefs that Christians should reject the ancient Israelite scriptures and their God, he produced a Christian biblical canon that included only the letters of Paul and a modified version of the Gospel of Luke. The boldness of Marcion's theological arguments and his self-made canon attracted followers and zealous opponents—many educated Christians of the second century wrote treatises against Marcion. He thus forced a decision about a crucial theological topic—was the God of Israel the same God who revealed through Jesus?—and the end result for what became mainstream Christianity was a more developed conviction about the enduring theological validity of the ancient Israelite scriptures. Christianity chose to preserve and adapt these texts for Christian theology and ethics, even while emphasizing their contents in very different ways than Jews would do. To reject the validity or holiness of the divine revelations of the Old

Testament is called “Marcionite,” and it is arguably the oldest Christian heresy.

Heretical views associated with Marcion primarily concern a set of Jewish *texts*. When similar attitudes are applied toward the Jewish *people* and their *covenant* with God, we call that view supersessionism. When one thing supersedes another, it replaces something in the same spot, as when a kingdom has one throne which confers the status of rule; when a new person sits there, the former no longer has the throne or the status that comes with it. (To “supersede” is a compound word from Latin, with the basic meaning “to sit upon someone else’s seat” or “to displace,” unrelated to words like “precede,” from a different root relating to motion.) Hence the idea of Christian supersessionism is that Christians and their new covenant with God—their new testament—have displaced the Jews and their covenant with God. This “replacement theology,” as it is also sometimes called, has had a nefarious history, frequently being used to defend a divine justification for harsh attitudes toward Jews and Judaism.

To be clear, it is not only those affiliated with Marcion who have held supersessionist views. The theological currents that became mainstream Christianity (and eventually Catholicism) had frequently generated replacement theology from the second through the twentieth centuries, which led to incoherent biblical theologies and vicious anti-Semitism.<sup>12</sup> The “teaching of contempt” for the Jewish people—falsely justified by selective biblical citations—later created the conditions for violent expressions of anti-Semitism throughout medieval and modern Europe.<sup>13</sup> Tragically, it was not until after the horrors of World War II that the Catholic Church re-evaluated its official doctrine about God’s covenant with the Jewish people (see later in this chapter and more detail in chapter 8).

Both Marcionism and supersessionism are exaggerated distortions of the revelations of the New Testament and Christian theology. Like other seemingly persuasive falsehoods, they contain a partial truth. It is true that Christianity views the revelations of the Old Testament differently than those in the New Testament, especially with respect to the words and deeds of Jesus himself, whom Christians believe to be the Word of God in flesh and the fullest revelation of God. But this doctrine does not mean that the Old Testament should be viewed negatively. It is also true that Christian doctrine promotes a renewed covenant with God through Jesus, a covenant which became open to Gentiles (non-Jews) and modified the required expressions of God’s ancient covenants with Israel. Catholic

theologians maintain subtly different views on how to understand and express this matter, as do Catholic bishops and other arbiters of doctrine. But the crucial points of agreement—and arguably the most significant theological change in Catholic theology of the modern era—were encapsulated in the document *Nostra Aetate* at Vatican II, which declared:

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues—such is the witness of the Apostle [Paul]. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and “serve him shoulder to shoulder” (Wisd 3:9).<sup>14</sup>

How do these issues relate to the Catholic view of the Bible, and especially the interpretation of the Bible in liturgy? During the decades since Vatican II, several official documents were issued to help guide the Catholic approach to the Bible, especially with respect to God’s covenant with the Jews.<sup>15</sup> In 1974, ten years after *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican issued “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing” it in actual practice. Regarding the interpretation of the Bible, the guidelines explicitly reject Marcionism and supersessionism: “The Old Testament and Jewish tradition founded on it must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear, and legalism with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor.”<sup>16</sup> Another decade later, the Vatican further elaborated on the relationship between the two biblical testaments in “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” expressing the need to hold different ideas in creative tension. “Promise and fulfillment, continuity and newness, singularity and universality, uniqueness and exemplary nature: . . . promise and fulfillment throw light on each other; newness lies in the metamorphosis of what was there before; the singularity of the people of the Old Testament is not exclusive and is open, in the divine vision, to a universal extension; the uniqueness of the Jewish people is meant to have the force of an example.”<sup>17</sup> Even the use of the term “Old Testament” is clarified: “because ‘Old’ does not mean ‘out of date’ or

‘outworn’ but emphasizes the *permanent* value of the Old Testament as a source of Christian Revelation.”<sup>18</sup>

Faithful Catholic interpretation of the Old Testament thus requires the recovery of a balance between—and an acceptance of the tension between—notions of the “already” and the “not yet” of redemption. In *Faith and Fratricide*, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s seminal work on Christian anti-Semitism, she describes the *already* as “fulfilled messianism”: it focuses on what God has already done through Jesus; it emphasizes the assurance of individual salvation; it deemphasizes the second coming of the Messiah; and it exaggerates the Church’s absolute role in history.<sup>19</sup> These factors ought to be balanced with the *not yet* of “unfulfilled messianism,” which is also the heritage of Christian faith: it acknowledges the uncertain horizon of eschatological judgment; it seeks to imitate the life, message, and Resurrection of Jesus as a “paradigm of hoping.” Christian theology necessarily lives with the *already* and the *not yet*—the tension is built into its texts, its worship, its calendar. During each annual cycle of readings in liturgy, the attentive Catholic experiences the *already* and the *not yet* of redemption in the Bible.

These challenging theological conversations are ongoing. In 2001 the Pontifical Biblical Commission—a group of scholars appointed by the pope as an advisory council on Catholic biblical interpretation—issued a substantial document about the Jewish people and the Bible: *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. The document’s main question is: “What relations does the Christian Bible establish between Christians and the Jewish people?” This necessarily requires a study of the relationships between the Old and New Testaments, which “is indispensable for anyone who wishes to have a proper appreciation of the links between the Christian Church and the Jewish people.”<sup>20</sup> Consider the words of Pope John Paul II at the synagogue in Mainz, Germany, in 1980: “The first dimension of this dialogue, that is, the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God [cf. Rom 11:29], and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and second part of her Bible.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Catholics should not regard the Old Testament as an adequate overall representation of the religion of Judaism, which has evolved far beyond its ancient scriptural roots.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document speaks forcefully and radically at times. Its most salient moments for the study of the Old Testament concern the notion of fulfillment:

The Old Testament in itself has great value as the Word of God. To read the Old Testament as Christians then does not mean wishing to find everywhere direct reference to Jesus and to Christian realities. . . . The notion of fulfillment is an extremely complex one, one that could easily be distorted if there is a unilateral insistence either on continuity or discontinuity. Christian faith recognizes the fulfillment, in Christ, of the Scriptures and the hopes of Israel, but it does not understand this fulfillment as a literal one. Such a conception would be reductionist. . . . Jesus is not confined to playing an already fixed role—that of Messiah—but he confers, on the notions of Messiah and salvation, a fullness which could not have been imagined in advance; . . . It would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipations of future events. All the texts, including those which later were read as messianic prophecies, already had an immediate import and meaning for their contemporaries before attaining a fuller meaning for future hearers.<sup>22</sup>

This profound quotation comes from an official Catholic Church document, introduced and endorsed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI). But anyone with even a passing knowledge of the Catholic lectionary can see the problem: this style of biblical interpretation does not cohere with actual liturgical practice. The pronouncements of the officially sanctioned biblical scholars have not been incorporated into the liturgical proclamation of scripture.

The bishops themselves recognize this fact. In 2008 Pope Benedict convened a synod of bishops on the topic of “the Word of God.” A Catholic synod is a formal meeting of bishops and advisors on an assigned topic, which results in recommendations for improving some aspect of the Catholic Church. One of the resulting proposals from that synod stated: “It is recommended that an examination be carried out of the Roman Lectionary to see if the current selection and ordering of the readings is truly adequate to the mission of the church in this historical moment. In particular, *the bond between the Old Testament and the pericopes [selections] of the Gospels should be reconsidered, so that they do not imply an overly restrictive reading of the Old Testament or an exclusion of certain important passages.*”<sup>23</sup> This was an astute and narrowly targeted recommendation from a global meeting of bishops,



but to my knowledge, no further action has been taken. Pope Benedict's apostolic exhortation in response to the synod, titled *Verbum Domini* (2010), reiterated the enduring value of the Old Testament, denounced the heresy of Marcionism, and showed respect for the Jewish understanding of the Bible and interreligious dialogue.<sup>24</sup> He also recommended further instruction and "publications aimed at bringing out the interconnection of the Lectionary readings."<sup>25</sup> But he stopped short of advocating for reform of the lectionary's thematic pairings, even though the bishops themselves question whether they are "truly adequate to the mission of the church."

### Types of Relationships between the Old Testament and the Gospel

The correspondence of the two testaments is often labeled by Catholics with simplistic terms: for example, one is *law* and the other is *gospel*, or one is *prophecy* and the other is *fulfillment*. But to analyze the lectionary's pairings more precisely, I prefer to use the four categories outlined by Laurence Hull Stookey, an American liturgical scholar. Having four categories allows us to think beyond a false dichotomy that sees only two kinds of Christian texts—those that are supersessionist and those that are not. Stookey's descriptions equip us better to analyze typological hermeneutics in the New Testament and in the contemporary Christian pulpit. Typology (from the Greek *typos*, meaning model or pattern) is a term that describes a kind of biblical interpretation: it is "a theological way of understanding persons, events, or explanations, especially in the New Testament, by referring back to Old Testament 'types.' A type can be an event, like the Exodus from Egypt (1 Corinthians 10:1–6); a real person, like Solomon (Luke 11:31); or a story or parable like that of Jonah (Luke 11:29–30)."<sup>26</sup> Typological interpretations will recur frequently throughout this book.

For Stookey, the labels A and B refer to the type and the "antitype" in a relationship of correspondence between any two stories. For my purposes, A and B stand specifically for the Old Testament and Gospel readings, respectively, in the Roman Catholic lectionary.

#### *Four Possible Relationships between Old Testament and Gospel Readings*

1. *Revolutionary displacement.* B is utterly superior to A. B supplants A and reveals the weaknesses and deficiencies in A. B could not have arisen out of A. The emergence of B is an obviating judgment upon A. Hence B displaces A.



- 2. *Revelationary replacement.* B is so virtually identical to A as to have been predicted by the existence of A. A “prefigures” B in an obvious way. The emergence of B renders A an obsolete precursor, but B’s role is to fulfill rather than to judge A. B replaces A in every way that counts, without brutally displacing A.
- 3. *Evolutionary progress.* B evolves from A, though B may surprise us in its coming. The emergence of B may even enable us to see A in a new and fuller light. Yet B is a progressive evolution and thus is more advanced than A. However, both can exist together without B displacing or replacing A.
- 4. *Complementarity.* B is closely related to A, indeed develops from A, as in the third option. But no judgment is made equating development with positive progress. A and B co-exist as closely linked and complementary entities.<sup>27</sup>

In short, category 1 equates to what we often call “supersessionism.” Category 4 encapsulates the complementarity of A and B; there is no sense that one is better than the other. But categories 2 and 3 helpfully fill out the areas in between, which in fact is where many of our lectionary pairings reside. I have applied Stookey’s categories to the Catholic Sunday lectionary in Ordinary Time, to see what kind of relationships the lectionary establishes when it is not bound by seasonal traditions (e.g., Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter). Table 2.1 summarizes the results of using these four categories to classify the correspondences implied by the lectionary in Ordinary Time.<sup>28</sup>

Consider one example of each category, to get a sense of how they differ. The readings for Sunday B-6 exemplify category 1. The Gospel reading is Mark 1:40–45, in which Jesus heals a person with a skin disease. The Old Testament reading contains two short sections from Leviticus 13, which explain laws revealed to Moses and Aaron concerning skin disease. The

TABLE 2.1 *Categorization of Correspondences between Old Testament and Gospel Readings Implied by the Lectionary in Ordinary Time*

Category	1	2	3	4	ambiguous
Year A	0	9	6	14	5
Year B	4	14	5	8	3
Year C	1	7	7	14	5
Total	5	30	18	36	13

reading skips over all the nuances of the legal code and, in the end, declares that the afflicted person must live outside of the camp. The actions of Jesus are clearly intended to displace the prescriptions of the Levitical law.

Sunday A-21 provides a good category 2. Matthew 16:13–20 expresses Simon Peter's confession, Jesus' calling him the "rock" of the church, and Jesus' giving him the "keys" to the kingdom, symbolizing the power of "binding and loosing." Isaiah 22:19–23 recounts an oracle about a certain Eliakim, son of Hilkiah, who will receive the "key" of the house of David, with the power to open and shut with certitude. The keys given to Peter have not "brutally displaced" the key given to Eliakim, but Peter's keys render Eliakim "an obsolete precursor." Eliakim's key prefigures Peter's, but while the former's key functioned for only a brief period, the latter's key has eternal authority.

Category 3 can be seen in Sunday C-17, a pairing already mentioned.<sup>29</sup> The Gospel reading (Luke 11:1–13) is Luke's teaching on prayer, including the "Our Father" and the saying of "ask, seek, knock." The lectionary prescribes the narrative of Abraham's dialogue with God about the fate of Sodom (Gen 18:20–32). The intercession of Abraham was a form of bargaining with God about the balance of mercy and punitive justice, and it did not result in the saving of Sodom and Gomorrah, while the clear teaching is that the prayer of Jesus' disciples will be successful. Both types of intercession "can exist together," but Jesus' teaching on prayer is couched as a "progressive evolution" over Abraham's method.

Sunday A-18 provides a category 4 example. The Gospel is Matthew's "feeding of the five thousand" (14:13–21), during which Jesus heals the sick on the lakeshore and then feeds a multitude by miraculously multiplying the available food. The Old Testament pairs Isaiah 55:1–3, which begins: "All who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat." The listeners are also promised that "I will renew with you the everlasting covenant." These readings complement each other. Not only does the Old Testament reading characterize the provision of sustenance in Jesus' parable, it also promises to renew the everlasting covenant. The readings "co-exist as closely linked and complementary entities."

By my reading of Catholic doctrine—documents of Vatican II, along with recent teachings by the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the three popes of the past fifty years—category 1 is adamantly discouraged or even forbidden in Catholic biblical interpretation. Category 2 is questionable at best. The doctrinal documents overall prefer some combination of categories 3 and 4. The good news is that over half the pairings in Ordinary

Time are based on categories 3 and 4. But let us not avoid the bad news of how many examples of categories 1 and 2 exist in the lectionary. Year B is especially distanced from Catholic doctrine, when over half the pairings correspond through category 1 or 2. I hasten to add that the Gospel of Mark, the guiding text of Ordinary Time in Year B, is not particularly prone to supersessionist interpretations. Indeed, the Protestant *Revised Common Lectionary* pairs Mark differently, since their “Consultation on Common Texts” disapproved of many of the Old Testament lections chosen by the Catholic lectionary. Protestant lectionaries took over much of the Roman lectionary from Advent through Easter, but in Ordinary Time, they introduced semicontinuous reading of great Old Testament narratives.<sup>30</sup>

To see what one change in lectionary pairing can do to the implied biblical interpretation, consider the pairing on Sunday B-6 (which was my example of category 1). In place of the legal passage from Leviticus about skin disease, the Protestant *Revised Common Lectionary* substitutes 2 Kings 5:1–14, the story of Elisha and Naaman, who suffered from a skin disease.<sup>31</sup> This change solves most of the problems mentioned so far. It replaces a category 1 pairing with a 3 or 4; it adds some captivating narrative material from a previously neglected part of the Old Testament; it doesn’t propagate a negative stereotype of Judaism; and it narrates a unified identity of God, as healer of both Jews and Gentiles prior to the life of Jesus.

As a final note on the pairings, I do acknowledge that—to quote my own words from earlier in this section—it may be misleading to say a text “resides” in an “established” relationship to another text, since there must always be readers and preachers who give these static texts meaning and make them dynamic for new interpretive contexts. Indeed, one of Stookey’s points is that, even in lectionary churches, preachers play a big role in relating the Old and New Testaments. Nevertheless, the lectionary plays a prior and bigger role by framing and focusing the available interpretations that preachers give to these texts. The preacher, like a museum tour guide, may help the viewers see things they would not see on their own, but in the gallery of the Sunday lectionary, the guides are limited because the juxtapositions of the exhibits never change.

### The God of the Lectionary

These arguments suggest that Catholics often do not shape their liturgical use of the Bible in ways that appropriately represent the Old Testament and Judaism, and in some cases the lectionary pairings support supersessionist

tendencies. The pairings sometimes seem like interpretive booby traps into which homilists and their congregations are led. But even if one is not persuaded by the preceding arguments, a Catholic might yet still be critical of the Old Testament readings and pairings for reasons inherent to Christian theology itself. That is to say, if the lectionary is functionally the Bible for most Catholics, does this body of biblical texts offer an adequate Christian theology—a Christian doctrine of God?

If one focuses on the treatment of the New Testament, the answer is affirmative—notwithstanding some cogent criticisms (see chapter 1). The lectionary mostly succeeds at proclaiming the overall witness of the New Testament about the life, teachings, miracles, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, followed by the doctrinal elaborations and ethical evaluations of his earliest followers. An attentive listener to the Gospel and Epistle readings has a sense of who God is in the Christian conception and how Christians ought to believe and behave, in so far as God and God’s will are made known by the New Testament. But if one focuses on the Old Testament readings and their pairings, the tendencies of the lectionary can lead to theological problems.

Let’s examine the different genres of Old Testament lections chosen for the Sunday lectionary in Ordinary Time. As mentioned above (chapter 1), the lectionary overall is disproportionately skewed toward the prophetic writings from the Old Testament. But many choices of texts for the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter are bound by venerated ancient tradition. These seasons have a higher concentration of Old Testament texts interpreted as predictions. But during Ordinary Time, when the lectionary is not bound by calendrical or seasonal concerns, is the theology of the Old Testament better represented?

Table 2.2 contains a summary of the genres of Old Testament lections for three years of Ordinary Time. I divide them into six categories: law, narrative, prediction (or *fore*-telling), exhortation (or *forth*-telling), wisdom,

TABLE 2.2 *Old Testament Genres in Ordinary Time*

	Law	Narrative	Prediction	Exhortation	Wisdom	Other
Year A	3	4	12	10	2	3
Year B	4	11	12	0	3	4
Year C	1	14	7	3	7	2
Total	8	29	31	13	12	9

and other oracles.<sup>32</sup> These are different means by which divine revelation occurs in the Old Testament. The prophetic corpus of the Bible, which is the largest Old Testament genre represented in the Catholic lectionary, has sometimes been split into two different categories for purposes of analysis by scholars, just as even in English we use the term “prophetic” to mean two distinct rhetorical forms. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, could be labeled prophetic for his direct exhortations of the American people and American leadership toward justice for those marginalized by race—his *forth*-telling, which included both “speaking truth to power” and inspiring hope among the downtrodden. King also spoke like a prophet by *fore*-telling, as when he predicted a vision of the future in his world-changing “I Have a Dream” speech and later when he seems to have predicted his own imminent assassination at the end of his “Mountaintop” speech. “Prophetic” speakers in western religious traditions often use both of these genres.

There is not much legal material in Ordinary Time, even though law is a foundational mode of divine revelation in the Old Testament. And while the tally of lections does show a substantial amount of narrative, the stories are extremely short, usually five verses or less. Texts of prediction remain the highest percentage by genre, even in Ordinary Time, when the lectionary is not bound by traditions of liturgical season. At one of its first sessions during Vatican II, Study Group 11 signaled its predisposition for the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament by even referring to the first reading not as a reading from “the Old Testament” but from “the prophet.”<sup>33</sup> The committee later justified its disproportionate use of Isaiah in Ordinary Time by arguing that “the narrative of the early ministry of Jesus in Galilee had been influenced by the book of Isaiah” and that these Sundays show Isaiah “in light of the fulfillment of the Gospel.”<sup>34</sup> As for the moral exhortations of the prophets, these are not well represented compared to their proportions in the Bible, or even the liturgical use of the Bible among Protestant Christians or Jews. It is no wonder that most American Catholics would assume that the author of “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” was Martin Luther King during the “I Have a Dream” speech, instead of a quotation of the prophet Amos. The representation of wisdom literature is not insignificant, though the Hebrew wisdom texts (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job) are far outweighed by the Greek (Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach).

These choices of Old Testament lections present a general problem for Catholic theology: the current cycle of readings does not adequately portray the identity of God through law, narrative, or moral exhortation. The very limited use of the legal material of the Torah fails to honor God's ancient identity as a maker of covenants and the Israelites' timeless contributions to ethics. Some of the legal material is included only as a foil, as a negative example against which the Gospel is contrasted. Without a good dose of narrative and Hebrew wisdom literature, the lectionary also omits God's primary activities as the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the world.<sup>35</sup> In the words of one lectionary critic: "Lectionaries as usually conceived destroy the Bible as . . . God's story. God is the principal actor throughout the Bible, but Christian lectionaries leave the impression for the most part that the whole truth is told in the New Testament and that the Old Testament merely points to it. . . . Lectionaries tend to leave us to think that Jesus did it all, whereas all of what Jesus said and did pointed to God."<sup>36</sup>

The meeting minutes of Study Group 11 show that it had actually generated a substantial list of potential readings from Israelite history for the Sunday lectionary, including large portions of the essential stories of patriarchs Jacob and Joseph, along with many others.<sup>37</sup> But they ultimately chose to emphasize "short and easy" readings from the Old Testament, which eliminated most historical narrative from consideration.<sup>38</sup> With limited examples of God's acting through law or narrative history, the Old Testament lections lead the listener to believe that God's primary activity in the ancient past was to predict an ancient future, namely to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Certainly *part* of Catholic doctrine holds that to be true, that the scriptures of ancient Israel prepared for the coming of the Messiah, but the lectionary generates the sense that such was the Old Testament's *primary* function. To reiterate the words of the Pontifical Biblical Commission: reading the Old Testament as Christians "does not mean wishing to find everywhere direct reference to Jesus and to Christian realities."

These analyses bring into focus the challenge of adapting the theocentric Bible (a collection of texts revealing the God of Israel) to a christocentric liturgical year (an annual cycle commemorating the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus).<sup>39</sup> The best chance for a theocentric emphasis in the lectionary would be precisely during Ordinary Time, when the earthly

biography of Jesus' life does not govern the readings as strictly. As it is now, the attentive listener at Sunday Mass will encounter the identity of God as incarnate in Jesus, but will struggle to meet the God made manifest in the stories of ancient Israel. For all these reasons, if the lectionary is functionally the Bible for Catholics, its current pairings do not reveal an adequate Catholic understanding of God.

## The Bible in the Catholic Life Cycle

MOST JOKES TOLD BY PASTORS from the pulpit aren't very funny. Modern society offers limitless opportunities for comedy outside of church, and parishioners aren't going to Sunday Mass looking for a laugh. But I did hear a clever joke once during Mass—and it was also a very awkward moment. It was a family Christmas Eve service, and it went something like this:

Years ago, our building used to have a problem with bats in the rafters. If you look way up to the ceiling, you can see how birds and bats might like to live among those crossbeams. We tried everything we could think of to get the bats out of here. But nothing worked. The bats seemed determined to stay at church. Until one day, we figured out the solution. I got hoisted way up there with some holy water, and I baptized those bats! (*long pause*) And now they're gone almost the whole year. They only come back on Christmas and Easter.

Ouch. Awkward silence, then groaning. It doesn't much matter where I heard the joke. I remember the church, but not the pastor's name. In any case, the sentiment applies widely throughout Catholicism, especially in recent decades. Most Catholics do not fulfill their weekly Sunday Mass obligation. Most are not hearing all the Bible readings analyzed in the previous chapters.

It goes without saying that the “CEO” Catholics (those attending on Christmas and Easter Only) are not encountering much of the Bible



through Mass attendance twice per year. The Christmas story is culturally widespread anyway. And the longest biblical readings around Easter actually occur on Palm Sunday (the prior week), Good Friday, and the Saturday night Easter Vigil—not on Easter Sunday morning, when the CEOs attend. During the rest of the year, there are some other well-attended Holy Days, such as Ash Wednesday, All Saints Day, and the Feast Days of the Virgin Mary. All of these “solemnities” were accounted for in the tabulation and analysis of the lectionary in previous chapters. Then what other kinds of biblical encounters in prayer do Catholics have—even the CEOs—outside of regular Masses?

This chapter and the next build on the previous two, while extending our analysis into the other ways the Bible infuses Catholic sacramentality. Catholics do experience the Bible through life-cycle events (chapter 3) and devotional prayers (chapter 4), some of which involve public worship, while others are private. A typical Catholic attends baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. Some do private confession (also called reconciliation or penance), which is biblically based in its origin but not biblically shaped in actual practice. Some are present for the sacraments of anointing the sick or dying, which can be profound biblical encounters. A very small number receive or witness the rites of Holy Orders: ordinations of deacons, priests, and bishops.

This chapter will survey the biblical quotations, themes, and allusions that a typical Catholic encounters at such life-cycle events, with two crucial caveats. First, even as I use the term “typical” Catholic, I myself flinch—knowing that no such thing exists within the world’s largest human organization. Participation in the life-cycle events analyzed here (and the prayers analyzed in the subsequent chapter) varies widely in quantity and quality. Some get married but not confirmed; some go to confession frequently, while others have not been at all since their first Communion. Perhaps most obviously, rates of Catholic marriage have declined significantly since the mid-twentieth century, such that many Catholics will not encounter the Bible through the sacrament of Matrimony (and still yet other cultural changes mean that some Catholics will do so more than once).<sup>1</sup> Second, for those readers who are less familiar with Catholic services, let me clarify that not all of the biblical references during these life-cycle events are signaled as such to the congregation. Unless a person comes into the encounter with substantial biblical literacy, the listening participant cannot necessarily distinguish biblical texts used in prayer from

the other prayers of these services. But that does not mean words of scripture are not getting through. To the contrary, some Catholics have their deepest meditations on the Bible during peaks and valleys of the life cycle.

### Getting Baptized and Confirmed

The Catholic Church prefers, in so far as possible, for rites of Christian initiation—the foundation being baptism—to be celebrated in community at the Easter Vigil or some other Sunday. Those assigned biblical readings have already been included in the lectionary tabulations above (chapters 1 and 2). But there are other biblical allusions in the prescribed prayers of the Roman Missal, the (very large) book of instructions for those presiding at Catholic services.<sup>2</sup> For those initiated at Easter Vigil, baptism is depicted with a blend of new birth (John 3) and adoption (Romans 8) imagery. The biblical symbolism of water is recounted in multiple modes: God's Spirit hovering over the waters of creation; the exodus from slavery to freedom through the water of the Red Sea; the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River; and Paul's notion that an immersion baptism is a participation in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The blessing of the holy water for baptism concludes with a quotation from the book of Daniel: "Springs of water, bless the Lord. Praise and exalt him above all forever."<sup>3</sup>

Some baptisms occur individually, outside of a Mass. The prescribed prayers resemble those at Easter Vigil, while adding optional snippets from New Testament epistles: the presider can quote from "Put on the new man" (Eph 4:24); or "God has saved us through the bath that gives rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5); or "See what love the Father has bestowed on us, that we may be called and may truly be the children of God" (1 John 3:1). The Roman Missal elsewhere prescribes prayers for the blessing of holy water (available upon entering a church in all seasons except Lent), even including the blessing of salt added to the water. The blessing of salt water alludes to the prophet Elisha, who purified the waters of Jericho with salt (2 Kgs 2:20–22). Thus a multitude of biblical allusions resound during baptismal liturgies, but mainly for those with ears to hear.

A similar pattern continues at later sacramental rites: Confirmation, Matrimony, Anointing of the Sick, and funerals all include biblical quotations as part of prescribed prayers. Confirmation is a coming-of-age rite for Catholics entering adolescence. Catholics practice infant baptism, and so the sacrament of Confirmation offers a chance to renew and affirm the vows made on behalf of the infant in the past. Through the sacramental

sign of anointing by the bishop, usually during a special Mass, the rite celebrates the presence of the Holy Spirit and strengthens (“confirms”) the faith of a maturing Catholic. The appropriate age and degree of preparation for Confirmation vary, and many Catholics are not confirmed at all. For those who are confirmed around the early teenage years, some biblical readings and discussion are often involved. But just as often, the preparation focuses on the lives of model saints—choosing a “Confirmation name”—and lessons in doctrine, prayer, and morality. During the Confirmation rite itself, biblical quotations might include: “I will pour clean water upon you and I will give you a new heart; a new spirit I will put within you” (Ezek 36:25–26); or “The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit of God dwelling within us” (Rom 5:5); or “Rejoice in the Lord, all you who have been enlightened, who have tasted the gift from heaven and have been made sharers in the Holy Spirit” (Heb 6:4). Themes of renewal, maturation, and Pentecost are frequent. In some instances, confirmed Catholics receive a Bible as a gift during the process, though other items like rosaries, icons of saints, or medal necklaces are more common.

### Getting Married

For many Catholics, the celebration of Holy Matrimony or marriage offers their most robust biblical encounter since childhood. For starters, there are biblical allusions in the prescribed prayers for marriage, as there were in the other life-cycle events. But the main reason this event offers a rich encounter with scripture is that the couple is encouraged to make *their own choices* of biblical readings for the Mass. (Time to dig out that dusty Bible received as a Confirmation gift.) For cradle Catholics, the notion that a layperson might have a choice about what occurs during Mass can come as something of a shock. They might have come in with many opinions about the colors of the flowers, the style of musical accompaniment, or which ceremonial role to give that picky distant relative. But when it’s time to plan the ceremony, many couples have not yet given a thought to Bible readings. Catholics have been habituated to assume those readings are predetermined by the Church.

So when couples are presented with a list of suggested Bible readings from which they can choose—or they can even select others not on the list!—this can become a rare and meaningful biblical encounter for

Catholics. Reading through a provided list of suitable scriptures for the sacrament of Holy Matrimony may be the *only* time many Catholics have done individual, private Bible reading since their Confirmation or Catholic school days. And they are doing so for a pivotal and public day in their lives, one in which those they hold most dear will be present and attentive.

The helpful wedding preparation website sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops presents nine options for an Old Testament reading, seven from the Psalms, thirteen from the New Testament Epistles, and ten from the Gospels.<sup>4</sup> That results in 8,190 different suggested combinations that a couple can choose for Bible readings at their wedding.

### *Suggested Bible Readings for Catholic Weddings*

#### **Old Testament Reading**

Male and female he created them (Gen 1:26–28, 31a)

The two of them become one body (Gen 2:18–24)

In his love for Rebekah, Isaac found solace after the death of his mother  
(Gen 24:48–51, 58–67)

May the Lord of heaven prosper you both (Tob 7:6–14)

Allow us to live together to a happy old age (Tob 8:4b–8)

The woman who fears the Lord is to be praised (Prov 31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31)

Set me as a seal upon your heart; love is strong as death (Song 2:8–10, 14,  
16a; 8:6–7a)

A virtuous wife (Sir 26:1–4, 13–16)

New covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah  
(Jer 31:31–32a, 33–34a)

#### **Responsorial Psalm**

The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord (Ps 33)

I will bless the Lord at all times (Ps 34)

The Lord is kind and merciful (Ps 103)

Blessed is the one who greatly delights in the Lord's commands (Ps 112)

Blessed are those who fear the Lord (Ps 128)

How good is the Lord to all (Ps 145)

Let all praise the name of the Lord (Ps 148)

## New Testament Reading

What will separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom 8:31b–35, 37–39)  
 Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1–2, 9–18)  
 Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you (Rom 15:1b–3a, 5–7, 13)  
 Your body is a temple of the Spirit (1 Cor 6:13c–15a, 17–20)  
 If I do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Cor 12:31–13:8a)  
 One Body and one Spirit (Eph 4:1–6)  
 A great mystery of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:2a, 21–33)  
 The God of peace will be with you (Phil 4:4–9)  
 Love, the bond of perfection (Col 3:12–17)  
 Let marriage be held in honor by all (Heb 13:1–4a, 5–6b)  
 Be of one mind, sympathetic, loving toward one another (1 Pet 3:1–9)  
 Love in deed and in truth (1 John 3:18–24)  
 God is love (1 John 4:7–12)  
 The wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:1, 5–9a)

## Gospel

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven (Matt 5:1–12a)  
 You are the light of the world (Matt 5:13–16)  
 Wisdom of building a house on rock (Matt 7:21, 24–29)  
 What God has united, let no one separate (Matt 19:3–6)  
 The greatest commandments (Matt 22:35–40)  
 They are no longer two, but one flesh (Mark 10:6–9)  
 The wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11)  
 Remain in my love (John 15:9–12)  
 This is my commandment: love one another (John 15:12–16)  
 That they may be brought to perfection as one (John 17:20–26)

Many of the choices are obvious to frequent wedding-goers: “Love is patient, love is kind” (1 Cor 13), Jesus’ miracle of water-to-wine at the wedding of Cana (John 2), or the “Set me as a seal upon your heart” section of Song of Songs 2. Many also choose from the general highlights tour of the Bible: the Beatitudes (“Blessed are the . . .,” Matt 5), the creation of Adam and Eve (Gen 2), or the discourse on love from the Gospel of John (John 15). But some options are surprising: the proposed wedding readings draw disproportionately from the “Catholic” part of the Old Testament, with two options from Tobit and one from Sirach. For mixed marriages

between Catholics and Protestants, this presents a fascinating biblical encounter, when the Protestants go searching in their Bibles for texts that aren't there. Even more surprising is the rate at which the option from Tobit 8 is chosen. According to one online marriage preparation guide for Catholics in the United States, the Tobit 8 lection is the second-most chosen Old Testament option (approximately 20% of couples, after the Adam and Eve reading at 30%).<sup>5</sup> Tobit 8:4–8 narrates a prayer on the wedding night for Tobias and Sara, which recounts the prototype of Adam and Eve's union and affirms that marriage is "not because of lust, but for a noble purpose." The reading then implores, "Call down your mercy on me and on her, and allow us to live together to a happy old age." The fact that a reading from this relatively obscure biblical book is chosen so often suggests that many couples are actually reading through the proposed options, and not just choosing one that they already recognized.

The focus on Genesis, Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Song of Songs, Sirach), or the marriage in Tobit looks imbalanced but does make a kind of sense. The prophets don't have much to say about marriage, though the concept of covenant can be applied to a marriage bond (Jer 31). As for the Exodus, there's not much that fits with modern hopes about love that can be gleaned from forty years of wandering hungry in the desert. And many behaviors of Israelite kings and their armies in the Old Testament's historical books are downright scandalous to contemporary views about sexual relationships and marriage.

One peculiar omission from the options is the book of Ruth, the short historical work about a Moabite widow who marries into an Israelite lineage. The story emphasizes loyalty, generosity, and interethnic marriage in the ancestry of King David. Then again, the undeniable characterization of Ruth as part of a property transaction (Ruth 3–4) renders the text very difficult to incorporate in our era of consensual marriage. The most fitting line from Ruth for a marriage—"Wherever you go I will go, and wherever you stay I will stay; your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God"—is actually said by Ruth to her former mother-in-law Naomi, not to her new husband, Boaz (Ruth 1:16). (That did not stop me from once using the line in a song I composed for a friend's wedding, and none present complained about my biblical remix.)

No doubt there are many couples who miss these opportunities for a rich biblical encounter. The period of wedding planning is stressful, with hundreds of decisions to make for one day, along with long-term preparation

for the marriage. But for many Catholics, the chance to read, ponder, and curate a set of readings from over eight thousand possible combinations remains the most significant event of biblical interpretation in their lives.

### Getting Sick

“For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health.” So goes the traditional marriage vow. There is no doubt that someone will eventually get sick. When a Catholic gets very sick—requiring in-patient hospitalization, major surgery, cancer treatment, etc.—one might be offered the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. In this ritual, a person is anointed on the forehead and hands with blessed oil, pressed from olives or other plants, and prayed over for health of body and soul. The sacrament was formerly called “Extreme Unction” (or colloquially “Last Rites”), and it is still associated by many with preparation for death. Once while a college student in a pre-operative room before a surgery, I was offered anointing by a priest making the rounds. I asked, “Does this mean the procedure is more dangerous than the doctors are telling me? Am I at risk of dying?” The priest assured me that I would be fine, and that the Catholic Church had broadened its usage of anointing in recent decades, connecting more with its biblical roots.

Indeed, anointing of the sick is a special kind of biblical reference. This is one of the cases in which Catholics follow the texts of scripture more literally than Protestants do. Jesus’ own power as a healer was among his most famous attributes, even referring to himself as a “doctor” (Luke 4:23; Mark 2:17). Yet despite over twenty healing stories proclaimed in the canonical Gospels—not counting exorcisms—seasoned Bible readers can sometimes overlook this obvious characterization. People sought Jesus primarily as a healer, secondarily as a teacher. Even his opponents did not question his powers of healing; they challenged from whence he derived them, but not the powers themselves. His apostles also healed in his name, as described in the Gospels and book of Acts. When Jesus commissioned his apostles, they did go about preaching “repentance,” but they also “drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (Mark 6:12–13).

The medicinal properties of various ointments were well-known throughout the ancient world: from the “balm of Gilead” praised as a “physician” by the prophet Jeremiah (8:22) to the anointing oil of the Good Samaritan on the roadside (Luke 10:34). The most direct biblical



instruction about anointing for physical healing comes at the end of the letter of James and anchors the Catholic sacrament of Anointing of the Sick: “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (Jas 5:14–16).

Here as elsewhere in the biblical witness, bodily healing and spiritual healing are not fully extricable. The teaching about healing of illness rolls immediately into a teaching about confession and forgiveness of sin, just as Jesus’ healing of the paralytic ends with an injunction to go and “sin no more” (John 5:14; cf. Mark 2:9). The second-century bishop Ignatius of Antioch calls Jesus the “one physician, both fleshly and spiritual.”<sup>6</sup> And the contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that the “assistance from the Lord” in anointing “is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God’s will.”<sup>7</sup>

The recommended choices for Bible readings at the Anointing of the Sick focus on suffering and healing. The minister of the sacrament might read from Paul’s letters about consolation and encouragement by identifying with the sufferings of Jesus (2 Cor 1:3–7); or from the Gospel stories when villagers laid their sick in the marketplaces where Jesus passed through (Mark 6:53–56); or from a healing narrative that relates well to the specific condition of the ill person. The proposed passages are moving biblical texts for anxious moments.

But some options could leave the listener on edge. Consider the suggested prayer of King Hezekiah, a leader of Judah who had been healed from an illness:

Once I said, “In the noontime of life I must depart! To the gates of the nether world I shall be consigned for the rest of my years.” I said, “I shall see the Lord no more in the land of the living. No longer shall I behold my fellow men among those who dwell in the world. My dwelling, like a shepherd’s tent, is struck down and borne away from me; You have folded up my life, like a weaver who severs the last thread.” . . . Those live whom the Lord protects; yours is the life of my spirit. You have given me health and life. (Isa 38: 10–12, 16)<sup>8</sup>

One hopes that ministers of anointing provide the biblical context for this—and make sure to read all the way to the positive outcome at the end! Even though King Hezekiah was healed in the end, the majority of the excerpted prayer emphasizes his fear and imminent demise. Seriously ill listeners are not likely comforted by the image of God as “a weaver who severs the last thread,” regardless of whether they are elderly or instead are sick “in the noontime of life.” Perhaps here we see a vestige of the former “last rites” function of this sacrament.

### Getting Buried

Eventually, everyone’s “shepherd’s tent is struck down” and “life is folded up.” During this period of mourning, the Catholic funeral rites offer a final biblical encounter. As with the rite of Matrimony described earlier, participants in funeral liturgies can make choices of which biblical readings fill out the Mass. Due to the bereavement process and relatively quick time frame in which funeral preparations must be made, the choices for biblical readings at funerals are often given less study by the family members than wedding readings are. Frequently the bereaved make a quick choice or leave it up to the presider. For those who make their own choices, typical Catholic guidance documents offer seven choices from the Old Testament, ten from the Psalms, fifteen from the New Testament, and nineteen from the Gospels. The choices do include themes of lamentation, fear, and judgment, but they offer balance with themes of hope, resurrection, and peace. The pre-Vatican II funeral rites were often accused of being too dark, and the liturgical reform brought more light into the readings.

As with the marriage readings mentioned earlier, some of the most popular choices for funeral readings are from the wisdom literature of the “Catholic” Old Testament. Two of the seven options are drawn from the Wisdom of Solomon, while one comes from 2 Maccabees. A text from the book of Wisdom is probably the most commonly used in North America:

The souls of the just are in the hand of God,  
and no torment shall touch them.  
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;  
and their passing away was thought an affliction  
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.  
But they are in peace.  
For if before men, indeed they be punished,  
yet is their hope full of immortality;

Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed,  
 because God tried them  
 and found them worthy of himself.  
 As gold in the furnace, he proved them,  
 and as sacrificial offerings he took them to himself. . . .  
 Those who trust in him shall understand truth,  
 and the faithful shall abide with him in love:  
 Because grace and mercy are with his holy ones,  
 and his care is with his elect. (Wis 3:1–6, 9)

The reading balances justice and mercy, grief with hope, imagery of testing and sacrifice, with the ultimate promise that the faithful abide in God's loving care.

One testament to this text's prominence in Catholic funerary culture is imprinted at the university church on the campus where I work. Fordham University Church was built in 1845 and still retains its original wooden doors at the entrance (Figure 3.1). Everyone who has passed through has walked beneath an image of the Virgin Mary on the tympanum, the pointed arch above the doors. After World War II, when Fordham lost many students in military service, Cardinal Francis Spellman (then Archbishop of New York) dedicated a new war memorial just inside the church's vestibule and also added subtle symbols of the four branches of the military to the doors. To complete the memorialization, a Latin phrase was embossed above the doors: *illi autem sunt in pace*. Standing just above the doorway, Wisdom 3:3 is undoubtedly the most viewed biblical text on campus. General knowledge of Latin has dwindled, of course, but anyone who enters can read the explanation in the church's brochure (or quickly look it up on their phone). The simple affirmation, "But they are in peace," calls to mind the entirety of the beloved text from Wisdom as a prayer for the war's dead.

As for choices from the rest of the Bible, there is not one quite as dominant as Wisdom 3 for the Old Testament. Some of the most widely used from the Gospels include the Beatitudes ("Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted," Matt 5:1–12); or "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest," Matt 11:25–30). Many of the options promise consolation and security in the afterlife, as in the text from John: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place

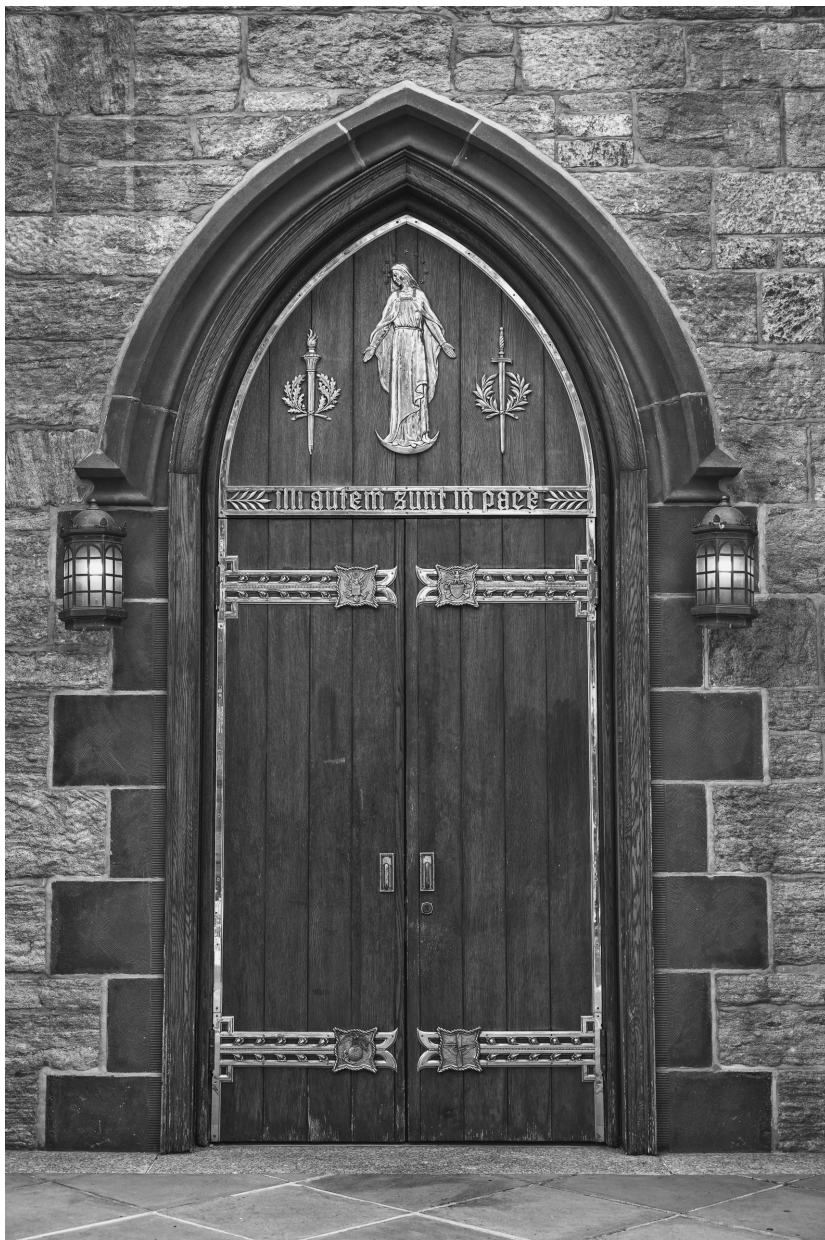


FIGURE 3.1 Main entrance of Fordham University Church, 1845 (modified 1948), Bronx, New York. Used by permission of Fordham University.

for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be" (John 14:1-3).

Other common choices that confirm eternal life come from the apostle Paul. The unique reading about the "rapture" was part of the pre-Vatican II funeral liturgy and remains important (1 Thess 4:13-18). Paul promises that the risen Lord Jesus will someday return and call forth the "dead in Christ" up to heaven. Some of the options deemphasize the Last Judgment of the dead and imply certitude about salvation. But others retain the balance of judgment and mercy that is characteristic of the overall biblical witness. The sheep and the goats are separated by Jesus in the afterlife, but one cannot be sure which side one will be on (Matt 25:31-46). The "good thief" on the cross next to Jesus is welcomed into paradise (Luke 23:39-43). But am I more like him or more like the thief on the other side of Jesus? A text from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians strikes the balance with rich imagery:

We know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven. We are always courageous, although we know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yet we are courageous, and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord. Therefore, we aspire to please him, whether we are at home or away. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Cor 5:1, 6-10)

The funeral readings thus embody the traditional Catholic "both-and" approach to doctrinal topics. Is one saved by faith or by works? Is one assured of the promise of salvation by God, or is one's eternal life determined by choices made in this earthly life? The Catholic answer—perhaps the biblical answer—to these either-or questions is simply "Yes."

### *Biblical Allusions in the Requiem Mass*

Besides the choices of readings, there have been other texts distinctive to a traditional Catholic Requiem Mass. Such Masses, named for the opening words "*Requiem aeternam*" ("eternal rest"), occupy a unique role in Catholic culture. The traditional medieval Gregorian chants from the Requiem



influenced musicians for centuries and later inspired many composers to set the texts to new music—Mozart’s and Verdi’s versions becoming the most famous of all. Since the reforms of Vatican II, most Catholics no longer experience the full Requiem Mass, but phrases and allusions live on through consistent musical performances around the world. The most distinctive texts of the Requiem include the Introit *Requiem aeternam* (the introduction), the Sequence *Dies irae* (sequences are traditional poetic texts specific for a particular kind of Mass), and—in most versions—the final chant *In paradisum* (sung at the final commendation and incensing of the casket).

The opening lines of the Introit are often still retained in contemporary Catholic funerals, proclaimed as a call and response. The presider might say, “Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,” and the congregation responds, “And let perpetual light shine upon them.” The idea of a blessed death as a “rest” or “sleep” needs little explanation, but one can note how Hebrews 4:9–11 offers a reinterpretation of the concept of Jewish Sabbath “rest” as an eschatological “rest” in the afterlife. Light is a ubiquitous metaphor in scripture, but “perpetual” light refers best to the vision of the new Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. “Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun” in the new Jerusalem, “for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:5). The traditional Introit concludes with poetic parallelism about Zion and Jerusalem, based on Psalm 65:2–3: “A hymn in Zion is fitting for you, O God. And a vow shall be paid to you in Jerusalem. Hear my prayer, all flesh shall come before you.”

Considered together, these texts send us to a source from the Christian apocrypha. A book included as an appendix in the Latin Vulgate since the sixteenth century, there called 4 Esdras, is labeled in the apocrypha of modern Study Bibles as 2 Esdras (and often divided up further into three distinct units). The opening chapters consist of prophetic oracles and judgments ascribed to the biblical Ezra, though scholars date these texts to centuries later than him. Ezra’s encouragement to all “nations that hear and understand” resonates most clearly with the Requiem’s Introit: “Wait for your shepherd; he will give you everlasting rest [*requiem aeternitatis*], because he who will come at the end of the age is close at hand. Be ready for the rewards of the kingdom, because perpetual light [*lux perpetua*] will shine on you evermore” (2 Esd 2:34–35).<sup>9</sup> He goes on to see a vision on Mount Zion of a great multitude of holy ones “who have put off mortal clothing and have put on the immortal” (2:45). Similar imagery from

the Introit is repeated later in the Requiem Mass during the reception of Communion, a text which often concludes the musical settings.

The centerpiece of the Requiem Mass, though, is undoubtedly its Sequence. A Sequence is a traditional poetic text curated for a specific Mass, only a few of which remain in regular use (the mostly medieval texts used on Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Corpus Christi). The Sequence *Dies irae* (“Day of wrath”) was designated for Masses for the dead, and is still sometimes used on All Souls’ Day (November 2, an annual Mass of commemoration of the faithful departed). It is attested from at least the thirteenth century and traditionally attributed to the Franciscan Thomas of Celano. In Mozart’s *Requiem*, the poem occupies almost half of the total lyrics and over one-third of the musical duration. Considering the regularity of human death during the centuries of the poem’s liturgical use—a period including the bubonic plague in Europe and many modern wars—one can fairly say that the *Dies irae* is among the non-biblical texts proclaimed most often in Catholic Church history. It remains, especially in its original Latin poetry, among the most gripping Catholic texts of all time.

And yet, perhaps labeling it “non-biblical” is not quite right. The form and tone of the text embody the biblical Psalms of lamentation. The lyrics and themes channel direct influence from the prophets, Gospels, and epistles.

The rhyme scheme and meter of the Latin are notoriously difficult to translate into English, such that nineteenth-century polymath Abraham Coles published a popular book of thirteen (!) different translations of it. In his introduction to that somewhat obsessive labor of love, he captures the Psalmist’s ethos in the poem, rooting it in the opening lines of Psalm 130 (*De profundis*, “Out of the depths”):

A vital sincerity breathes throughout. It is a cry *de profundis*; and the cry becomes sometimes—so intense are the terror and solicitude—almost a shriek. . . . Every line weeps. Underneath every word and syllable, a living heart throbs and pulsates. The very rhythm, or that alternate elevation and depression of the voice . . . one might almost fancy were synchronous with the contraction and the dilation of the heart. It is more than dramatic. The horror and the dread are real: are actual not acted. A human heart is laid bare, quivering with life, and we see and hear its tumultuous throbings. We sympathize—nay, before we are aware, we have changed places. We, too, tremble and quail and cry aloud.<sup>10</sup>



When studying the text carefully, we can see other powerful biblical resonances. But first, we need a translation to examine. Among the many available, I include here the English version most commonly used by American Catholics in the period before liturgical reform. This is the version included under “Daily Mass for the Dead” in the *Saint Joseph’s Daily Missal*, a book of prayers and readings distributed at least as widely as the Bible in mid-twentieth century American Catholicism. (I’m transcribing it directly from my dad’s childhood copy—the same dad who didn’t own a Bible.)

*Dies irae*

Latin original, 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> c.

Translation as printed in the *Saint Joseph’s Daily Missal* (1959)<sup>11</sup>

That day of wrath, that dreadful day,  
shall heaven and earth in ashes lay,  
as David and the Sybil say.

What horror must invade the mind  
when the approaching Judge shall find  
and sift the deeds of all mankind!

The mighty trumpet’s wondrous tone  
shall rend each tomb’s sepulchral stone  
and summon all before the Throne.

Now death and nature with surprise  
behold the trembling sinners rise  
to meet the Judge’s searching eyes.

Then shall with universal dread  
the Book of Consciences be read  
to judge the lives of all the dead.

For now before the Judge severe  
all hidden things must plain appear;  
no crime can pass unpunished here.

O what shall I, so guilty plead?  
and who for me will intercede?  
when even Saints shall comfort need?

O King of dreadful majesty!  
grace and mercy You grant free;  
as Fount of Kindness, save me!

Recall, dear Jesus, for my sake  
you did our suffering nature take,  
then do not now my soul forsake!

In weariness You sought for me,  
and suffering upon the tree!  
let not in vain such labor be.

O Judge of justice, hear, I pray,  
for pity take my sins away  
before the dreadful reckoning day.

Your gracious face, O Lord, I seek;  
deep shame and grief are on my cheek;  
in sighs and tears my sorrows speak.

You Who did Mary's guilt unbind,  
and mercy for the robber find,  
have filled with hope my anxious mind.

How worthless are my prayers, I know,  
yet, Lord, forbid that I should go  
into the fires of endless woe.

Divorced from the accursed band,  
O make me with Your sheep to stand,  
as child of grace, at Your right Hand.

When the doomed can no more flee  
from the fires of misery  
with the chosen call me.

Before You, humbled, Lord, I lie,  
my heart like ashes, crushed and dry,  
assist me when I die.

[Full of tears and full of dread  
is that day that wakes the dead,  
calling all, with solemn blast  
to be judged for all their past.

Lord, have mercy, Jesus blest,  
grant them all Your Light and Rest. Amen.]<sup>12</sup>

The opening lines in Latin introduce the meter and threefold rhyme, which the translator has approximated in English.

*Dies irae, dies illa,  
solvet saeculum in favilla,  
teste David cum Sibylla.*

And the biblical resonances begin immediately. *Dies irae, dies illa* quotes one of the prophets of doom, Zephaniah, who pronounced a day of wrath and judgment upon ancient Judah. In the Latin Vulgate, Zephaniah's oracle sounds as dark as the Requiem Sequence which it inspired:

*Dies irae, dies illa,  
dies tribulationis et angustiae,  
dies calamitatis et miseriae,  
dies tenebrarum et caliginis,  
dies nebulae et turbinis,  
dies tubae et clangoris* (Zeph 1:15–16).

Not only will there be a day of wrath, but also a day of tribulation, anguish, calamity, misery, darkness, obscurity, clouds, whirlwinds, trumpets, and alarms. In other words, if the Catholic Sequence feels foreboding, one can blame the biblical prophets as much as the medieval poets.

The prophecy of coming judgment is not only biblical, from the lineage of David, but also from secular prophets, the various Sibylline oracles of the ancient world. These female oracles from various locations—Delphi, Cumae, etc.—influenced early Christian storytelling and imagery. In the medieval *Golden Legend* and related artworks, a Sibyl in Rome prophesied to Caesar Augustus of the coming birth of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> And the ceiling of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel is framed with twelve prophetic figures, but they are not the twelve “minor prophets” of the Old Testament. Rather,

Michelangelo depicts seven biblical prophets and five Sibyls woven together, apparently on equal footing, representing the medieval world's ratified powers of prognostication.

With the central theme of the Last Judgment, the *Dies irae* draws from the biblical book of Revelation. The deceased stands before the "Throne" and the "Judge," in order to learn what the "Book of Consciences" has recorded of one's earthly life. The "book of life," an image taken over from apocalyptic Judaism (Dan 12:1–3; cf. Phil 4:3), appears five times throughout Revelation, as a symbol of God's just judgment. "Standing before the throne . . . the dead were judged according to their deeds" written in "the book of life" (Rev 20:11–12). The *Dies irae* also expresses other apocalyptic images from scripture. The "trumpet" and "flames" of the apocalypse are widespread throughout biblical prophecy, with a specific vision of fiery conflagration in 2 Peter (3:8–13). The stanza that includes "O make me with Your sheep to stand" is a much clearer biblical allusion to the Gospel of Matthew (25:31–45) in the Latin poem, whose more literal (less poetic) translation could be, "Grant me a place among the sheep, and separate me from the goats, establishing me on your right side."

Fire and brimstone notwithstanding, the poem does not lack mercy. About half of the stanzas appeal to the "grace and mercy" of Jesus, the "fount of kindness" expressed through his suffering, or a related notion. Such concepts resound throughout the New Testament generally, and specific works of mercy are alluded to near the end of the poem. The stanza about "Mary" and the "robber" shows poetic efficiency in the Latin:

*Qui Mariam absolvisti,  
et latronem exaudisti,  
mihi quoque spem dedisti.*

Here we see two episodes from the Gospel of Luke. We can understand "you who absolved Mary" when we note that the unnamed "sinful woman" who anoints Jesus at dinner with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50) was later ascribed the identity of Mary Magdalene in church tradition and art (see chapter 6). Jesus also "heard" the request of the "robber"—the "good thief" on the cross next to Jesus—and let him into paradise that very day (Luke 23:39–43). The poet of the *Dies irae* prays that "this day" might *not* be a "day of wrath," but a day like that of the penitent anointing woman or the penitent thief, a day that leads to paradise. The stanza concludes,

“This hope you have given me,” a hope founded explicitly upon biblical references.

When the Mass is ended, while the casket is incensed and the departed prepares to depart the building, many traditional Catholic funerals have concluded with *In paradisum*. This brief chant has been resilient due to its melodic beauty and heart-rending timing.

May the angels lead you into paradise;  
at your arrival may the martyrs receive you  
and lead you into the holy city of Jerusalem.  
May the chorus of angels receive you  
and with Lazarus, once poor,  
may you have eternal rest.

The chant recapitulates the biblical themes from the Introit: asking for a welcome into the “holy city of Jerusalem” and “eternal rest.” The hope for “paradise,” which the good thief entered, recalls the goodness of Eden’s paradise, too, where angels guard the tree of life (Gen 3:24). The final biblical reference of the Requiem Mass is to “Lazarus, once poor.” While there may be a secondary allusion to Lazarus of Bethany, whom Jesus raised from the dead (John 11), the qualifier “poor” (*paupere*) indicates a primary reference to the poor Lazarus of Jesus’ parable about the afterlife (Luke 16:19–31). This Lazarus, a beggar at a rich man’s gate, died poor but righteous and was “carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham” (Luke 16:22). So, too, the chant beseeches a “chorus of angels” to receive the deceased of the funeral Mass. Jesus’ parable was not only about the social ethics of wealth and poverty, but it also served as a warning about the reality of Last Judgment, of the divide between blessedness and torment. Therefore, just as the prophets of doom and the condemned rich man of the parable wanted to send warnings to their living kinsmen, in order that they might live in more holiness while they had the chance, so also the Requiem Mass promises both exacting justice and overwhelming mercy to those in the congregation.

~

Now, all those words just heard at the funeral—formal prayers, biblical readings, biblically infused poems and songs—all those happen at the front of the church or in the choir loft. But what’s going on for everyone else in

attendance, those crouched in the pews or pacing the edges of the sanctuary before candle-lit saints?

If there are traditional Catholics in attendance, before and during the funeral there are almost certainly some people kneeling in prayer, thumbing beads, mumbling words memorized long ago. In meditative prayer, they are imagining the joys and sufferings of their deceased loved one, uniting those with the joys and sufferings of Jesus and Mary. If they are holding their own copy of the *Saint Joseph's Daily Missal*, they could even turn to the glossy, full-color back pages to reference the mysteries of the rosary or the Stations of the Cross. As we turn from the pulpit to the pews and family homes, we enter another rich world of prayer animated by biblical stories.

## The Bible in Catholic Prayer and Devotion

### Biblical Visualization in Prayer

As this book transitions from the Bible in Catholic worship to the Bible in Catholic imagination, an appropriate bridge is the concept of visualization. Much of the Catholic approach to the Bible in prayer involves visualization in one's mind, not only of what scripture says, but also of the worlds that might exist between its lines. Many Catholics have learned such methods of prayer from Ignatian spirituality, the five-hundred-year-old tradition stemming from St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (S.J., "the Jesuits"). The worldwide Jesuit educational system has left its mark on the prayer lives of countless Catholics.

James Martin, S.J., a best-selling contemporary spiritual writer who has brought Ignatian spirituality to millions of readers, describes well the style of biblical prayer called Ignatian contemplation, imaginative prayer, or composition of place.

Ignatian contemplation encourages you to place yourself imaginatively in a scene from the Bible. For example, if you're praying about Jesus and his disciples caught in a boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee, you would try to imagine yourself on board with the disciples, and ask yourself several questions as a way of trying to place yourself in the scene.

You might ask: *What do you see?* How many disciples are in the boat? What is the expression on their faces? How rough is the sea? *What do you hear?* The howling wind? The fishing tackle shifting about in the boat?



*What do you smell?* You're in a fishing boat, so you might smell residues from the day's catch. *What do you feel?* Homespun clothes were probably heavy when soaked by storm-driven water. *And what do you taste?* Maybe the spray on your lips. With such imaginative techniques you let the Gospel passage play out in your mind's eye, and then you notice your reactions.

Ignatian contemplation doesn't require any special spiritual talents. Nor does it require you to believe that every single detail of the narrative is accurate. (As we will see, some Gospel accounts of the same events disagree.) It merely asks you to enter into Bible stories imaginatively and to accept that God can work through your imagination to help you see things in fresh ways.<sup>1</sup>

Fr. Martin has guided thousands of listeners in person through such biblical prayer experiences, not to mention the millions learning them through his books. This pattern of reading exemplifies the Catholic emphases articulated at the beginning of this book: Story, Imagination, Sacrament. To be sure, biblical visualization in prayer existed long before the Jesuits, as modeled by medieval mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila, St. Bonaventure, and St. Hildegard of Bingen. As presented in this book's Introduction, Michelangelo's *Pietà* also embodies a prayerful imagination between the lines of the text. Such visualization remains an essential mode of how the Bible infuses Catholic spiritual life. "God can work through your imagination."

While I was writing this book, I was asked to contribute to a collection of Catholic prayers, to compose a short "Prayer Before Reading Scripture." Initially I demurred, not having ever composed a prayer that many others might read and re-read as their own. But when I pondered what is *Catholic* about reading scripture, words for a prayer began to emerge. Catholic reading of scripture is usually done in community, it listens more than it reads, and, at its best, it visualizes. It imagines.

### *Prayer Before Reading Scripture*

Author of life, your Word echoes  
Through sounds of creation,  
Through friends and strangers,  
And also through these pages,  
Bound by modern cover,  
Sealed with our ancient sign of the cross.

Yet when we hear your Word,  
We don't always incline our ears.  
Sometimes we do listen, but fail to imagine.  
Help us to imagine:  
A welcome table set by Sarah and Abraham,  
Hosting angels unawares.  
Each dusty step of ascent to the Temple mount,  
Singing Hallelujah with labored breath.  
The raised eyes of Martha and Mary,  
Praying breath for their brother.  
Children laughing on Galilean grass,  
Eating bread and more bread.  
Author of life,  
As we read these written words,  
The imprint of your divine Word,  
Help us to imagine anew  
The worlds between your lines.<sup>2</sup>

Imagining the worlds between the lines of the Bible is not exactly a *method* of interpretation in the sense that a method might yield similar results among different users. Rather, biblical visualization is more like opening up a mental sense to the possibilities of meaning. It can lead to beauty, to fear, to confusion, to compassion. This sense is not a style exclusive to Catholics, of course; in a way, all reading requires an act of imagination to participate in the meaning of a text.

Great biblical interpreters from all traditions have rich imaginations. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s presentation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan during his famous "Mountaintop" speech (April 3, 1968) hinges on his biblical imagination between the lines. He pivots from traditional readings of the text to his own emphasis on fear and race by using a process of composition of place along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, combined with Ignatian imagination about those who passed by the man in the ditch on the roadside. "Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop," says King, and "I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me."<sup>3</sup> He proceeds to deliver one of the most compelling interpretations ever uttered of Jesus' famous parable, entirely based on his imagination of the worlds between the lines of the biblical text.

To those who say they do *not* do such acts of imagination—that they merely stick to the literal text—such a claim can be easily disproven. Here’s a question I have often asked rooms full of Bible-reading Christians: “Where was Mary when she met the angel Gabriel and received the message of her miraculous pregnancy?” Those brave enough to answer usually say, “at home.” But the text does not tell us anything at all about the setting of this famous event. Literally no information is provided about the circumstances of the Annunciation, except that it happens in the town of Nazareth (Luke 1:26–28). Was she at home? Walking through the village? Drawing water from a well? Our *imaginations* fill out the scene: we see her room, her clothes, her posture, the tilt of her head, something she’s holding in her hand. The history of Christian art plays a big role in this process, as this book’s subsequent chapters and conclusion will show. But with or without that history of art, our imaginations always already read between the lines. Catholics have honed that mental faculty for centuries.

Imaginative prayer with the Bible can be found from the earliest centuries of Christianity, but it seems to have fully bloomed in the medieval period. In the words of Jean Leclercq’s study of monastic culture, the luminaries of medieval spirituality “counsel the renunciation of carnal images; but this is in order to substitute for them a holy imagination. The sanctification of the imagination results in their attachment to the slightest particulars of the text, and not merely to the ideas it contains.”<sup>4</sup> Medieval Catholic readers of scripture were rarely fixed only on the literal sense or its doctrinal concepts, but rather the spiritual senses that blossomed from the words. Their allegorical interpretations of the figurative language of the Old Testament, especially of the Psalms and Song of Songs, dug deep wells of meaning. During periods of intense prayer, some experienced visionary flashes of biblical understanding, and those who sustained these visions are thought of as Christian mystics.

Consider how Hildegard of Bingen explains and justifies her visionary experiences with reference to biblical understanding. This twelfth-century polymath—a poet, musical composer, theologian, founder of a community, and writer on medicine and nature—claims that a sudden midlife illumination granted her a full and immediate understanding of scripture.

It happened that, in the eleven hundred and forty-first year of the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding

brilliance came and permeated my whole brain and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel, and the other catholic volumes of the Old and the New Testaments, though I did not have the interpretation of the words of their texts or the division of the syllables or the knowledge of cases and tenses.<sup>5</sup>

Years of prayer and visions had culminated in a biblical understanding seemingly unrelated to any activity we would consider “Bible study.” The actualization of her biblical interpretations through mystical visions and poetry also allowed her to function as a creative thinker within the patriarchal context of medieval Catholicism.<sup>6</sup> And as usual in Catholic interpretation, the Psalms and Gospels were her foundation.

In his book *The Flowering of Mysticism*, church historian Bernard McGinn charts the growth of medieval mystics and their styles of biblical interpretation. He highlights the many influential women mystics in both lay communities and religious orders, such as the Cistercian women of thirteenth-century Helfta (Germany), who produced the largest single collection of women’s mystical writings of the medieval era. Their visions emerged from lives permeated by scripture and liturgy. McGinn is careful to note that these were not usually sudden flashes of light, as if possessed by an external force. “It might be better,” he writes, “to speak of them as ‘visualizations’ rather than visions, in order to stress the fact that they are imaginative creations ‘seen’ by the mystic as she strives to appropriate the inner meaning of the action of the liturgy.”<sup>7</sup> In the case of the mystic Mary of Oignies, an early leader in the “Beguine” spiritual movement of lay women founded in Belgium, a lifetime of hearing scripture in prayer eventually led to a profound exposition of its meaning as she approached death. Her contemporaneous biographer observed how she finished her mortal life with three uninterrupted days of singing, and the content of her lyrics was not comprised of hymns but original biblical interpretation. “She expounded in a new and wondrous way certain things about the divine scriptures, subtly explaining many things about the Gospel, the Psalms, and the Old and New Testaments that she never heard.”<sup>8</sup>

Many other prophetic women followed in subsequent decades; and some rarely mentioned today were well-known during their lifetimes, such as

Mechthild of Magdeburg. She lived most of her life with the Beguines and her final years with the Cistercians of Helfta, her visionary gift overflowing into a seven-volume written work in vernacular German—perhaps the first Catholic mystical text written in a language other than Latin. Titled *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*The Flowing Light of Divinity*), Mechthild's text defies categorization, mixing poetry, dialogue, philosophy, and biblical visualization. According to McGinn, her claims of divine authorization for her ideas exceeded those of anyone else from this era, and she imagines herself both as an heir to the visionary of John's Apocalypse and as God's beloved in the Song of Songs.<sup>9</sup> By multiplying what McGinn calls "image complexes" in her mystical visualizations, Mechthild blurs the boundary between lover and beloved, between God's voice and her own, thoroughly inhabiting her allegorization of scripture.<sup>10</sup> It is no surprise, then, what one finds at the end of McGinn's study of medieval mysticism, in the book's index entry for "Bible." There it says, "*See also* Allegory; Song of Songs."<sup>11</sup>

Other medieval Catholic visionaries did become household names. Bonaventure was a thirteenth-century mystical theologian in the Franciscan tradition (founded by Francis of Assisi) whose visions sprouted from biblical roots. Bonaventure laid out a spiritual path for others to follow, and he emphasizes that meditation on scripture is always the first step.<sup>12</sup> His devotional writings, *The Tree of Life* and *The Mystical Vine*, adapt imagery from the Gospels to encourage identification with the suffering of Christ. *The Tree of Life* opens with a quotation from the Song of Songs, showing that the mystical inhabiting of the feminine figure of God's beloved was not a meditation only for women mystics. The purpose of the treatise is so that the reader will contemplate "the love of Jesus crucified, so that [the reader] can truthfully repeat with the bride, 'A bundle of myrrh is my Beloved to me: He shall abide between my breasts' (Song 1:12). Now, in order to enkindle an affection of this sort, to assist the mind and stamp the memory, I have attempted to gather this 'bundle of myrrh' from the groves of the Gospels."<sup>13</sup>

Spanish Catholicism in the 1500s witnessed a burst of mystical reflection on the scriptures. Like Mechthild and Bonaventure, Teresa of Avila was especially inspired by the Song of Songs, the Gospels, and the Psalms, as she created a "living book" of visions from her years of listening to the scriptures.<sup>14</sup> John of the Cross, most famous for his poem "The Dark Night," drew more widely from the Old Testament. His own commentary on the poem's meaning demonstrates how it was catalyzed by lines from

not only the Psalms and Song of Songs, but also Job, Wisdom of Solomon, and most of the biblical prophets.<sup>15</sup> Ignatius Loyola, on the other hand, resembled Bonaventure in his focus on the Gospels. His method of biblical contemplation was introduced at the beginning of this chapter, but I did yet not clarify that the object of his attention was almost entirely the life of Jesus. His most influential work, *The Spiritual Exercises*, is not meant to be read on its own; rather, it is a manual for a four-week guided prayer retreat with a spiritual director. It constitutes the foundation of Ignatian spirituality, an exercise of the imagination to conform oneself to the life of Jesus and his disciples. The first contemplation of the third week offers a good example of the method. The biblical scene under consideration is when Jesus sent two disciples to prepare for a communal meal in Jerusalem—what would become his “last supper.” After setting the stage, Ignatius directs the reader: “A composition, by imagining the place. Here it will be to see in imagination the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, whether it is broad, or narrow, or level, and so on. In similar manner, imagine the room of the supper, whether it is large, or small, or arranged in one way or another.”<sup>16</sup>

When I first read the *Exercises* years ago, I breezed past such directives and wondered what the point was. What biblical interpretation could be performed by imagining the width of a road or the arrangement of seating around a table? It wasn’t until years later, when I was formally led through examples of Ignatian contemplation by Jesuits, that I realized the value. There is not one “point” of biblical visualization, nor is there one method. The process is individualized, expansive, and unpredictable—powerful not by its exegetical objectivity but through its inevitable subjectivity. Once I was present when Fr. Martin led a large group of Catholic parish leaders and religious educators through a guided meditation. There were about three hundred of us in a school gymnasium, and he slowly read the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. He interlaced the recitation with questions that helped us to imagine the composition of place. Initially not paying close attention, I was eventually drawn in to participate, and I let my mind explore anew this story I had heard a thousand times. Minutes expanded. The sounds of the gymnasium faded away, the shifting bodies of those around me fell silent, and I found myself on a Galilean hillside. I have no idea how long the meditation lasted. When I debriefed with Fr. Martin later that day, he asked me whether I participated and how it went. “Actually I saw and heard something I had always missed in the

story,” I said. “On that hillside, there were thousands and thousands of *children*. Playing, laughing, running.” He smiled, because *of course there were!* The text describes “about five thousand men, not counting women and children” (Matt 14:21). From just one word, Ignatian biblical visualization opens up worlds.

Despite the saintly names of the previous paragraphs, let us be clear that biblical visualization is not only for Catholic mystics, but for any Catholic in prayer. In the present day, Fr. Martin emphasizes this during his guidance in Ignatian contemplation. And already during the flowering of medieval Catholicism, regular devout people were encouraged to visualize in their prayer, especially

to imagine the feelings Mary and Jesus experienced during the major events of their lives. One of the principal texts to promulgate this practice is *Meditationes vitae Christi* (*Meditations on the Life of Christ*). It was written in the fourteenth century by a Franciscan monk as instruction to a nun in the sister monastic order of Poor Clares. The text advises the reader to meditate and envisage herself in the story, for example, visiting Jesus in his crib and kissing him. This late medieval guide was so popular that more than two hundred manuscript copies still exist.<sup>17</sup>

*To imagine the feelings that Mary and Jesus experienced during the major events of their lives*—that sounds really familiar to Catholic ears. Indeed, it’s a good summary of the most popular Catholic biblical devotion of all: the rosary.

## Biblical Devotions among Catholics

### *The Rosary*

Like many Catholics, the first time I heard a rosary was at a funeral. We were whispering and eating mints in a mortuary viewing room, everyone seemingly waiting for something to happen, though I didn’t know what. One of my elderly relatives rested in peace before us, the first dead body I’d ever seen. As for the rosary, I had seen one of those before, and people around me were holding them. Suddenly a group of about ten women walked in, knelt before the casket, pulled out their rosaries, and began to pray. This, I later learned, was the Slovenian Women’s Union, and they were there to lead us in prayer, like some band of wailing women of old,



who must have filled their calendars with the funeral wakes of deceased Slovenian Americans.

Most people joined in, including my dad, whom I had rarely seen pray the rosary. Yet somehow his personal rosary materialized out of thin air, and he knew exactly what to do. No one had taught me, so I tried to follow along. Hearing its repetitions for the first time—seemingly endless to a fidgety child at his first funeral—was strangely affecting and comforting. But just when I'd feel confident to join in a "Hail Mary," then the script would change, and some other prayer briefly intervened. During that half hour, I never quite got the verbal rhythm or the overarching picture. What should my mind have been doing while my lips were moving? One of the women must have announced which biblical visualizations ("mysteries") we were supposed to have in our minds while we prayed, but I didn't catch on. I'm guessing, considering the context, that it was the "sorrowful mysteries."

The basics of the rosary as it exists today are easy enough to understand, though the medieval origins and development of the tradition are difficult to chart with precision. The word "rosary" refers to both the content of the prayer and the physical object—a string of sectioned beads, like a rose garland, for counting a series of repeated prayers. The form of the experience combines oral repetition of short memorized prayers with mental meditation on scenes from the lives of Jesus and Mary.<sup>18</sup> The primary verbal content is biblical: the "Hail Mary" contains the words uttered by the angel Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation ("Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with thee," Luke 1:28), which were soon combined with the words spoken by Elizabeth to Mary at the Visitation ("Blessed art thou, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb," Luke 1:42). The third line is not biblical and was the last to be added ("Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death"). Already in the early 1200s, there is evidence of Catholics using counting beads to recite "Hail Marys" in groups of 50 or 150 repetitions (similar to how peoples of Central and South Asia had prayer counters centuries prior to that). When repeated 150 times, this could be called a "Marian Psalter," corresponding to the 150 Psalms. Other Marian Psalters were prayer books of printed Psalms that offered short typological interpretations of how each Psalm prophesied something from the life of Mary or Jesus.<sup>19</sup> From such Marian Psalters, it was not a big leap to meditating on scenes from the lives of Mary and Jesus themselves.

The addition of suggested biblical episodes on which to meditate occurred around 1300. In her study of the earliest medieval German versions of the rosary, Anne Winston-Allen has analyzed eight different sets of biblical meditations preserved in manuscripts between 1275 and 1500.<sup>20</sup> It makes sense that the earliest extant versions emphasize the Annunciation/Incarnation, the Visitation, the Nativity, and the other events of Jesus' childhood with Mary. But the correspondence to 150 Psalms required more scenes than were supplied by the paltry biblical evidence about Mary's life. "What was needed was a way to focus the attention more efficiently and a way to sequence the meditations so that they could be learned and remembered better than the random lists of attributes that had lost their original connection to the Psalms. For this the life of Christ was the perfect vehicle."<sup>21</sup> By around 1500, three sets of scenes had somewhat stabilized: Mary's joyful moments (later called the "joyful mysteries"); the painful events for Jesus and Mary (the "sorrowful mysteries"); and the triumphant finales for both (the "glorious mysteries"). Many of these scenes had also been arranged by ancient and medieval artists, and the pilgrimage routes around the Holy Land included them on their itineraries. If one prays ten "Hail Marys" per scene (a "decade" of the rosary), meditating on all fifteen mysteries would add up to 150, a Marian Psalter. In most people's regular practice, though, to "pray the rosary" means to recite five decades and consider one set of mysteries. Thus most rosaries have fifty beads for Hail Marys, along with a few other beads for other intervening prayers and a crucifix on the end of the loop.

### *The Joyful Mysteries*

1. Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38)
2. Visitation (Luke 1:39–56)
3. Nativity (Luke 2:1–20; Matt 1:18–25)
4. Presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:22–38)
5. Finding in the Temple (Luke 2:41–51)

### *The Sorrowful Mysteries*

1. Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42 and parallels)
2. Scourging of Jesus (John 19:1)
3. Crowning with Thorns (John 19:2–3 and parallels)
4. Carrying the Cross (John 19:17)
5. Crucifixion (Mark 15:22–41 and parallels)

*The Glorious Mysteries*

1. Resurrection (Luke 24:1–49 and parallels)
2. Ascension (Acts 1:6–11)
3. Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13)
4. Assumption of Mary
5. Coronation of Mary

Without a book in hand, the rosary is nonetheless a biblical encounter. “Every devout Catholic, daily when he sayeth his beads, doth as it were in a book read.” Thus wrote the sixteenth-century English Jesuit Henry Garnett in *Societie of the Rosarie*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, thirteen of the fifteen traditional mysteries on the “beads” are directly biblical from the “book,” while the final two are derived from typological interpretation of the Old Testament and developing theological doctrines (on this, see chapter 6 on Mary in biblical art).<sup>23</sup> Centuries later, a central document for the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, also makes sure to root the mysteries of the rosary in the Bible.<sup>24</sup> And yet, the biblical episodes are clustered at the beginnings and endings of life, similar to trends in medieval Catholic art. Were there no biblical scenes from Jesus’ ministry worth calling to mind in prayer?

To respond to that lack and to bolster the biblical foundation of the rosary, in 2002, Pope John Paul II added a fourth set of mysteries about Jesus’ public ministry. Calling them the “mysteries of light” or “luminous mysteries,” since each of them illuminates an aspect of Jesus’ identity and mission, he wanted Catholics “to rediscover the rosary in the light of Scripture.”<sup>25</sup> The luminous mysteries are: the Baptism of Jesus; the wedding miracle at Cana; the proclamation of the Kingdom of God; the Transfiguration; and the Last Supper. John Paul II also wanted to counteract criticisms of the rosary as a vacuous prayer of mere mumbling. He was well aware that for Catholics at that time the praying of the rosary (done by approximately 20% of U.S. Catholics) was much more common than Bible study (approximately 5% of U.S. Catholics).<sup>26</sup> He thus encouraged the public reading of the relevant biblical passages alongside the prayer of each mystery, so that “the word of God can become part of the rosary’s methodology of repetition without giving rise to the ennui derived from the simple recollection of something already well known. It is not a matter of recalling information but of *allowing God to speak*.”<sup>27</sup> Beads and books could work together in the service of listening—and imagining.

Nathan Mitchell's *The Mystery of the Rosary* is especially astute about the rosary as a medium of biblical visualization. His focus on Catholic prayers and devotions of the sixteenth century shows that the rosary is not only *like* the *Spiritual Exercises*, but that the two reflexively influenced each other during the imaginative biblical devotions of the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation (often called the "Counter-Reformation"). It was as if the Protestant Reformers had said, "You all need to focus more on the Bible," and the Catholics responded, "We agree, but we're going to do it a different way—through prayer more than through reading." The book *Roma Sancta*, a 1582 English-language chronicle of religious life in Italy, connects the spread of the rosary specifically to places where the Jesuits were living and preaching in their Ignatian style.<sup>28</sup> The ways that the rosary and the *Exercises* of Ignatian spirituality imagined biblical scenes "permitted praying Christians to customize each mystery of faith, to tailor it in relation to their particular needs, and thus to inscribe it onto their own personal life drama and individual history. The result was a far more intense system of meditation that respected freedom and diversity in the way each person grasped and appropriated the central mysteries of faith."<sup>29</sup> Centuries later, when the Jesuit Fr. Martin introduced the method of Ignatian biblical contemplation to millions of readers through his surprise bestseller, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, how did he begin that chapter? That's right, with a story about the rosary.<sup>30</sup>

The rosary's central mysteries of faith do not, to be sure, cover even a small percentage of the Christian Bible. As in the mystical writings of Bonaventure and the *Exercises* of Ignatius, the lens of faith focuses here on the Gospels. Yet with these few raw materials, the rosary's garland of beads grew in popularity to encircle the globe because it could "absorb the reframings of reform, representation, ritual, religious identity, and devotion" in the period after the Reformation.<sup>31</sup> When one honestly imagines, for example, the joyful mysteries in a realistic manner, they "deal with the raw material of the human drama":

a young woman suddenly confronted with an intruder whose improbable "message" leaves her stunned, confused—and pregnant. There follows a panicky trip to a trusted, older relative who, though surely postmenopausal—also becomes pregnant, leaving her aged husband literally speechless. Then we hear of parents in flight, a birth on the run in a stinking, unsanitary shed. After that, the drama continues with an old

man's promise that the kid will run into deep trouble and the mother's heart will be broken—followed by the scary episode of a missing child.<sup>32</sup>

Viewed in the mind's eye in such a way as that, the rosary's mysteries—joyful, sorrowful, and glorious—can encompass nothing less than the joys and fears of human existence, imagined from both male and female perspectives.

### *Other Biblical Devotions to Jesus and Mary*

Like the traditional mysteries of the rosary, other popular biblical devotions to Jesus and Mary accentuate the beginnings and endings of their stories. For example, the Annunciation, whose outsized influence on the Catholic tradition will be analyzed in this book's conclusion, generated a second prominent form of prayer called the Angelus. Though it is not recited as often as the biblical prayers of the Our Father or the Hail Mary, the Angelus has probably been the third most prevalent Catholic prayer of biblical origin. Its text is a narrative expansion on the Hail Mary—a development of the rosary's first mystery.

Like the Our Father and Hail Mary, the Angelus is named for its opening words (in the original Latin): *Angelus Domini*. It comprises three call-and-response lines from scripture and a concluding petition.

The angel of the Lord declared to Mary.

*And she conceived of the Holy Spirit. Hail Mary, etc.* (from Luke 1)

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

*Let it be done to me according to your word. Hail Mary, etc.* (From Luke 1)

And the Word was made flesh.

*And dwelt among us. Hail Mary, etc.* (from John 1)

Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.

*That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.*

The Angelus combines the Annunciation of Luke and the Incarnation of John in an easily memorized short prayer—short enough that for centuries many Catholics prayed it three times a day. Angelus bells would ring out from church towers at sunrise, noon, and sunset, calling those within ear-shot to prayer, not unlike the calls to prayer from the minaret of a Muslim mosque. Still today Catholic churches often peal their bells at noon and

6:00 PM. (They often now skip the 6:00 AM peal, out of deference for different rhythms of sleep and work in the modern world.)

Another prominent devotion, the Stations of the Cross, is not prayed daily but sometimes weekly (on Friday) and often seasonally (during Lent). The fourteen Stations are verbal and visual reminders of the final hours of Jesus' life, his path of suffering from his condemnation by Pontius Pilate to his placement in the tomb. Also called the Way of the Cross, it likely has roots in the *via dolorosa*, the "path of suffering" that a pilgrim could walk in Jerusalem, re-enacting and meditating upon Jesus' last day. Like other forms of biblical visualization presented earlier, this one flourished especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and became standardized. Catholic churches around the world have visual cues for the fourteen Stations on their interior side walls, so that anyone can walk through and see them as catalysts to prayer. Most of the Stations are described or implied in the biblical text, but Catholics are sometimes surprised to learn that not all of them are—most noticeably Station #6, in which an onlooker named Veronica wipes the face of Jesus while he struggles to carry his cross. This has presented a challenge for communal prayer of the Stations that involves also reading each scene from scripture, as often happens on Fridays of Lent. In response to that—and as an ecumenical outreach to Protestants—Pope John Paul II introduced a modified Stations of the Cross in 1991.<sup>33</sup> During a Good Friday service in the Roman Colosseum, he led prayer through fourteen scriptural Stations, *all* of which can be found and read from the Bible. This resembles his teaching on the rosary, when he exhorted Catholics to read the biblical passages connected to each mystery. In the case of the Stations, though, the visual art in churches around the world has not adopted John Paul II's scriptural cues. For most Catholics, the Stations of the Cross remain the fourteen they can see on the walls.

The Stations of the Cross is a type of "stational liturgy," a prayer form in which participants move from place to place and engage in a prayer or ritual at each spot.<sup>34</sup> Another example of this form focuses not on the end of Jesus' life during Lent but on the anticipated beginning of his life during Advent. The tradition of *Las Posadas* is celebrated especially by Catholics of Mexican descent, on each of nine nights leading up to Christmas. A form of communal biblical re-enactment, people play the roles of Mary and Joseph seeking lodging where the baby can be born, but they continue to be turned away by those playing the roles of innkeepers "because there is no room in the inn" (*en la posada*, Luke 2:7). Several

turn them away, until finally one home welcomes them and the entourage enjoys sweet treats to complete the evening. Along the way, the moving pageant sings distinctive *villancicos* (holiday carols) for the occasion, which imagine the motives and struggles of the biblical characters. For Mexican migrants living in the United States, the prayer has found deeper meaning. In the words of Sr. Nina Rodriguez, a Catholic nun from a Mexican American neighborhood in Detroit, “Las Posadas is when you come together with your family and you remember the struggle of your family, being immigrants coming to this country that desire to be welcomed, just as the Holy Family desired to be welcomed. . . . [Jesus] came into this world under a difficult situation. His family went through trials, just like our families have gone through trials.”<sup>35</sup> For many Catholics, it does not require a great leap of imagination to visualize a threatened pregnant woman, seeking shelter and refuge.

It is striking that almost all of the biblical visualizations discussed so far took their main shape in the 1500s, a rich period for Catholic biblical spirituality at the same time as the Protestant Reformers were emphasizing the biblical text anew. To all of these prayers and devotions, we add a final example from that century. Of all the ways Mary has been venerated in prayer by Catholics, perhaps the most influential version in the Catholic imagination is the one honored for almost five hundred years in Mexico: *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, who appeared in 1531 on the outskirts of what is now Mexico City. “Our Lady of Guadalupe,” an appearance of the Virgin Mary considered by hundreds of millions of Catholics to be central to their faith, was eventually declared “Patroness of the Americas” by the Vatican. Her impact on Catholics of Latin American heritage truly cannot be overstated. As they say in Mexico: you might not even be Christian, but all Mexicans are Guadalupan.<sup>36</sup>

According to traditional accounts written in the 1600s, a peasant named Juan Diego was passing the hill of Tepeyac, north of Mexico City, when he was greeted by a woman who told him she was the Virgin Mary.<sup>37</sup> She wanted a church built there in her honor. When Juan Diego informed the bishop, he did not believe him and asked for a sign of proof. But Juan Diego was busily occupied caring for his uncle, dying of the plague, and went in search of a priest to bless his uncle. While out on this task, Mary greeted him again and commanded him to gather roses and other flowers from the hill. He did so and carried them down in his garment (his *tilma*) to show the bishop. When he dropped the flowers on the floor there—varieties





FIGURE 4.1 Our Lady of Guadalupe, on the traditional *tilma* of Juan Diego, 16th c., Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City. Photograph by Karolja. Wikimedia Commons.

miraculously blooming out of season—there was revealed an image of the Virgin Mary on his *tilma* (Figure 4.1). The bishop had it placed in the cathedral for veneration, and it has remained on display in Tepeyac ever since.

The day of the first apparition, December 12, is the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which attracts a mind-boggling amount of pilgrims to Tepeyac (and every other Guadalupan shrine in the world). The site has become a whole complex of buildings and plazas, *La Villa de Guadalupe*, which welcomes approximately ten million pilgrims annually, about half of whom visit during the days around her feast.<sup>38</sup> The “new basilica” (1976) can fit over ten thousand people at one time, and almost one hundred thousand *per hour* pass through on the feast day. The overall *Villa* receives a number of annual visitors comparable to the Vatican itself. And besides

traditional imagery of Jesus like the crucifix, the iconic *tilma* of Guadalupe is the second-most prevalent religious image in the Americas.<sup>39</sup> Whether in Latin America, the southwestern United States, or even the Philippines, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is ubiquitous: in churches, of course, but also restaurants, sidewalk murals, homes, jewelry, tattoos, and more. Journalists have documented hundreds of public murals and shrines to Our Lady of Guadalupe in just *one* section of Los Angeles, California.<sup>40</sup>

Due to the widespread imagery, these paragraphs about Guadalupe could well have been part of the visual arts chapters of this book (chapters 5 and 6); however, I chose to put them here because of how central Guadalupe is to Latin American Catholic prayer life. Once behind a gas station in rural California, I saw a makeshift prayer shrine to her in a dingy corner, where workers were taking a smoke break in her presence. She was nestled there among trash cans and empty delivery pallets. Like the unexpected Incarnation, Our Lady of Guadalupe surprises in her appearing.

Uninformed onlookers might not see the biblical aspects of this Marian devotion, but make no mistake: in Guadalupan spirituality, this Mary is absolutely a *biblical* Mary. First, she is a fulfillment of Mary's characterization in the Gospel of Luke. In the words of Fr. Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzalez, a professor of spirituality and scholar of Guadalupan devotion:

The image of Mary in the gospel of Luke is not a humble servant woman. She's a woman who's determined. She's a woman who's powerful and, in the only prayer that we have of the Virgin Mary to God, she pretty much challenges God to side with the poor, to send the rich away empty-handed and to make sure that the hungry are fed [Luke 1:46–55, "the Magnificat"]. . . . Saint Luke has a particular care in making sure that people know that Jesus has a preferential option for the poor. Liberation theology, liberation spirituality, picks up on the gospel of Saint Luke and Jesus' preference for the poor and the oppressed.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond the biblical connections to the Gospel of Luke, Our Lady of Guadalupe is often interpreted as an unnamed woman envisioned in the book of Revelation: "a great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth" (Rev 12:1–2). She gave birth to a son who was "destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod" and was "caught up to God and his

throne" (Rev 12:5). Interpreting this woman as Mary goes all the way back to the fifth century and, by the medieval era, had become a customary approach to the text. Visually it is first attested in a fourteenth-century manuscript, the "Cloisters Apocalypse" (see Figure 6.20); and with regard to Guadalupe, the biblical connection was championed by her most important early interpreter, Miguel Sánchez (1594–1674).

Fr. Sánchez was a respected Mexican priest who, according to his own sworn deposition, spent fifty years "gathering information from the oldest and most trustworthy persons of the city," in order to better understand the Guadalupan apparition.<sup>42</sup> His crucial work, *Imagen de la Virgen María, Madre de Dios de Guadalupe* (1648), greatly deepened the interpretation of Guadalupe and offered erudite arguments for imagining her as biblical. A substantial portion of the treatise is a word-by-word application of Revelation 12 to Our Lady of Guadalupe.<sup>43</sup> Beyond that grounding text, other densely packed biblical typologies of Sánchez have been expertly analyzed in D. A. Brading's monumental scholarly study of Guadalupan history, *Mexican Phoenix*. Brading shows how Sánchez went far beyond—or rather, *before*—the "woman of the Apocalypse" to model the Guadalupe events on the prior biblical account of the Exodus, especially Moses' encounters with God at Horeb (the burning bush) and Sinai (the giving of the law). "His deployment of typology was thus not a question of metaphor . . . but took the form of a re-enactment in which Juan Diego acted like Moses, with the image of Guadalupe not merely identified as the staff used both by Moses and Aaron to impress Pharaoh, but also as the Ark of the Covenant with the Tables of the Law."<sup>44</sup> Connecting Old and New Testaments, Sánchez realizes that the ark of the covenant is described in the biblical verse preceding the woman clothed with the sun (Rev 11:19), a fact also expressed by the Cloisters Apocalypse. God's presence had temporarily appeared in the burning bush and the ark; so also did the Virgin Mary bear the divine presence on earth to a messenger who needed God's wondrous sign to persuade an earthly ruler. From what, though, were *these* sixteenth-century people being liberated? In *Theologies of Guadalupe*, Timothy Matovina argues that she offers a covenant with the Mexican nation in the context of fraught colonial encounters.<sup>45</sup> Different interpreters of Guadalupe over the centuries have used divine covenants with Noah, with Moses, and with David to craft competing biblical theologies of Mexican nationalism. In the end, "despite its potential association with an uncritical nationalism, the Guadalupan covenant enabled devotees, preachers, and their critics to forge visions of a more united and just homeland."<sup>46</sup>

That note of hope amid trouble fits well in the season of Advent, when the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe is celebrated. From her feast day through *Las Posadas*, Mexican Catholics share stories, songs, sweet tamales, and rich hot chocolate as they recount the lives of Mary and Jesus. For a fitting conclusion on this theme of Advent hope, let's hear from Socorro Durán, who grew up *literally across the street* from the Basilica of Guadalupe and later taught for decades as a parish leader in California. According to her, who is "the woman clothed with the sun," the biblical Lady of Guadalupe?

For me it speaks of the hope and expectation that Our Lady awakens in us as Latinas and Latinos. Like our Native American ancestors, we too see a sign of God's presence, God's coming near to us, in sudden and unexpected happenings. . . . It's more of an Advent feast than anything else I can think of. . . . The hope of the Christmas season we are approaching shows itself on your faces, on the faces of your parents and children when you see the story of Tepeyac re-enacted each year. People just like you play the parts of Juan Diego, the bishop and his attendants, the Virgin, and all the others who appear in the drama. The story is about how the underdog is finally heard. We Latinos are "underdogs," and so we can feel close to Juan Diego, his sick uncle Juan Bernardino, and all his people.

The drama of Tepeyac makes you laugh and imagine. You laugh because you see how Juan Diego tries to *dar vueltas* (spin around), to avoid the Virgin, but she catches him. You laugh because he becomes so familiar with the Lady that he nicely talks back to her. He becomes like us, a little *rezongón* (grumbler). And you also imagine how it is that God speaks to *you* through this beautiful woman and mother, how God leads *you* forward toward something much better. We want to hear this. We need to hear it. The story of Guadalupe, like the story of Christmas, renews hope in our wilting spirits.<sup>47</sup>

Through both the archival research of scholars and the eyes of a girl raised in the shadow of Tepeyac, we see the Catholic imagination still at work, combining typology, ritual, storytelling, and visualization in biblical prayer.

### **Biblical Prayer for Monks (and Other Catholics)**

One day while scrolling social media, the following post and response came across my screen. A Catholic lay woman posted: "Catholics: we should be

reading Sacred Scripture every day. It does not have to be a lot, but we should be reading the Word of God.” A Catholic priest responded: “If you want a cheat code to make it easier to read Scripture daily, the Liturgy of the Hours will spoon feed the Bible to you. You’ll get about a chapter in the Office of Readings, and a nice little paragraph in the rest of the hours.”<sup>48</sup>

The short exchange shows, first, the desire of an eager Catholic layperson to engage more with the Bible, while assuring her presumably wary Catholic social media followers that “it does not have to be a lot.” Then a priest with almost ten thousand social media followers wants to help, but senses that a sympathetic Catholic reader might feel daunted by “Sacred Scripture.” Where does one begin? Do I just pick up a random page? How does everything in this big book relate to everything else? So he offers a “cheat code”—a video-game metaphor understandable to most young people, a password that makes a game easier to conquer or gives a game’s player extra abilities. Something called the Liturgy of the Hours might help someone navigate this new level of Catholic spiritual life. The Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office or the Breviary, is the foundation of monastic prayer life.

Next, switching metaphors, the priest describes this medieval monastic tradition as a way to “spoon feed” the Bible to lay Catholics. The point is that most are not ready to jump to this higher level—not ready for the solid food of individual Bible study—but the snippets of the Liturgy of the Hours can offer the beginnings of biblical nourishment. The priest’s instinct here was not the only option: one might have suggested to prepare the Sunday Mass readings in advance, or to begin with a specific biblical book, or to subscribe to a devotional periodical or podcast. Instead, he encourages Catholics to go straight to the monastic source, to bring a little monastic prayer life into a layperson’s day.

The Liturgy of the Hours is a rhythm of daily prayers going back to at least the sixth century, especially in monasteries. Earlier in this chapter, we learned about priests called Jesuits and Franciscans and Carmelites, along with various orders of women, such as the Beguines. To understand the Liturgy of the Hours, the best source is the order of monks called Benedictines, whose founder, Benedict, shaped centuries of prayer tradition.<sup>49</sup> The “Hours” refer to specified times of prayer throughout the day (such as Vespers), and the Divine “Office” means that reciting these prayers has a beneficial service or duty (Latin *officium*). Whether in a monastery or a regular church setting—called the “monastic office” and the “cathedral



office,” respectively—the Liturgy of the Hours has always been intended as a communal prayer. Private recitation of the Office began only when monks and priests traveled more often, and a book called the Breviary was created for that purpose. As the Office stands today, it includes Psalms, poems from the Old and New Testaments, intercessory prayers, the Our Father, and other short responses.

The Psalms have always been the centerpiece of the Divine Office. Particular poetic texts are chosen to structure and sanctify the human experience of time. For example, drawing from the Jewish sanctification of time, Psalm 141 is used for evening prayer: “Let my prayer be incense before you; my uplifted hands an evening offering” (Ps 141:2). Benedict had ordered seven times of prayer per day, based on Psalm 119: “seven times a day I praise you” (Ps 119:164). With that schedule, one can efficiently recite the entire 150 Psalms in a week. But the strict Benedictine rule has not always been followed, and the twentieth-century liturgical reforms of Vatican II led to fewer Psalms, fewer Hours, and more balance with the New Testament, too.<sup>50</sup>

In his masterful study of monastic culture, Benedictine Jean Leclercq helps lay readers to understand the *how* of monastic prayerful recitation. The consistent rumination over the same biblical phrases leads to meditative prayer and “the extremely important phenomenon of reminiscence, whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke whole quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions elsewhere in the sacred books. Each word is like a hook, so to speak; it catches hold of one or several others which become linked together and make up the fabric of the exposé.”<sup>51</sup> Once the Psalms and other texts of the Office are learned by heart, a monk “becomes a sort of living concordance, a living library, in the sense that the latter term implies the Bible.”<sup>52</sup> Through such processes compounded over centuries, monasteries became living Bibles.

But *why*, apart from Benedict’s rules, have monks continued the practice? A recent memoir by an American monk, Brother Paul Quenon, suggests some of their reasons. He attests that Psalm repetition is not a “dumb-downer” but a “mind builder,” keeping the mind sharp and focused through memorization.<sup>53</sup> More important, he describes a similar process as Leclercq did, in which catchwords connect and produce sudden epiphanies of biblical interpretation and spiritual insight. In the communal setting, Quenon has experienced “a new opening, where the heart and

mind stand behind the words and they become my own. With that grows an inner expansion, a sense that these are not only my words; these are our words. . . . The boundary of my soul is dissolved; the person I usually am becomes broader.”<sup>54</sup> A guidebook to Benedictine prayer concurs about the visualizations and emotions that arise once the Psalms are memorized by the reciter. “This familiarity allows a person to rise above the words of the psalms and to ride his or her emotions or even become absorbed in the experience of the prayer in a way that is comparable to praying the rosary.”<sup>55</sup> The result differs, though, from other forms of biblical prayer covered so far: it is more narrowly textual than Ignatian contemplation, the rosary, or other devotions to Jesus and Mary. Nothing tactile or visual mediates the biblical words. Indeed, when the final day’s prayer of Compline is uttered in darkness, the chanted memorized words are all that exists. And still there, the canon within the canon of the Psalms engages cloistered monks with the diverse wildness of humanity.

The Psalms offer kings and queens, sin and salvation, depths, heights, pits, muck, mountains, valleys, wailing, rejoicing. The unpredictability of the Psalms reminds Br. Quenon of being a kid, subject to someone else’s whims, as if roughly bounced back and forth

in the back seat of Dad’s black Chevy, long before there were seat belts. . . . You couldn’t always see what was coming next. Likewise with these ancient Psalms: the old Hebrew in the driver’s seat doesn’t think sequentially or logically, but switches from first person to third and back again. His mood turns on a dime. Balance and beauty are not always the intentions of the primal poetry. Authenticity, grit, and realism are more the order of the day, all spun out in passages of grief and resentment, as well as in sweet trust, love, and serenity.<sup>56</sup>

Reciting the Psalms can be a bumpy ride, and their sporadic hatred and violence contrast with the beautiful, tranquil setting of the monastery. Some of the bumps are considered too big to handle: a few extravagantly violent verses are omitted from the recitations.

Yet even with some omitted sections and uneven personal discipline in following the Divine Office, the recitation of the Psalms introduces a cast of biblical characters and characteristics which leave their mark on Catholics in prayer. In the words of Br. Quenon’s more famous brother monk, Thomas Merton, “there is no aspect of the interior life, no kind



of religious experience, no spiritual need of man that is not depicted and lived out in the Psalms.”<sup>57</sup> Through habitual repetition of the Psalms, Br. Quenon hears “the voice of humanity, of any poor loner or derelict, any kind of warrior, someone injured, even vindictive. All of these sentiments, for better or worse, are true of me as well. . . . Psalmody draws me along, farther and wider, stretches me almost painfully at times, and deepens my empathy for the human race.”<sup>58</sup> In the end, it seems that his memoir, *In Praise of the Useless Life*, was titled ironically: Br. Quenon and centuries of others have found daily Psalm recitation profoundly useful.

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The integration of biblical recitation with the joys and sorrows of Catholics’ daily life rhythms harkens back to the previous chapter on the Bible in the Catholic life cycle. Like a group of monks reciting the Liturgy of the Hours, that community of praying Slovenian women at my great-uncle’s funeral carried on a five-hundred-year tradition of Catholic biblical prayer, leading mourners in meditation on the sorrowful events in the life of Christ and his mother, Mary. Catholics pray with stories from the Bible during such seasons of life and take guidance from the seasons of the liturgical year, especially Advent to Christmas and Lent to Easter. Other regional devotions have risen from among the people, inspiring biblical reflections on Jesus and Mary in many guises. Through all these rhythms, and especially at life’s peaks and valleys, praying Catholics visualize the Bible with their fingers on beads, their ears on bells, their feet on pilgrim paths, their minds on Gospel stories, their hearts on Psalms, and—once in a while—their eyes on the printed page of the Book.

## Origins of Catholic Biblical Art

THIS BOOK BEGAN WITH A visitor searching for a Bible at a Catholic Sunday Mass, wondering how it could be absent among a gathering of the world's largest biblical religion. A Protestant Christian would be especially curious, even confused by this. Where is the Bible in that church?

Now consider instead that you're a Catholic walking into a Protestant church of a northern European tradition, a basic building, brown and white, with hymnals and Bibles in every pew. Many don't use the pew Bibles, since they've brought their own. This is a worship of words: reading together, singing together *a cappella* or with limited instrumentation, and listening to a long sermon that occupies the vast majority of the time. As the sermon hits the forty-five-minute mark—and it's only point three of five on the pastor's provided textual outline—you squirm around in your too-straight pew, and you begin to look around the church. Then you realize: there is *nothing* to look at.

Where is the biblical art in this church? Many Protestant churches, especially in the more austere Reformation traditions, have no paintings, no stained glass, certainly no Stations of the Cross or other statues, and often no crucifix, either. Many rooted in the Calvinist lineage have taken the Second Commandment against “graven images” of God to mean a general avoidance of the visual arts in worship. Some churches go so far as to prohibit musical instruments, such that no artificial sensory adornments are permitted of sight or sound. The building is no more than an ark to protect God's people from the weather and walls to amplify God's word within it.

This is not true of all Protestant churches, of course, as there exists a spectrum of sacramentality across Christian traditions. But overall, the point holds that Catholic (and Eastern Orthodox) Christians routinely use a fuller sensory experience than Reformed Christians do. “Proclaiming Christ,” in the words of Pope Francis, “means showing that to believe in and to follow him is *not only something right and true, but also something beautiful*, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties.”<sup>1</sup> These chapters look first at the Bible in Catholic visual and dramatic arts and then turn to the world of poetry, fiction, song, and screen. How is the Bible passed on through Catholic visibility, embodiment, storytelling, and poetry—in short, through a Catholic imagination?

### The Catholic Imagination

The notion of a distinctive “Catholic imagination” has been discussed by scholars of literature and the arts for about forty years. It stands to reason that if people are formed from childhood with a specific and thorough religious vision, reinforced through rituals that evoke the senses, then a particular cultural worldview—an *imagination*—will be transmitted. Catholic cultures in North America were especially encompassing during the mid-twentieth century, before the rising rates of intermarriage, conversion, and disaffiliation. Of course, many other times and places in world history have been permeated with Catholic cultures of visibility and expression.

The scholar most associated with this idea is Andrew Greeley, a Catholic priest and academic sociologist who wrote *The Catholic Imagination* (2000).<sup>2</sup> “Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.”<sup>3</sup> Through chapters about the sacraments, the arts, fictional literature, and more, Greeley aims to show that Catholics—whether devout or lapsed—move through the world with a different set of senses and sensibilities than others (especially Protestants). His argument has been justifiably accused of oversimplification with respect to the Catholic/Protestant divide and conflation of diverse historical periods and regional Catholic cultures. Yet the overall concept remains relevant and does help us to see certain features which might connect medieval

woodcarvings to modern artworks that have been created by Catholic-haunted artists, writers, and directors.

Greeley's book is at its best when it highlights devotions over dogma, storytelling over doctrine, the perceptible over the intellectual. Catholics are more likely to dwell in a mystery than they are to resolve a puzzle, more likely to relish the tension of a metaphor than to settle for plain language. The "Holy," Greeley says, is "lurking in creation." Full epiphanies are rarely available, but instead Catholics spy hints and guesses of God's immanent presence incarnate in the world. "Find God in all things," says the Jesuit maxim. Indeed, Catholicism has frequently embraced various cultures' veneration of divine presences in the natural world; Catholicism has usually emphasized salvation in this life along with hope for an afterlife. And while emphasizing the potentiality of divine grace mediated by imperfect material nature, the Catholic imagination has also not turned its gaze away from bodily suffering. One seeks God in all things, but grace and suffering are often intertwined, two sides of the same human experience.

That's why the introduction of my book began with the *Pietà*, both the most famous production of Catholic biblical art in world history and a pristine expression of the Catholic imagination. Biblical art, but *imagined between the lines* of the Bible's text; focused on *Jesus* and *Mary* as the central characters of the *divine drama*, each full of *suffering* and full of *grace*; inviting the viewer in *devotional prayer* to contemplate the biblical *mystery* of the *Incarnation* (God become human) and the *Passion* (suffering and death). Now, to bring our historical timeline up to the *Pietà* and then beyond to the twenty-first century, we will first return to the origins of biblical art. Focusing especially on Rome and its environs, the crucible of what would become Roman Catholicism, how did early Christians imagine and depict the Bible?

### Visualizing the Bible

We often take for granted how central eyesight is to human biology and culture. In his book about the sense experiences of the animal kingdom, award-winning science writer Ed Yong emphasizes this perceptual bias of humans toward the visual. We dramatically overestimate the visual abilities of the animals around us and underestimate their other senses. Yes, birds of prey are impressively "eagle-eyed," but virtually all other animals have worse visual acuity than humans. Our biological strong suit has thoroughly influenced human cultures as well. For example, many languages' words

for seeing and knowing share common roots; the most common ancient Greek verb translated as “I know” is etymologically the perfect tense of a verb “to see” (“I know” = “I have seen”). The perceptual bias toward the visual sneaks surreptitiously into countless aspects of our language and thought:

Our species and our culture are so driven by sight that even people who are blind from birth will describe the world using visual words and metaphors. You agree with people if you *see* their point, or share their *view*. You are oblivious to things in your *blind spots*. Hopeful futures are *bright* and *gleaming*; dystopias are *dark* and *shadowy*. Even when scientists describe senses that humans lack altogether, like the ability to detect electric fields, they talk about *images* and *shadows*.<sup>4</sup>

And even as I mentally *review* this paragraph to decide if I have *overlooked* something, I cannot avoid the dominance of the visual.

For these reasons, it's surprising that scholars still refer to Christian art as the *biblia pauperum* (“the Bible of the poor”), a concept going back at least to Gregory the Great (sixth century) and later used to describe a wide variety of pictorial Bibles.<sup>5</sup> The classic phrase is not very helpful, as it defines the many in the terms of the few. We wouldn't describe the experience of listening to performed music as “the music of the poor,” as if only those few who can read and study the printed score have authentic access to the music. No, we understand that most people do *not* study the printed score and yet can have great appreciation for the music and its meaning. So, too, can the visual encounter with the Bible generate authentic faith and profound meaning—most especially during those fifteen hundred years of Christianity that existed before the printing press. Prior to mass literacy and “print culture,” biblical images were not for the poor; they were for everybody. And even in the world after the printing press, even in cultures with high rates of literacy, visual imagery has not lost much of its power to the textual.

One strong distinction to be made between visibility in premodern and modern worlds is that premodern visibility bore more resemblance to orality and aurality than it does today. This was especially the case for early Christians, as classicist James A. Francis has noted. “It is a modern prejudice to assume that once people could read, they would somehow abandon orality and visibility in favor of the textual and literal; [to assume]

that reading trumps all other modes of reception and comprehension.”<sup>6</sup> A performance of “[a] sacred text, because it was assimilated aurally, lent itself to visuality. The Christians responsible for such works as the catacomb paintings did not use images merely to illustrate their texts; nor did they use texts to justify their images. Rather, both these modes of expression and communication were grounded in a common experience of visuality in which . . . the distinction between word and image tends to break down.”<sup>7</sup> With these principles from biology and history in mind, we can better survey the artistic evidence from the period when Christians were generating a biblical culture through the visual arts.

Prior to the epochal conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity in the fourth century, the repertoire of biblical art was relatively small. That pivotal century brought material resources and imperial support to Christian population centers, which enabled the visual culture of Christianity to expand its options and dramatically increase its scale. In addition, the refounding of Jerusalem as a pilgrimage destination for Christians catalyzed new topics and forms for biblical art, scenes embossed on mementos brought home by pilgrims to highlight the biblical sites they had visited. During Christianity’s first fifteen hundred years, from the carved reliefs of marble sarcophagi to the apse mosaics of grand basilicas to the paintings and stained glass of royal chapels, artists of ancient and medieval Europe were co-inventors of Catholic biblical interpretation.

### The “Bible” of Early Christian Art

The vast majority of extant early Christian art comes from sites of burial. And many of the best sarcophagi found in Roman catacombs and archaeological sites have been gathered into one museum for viewing—if you are lucky enough to get in. It’s a large room called the Pio Cristiano, a section of the sprawling Vatican Museums, and there is no way to know in advance whether it will be open on the day you visit. You could have waited in line for hours, could have traveled from the United States specifically to photograph and study the artifacts there, could have recited a well-rehearsed “*per favore, sono un professore di teologia*,” but no one—not even the stone-faced museum guard—knows when or whether the ancient stone faces inside will next be open for viewing.

Then miraculously one day, the rope is down, the lights are on, and you just . . . walk right in, as if the place keeps regular hours. Immediately upon



FIGURE 5.1 Sarcophagus fragment with Magi, Virgin, and Child, ca. 4th c., Rome. Pio Cristiano museum, Vatican City. Photograph by author.

entry, you see that the first wall is full of fragments of ancient sarcophagi with imagery any Christian might recognize. Nine fragments are grouped together, each of which depicts a version of the Nativity (the birth of Christ) and/or the Adoration of the Magi (the wise men from the East who bear gifts to honor the newborn, Figure 5.1). Not far beyond that exhibit, an impressively carved, almost fully preserved sarcophagus stands alone, showing five scenes from the Passion narrative (the events leading up to and including the Crucifixion of Jesus). These are precious artifacts bearing witness to early Christian artistic reflection on the birth and death of Christ.

But the curation of these objects is also a bit misleading. One of the big surprises of this earliest period of Christian art is how rarely we find depictions of events from the beginning and especially from the end of the life of Christ. In fact, most of the images that would come to dominate the visual vocabulary of medieval and Renaissance artists—the Annunciation to Mary, the Nativity of Jesus, the Crucifixion, and the very cross itself—were barely depicted in the first five hundred years of Christianity.



If not those stories, what scenes *did* the earliest Christian art depict? In this era before the codification and dissemination of the Bible as a full set of bound texts, what kind of Bible was transmitted by early Christian art?

Drawing from my years of research and teaching in this area, and after consulting with distinguished colleagues in the field, Box 5.1 summarizes the most frequently depicted biblical narratives in early Christian art,

BOX 5.1 Frequently Depicted Biblical Stories in Early Christian Art

Gen 2–3	Adam and Eve
Gen 4	Cain and Abel
Gen 6–9	Noah and the flood
Gen 18:1–15	Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality
Gen 22:1–19	Abraham and Isaac
Exod 14–15	Crossing of the Red Sea
Exod 17:1–7 // Num 20:2–13	Moses striking water from the rock
Exod 19–20	Moses receiving the Law
Job	Job (sometimes with his wife)
Ezek 37:1–14	Valley of dry bones raised to life
Dan 3	Three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace
Dan 6	Daniel in the lion’s den
Dan 13	Susanna and the elders
Jonah	the Jonah cycle
Ps 23, 1 Sam 17, Luke 15, John 10	Shepherd and sheep (multiple references)
Matt 1:18–2:12	Nativity of Jesus & Adoration of the Magi
Matt 3:13–17 and parallels	Baptism of Jesus
Mark 2:1–12 and parallels	Healing of a paralytic
Mark 5:25–34 and parallels	Healing of a woman with a flow of blood

Mark 6:30–44 and parallels	Multiplication of the loaves and fishes
John 2:1–12	Wedding at Cana, turning water into wine
John 4	Jesus with the Samaritan Woman at the well
Mark 10:46–52 and others	Healing of the blind
John 11	Raising of Lazarus
various	Jesus seated and teaching, surrounded by disciples
Luke 19:29–40 and parallels	Jesus entering Jerusalem
Mark 14–15 and parallels	Passion narrative of Jesus (with Peter, Pontius Pilate, etc.)
Matt 27:57–28:15 and parallels	Empty tomb
(non-biblical)	Arrest of Peter
(non-biblical)	Peter drawing water to baptize his jailers
(non-biblical)	Christ crowning Peter and Paul
(non-biblical)	Christ “giving the law” to Peter and Paul ( <i>traditio legis</i> )
During later phases of early Christian art, these increase in frequency:	
1 Sam 17	David and Goliath
Luke 1:26–38	Annunciation to Mary
Luke 1:39–56	Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth
Matt 17:1–8 and parallels	Transfiguration of Jesus
Acts 1:1–11	Ascension to heaven
Acts 2:1–13	Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

covering approximately the first five hundred years.<sup>8</sup> The dominant themes of the list are healing, nourishment, and salvation—the more miraculous, the better. We see that stories from the Old Testament were prominent, but primarily those that could be interpreted as a miraculous salvation from death: Noah rescued from the flood (Figure 5.2), Isaac from Abraham, the wandering Israelites from starvation, the Hebrew children from a tyrant’s



FIGURE 5.2 Sarcophagus fragment with Noah and Three Hebrew Children in the Fiery Furnace, ca. 4th c., Rome. Pio Cristiano museum, Vatican City. Photograph by author.

fiery furnace (Figure 5.2), a valley of bones from desiccated death, Daniel from the lions, and Jonah from, well, *everything* (even himself). The scenes from the New Testament also emphasize miraculous themes, especially when we sort the list by relative frequency (see later in this section). Among extant sarcophagi and catacomb art, we see hundreds of examples of Jesus' miracles of bodily healing, of abundant food provision, and of the raising of the dead. One might ask whether the funerary context of the art has skewed the evidence toward an artistic biblical "canon" that focuses on salvation from illness and death. No doubt this is true to a degree, but the other media of early Christian art from diverse contexts—bowls, lamps, jewelry, amulets, liturgical objects, etc.—also favor episodes of the miraculous. From the stories of ancient Israel through to the healing ministry of Jesus, the artistic canon depicts a Bible of God's wonder-working.

Among all the biblical stories circulating in this era, by far the most frequently depicted is that of Jonah. This might come as a surprise, since "the Jonah cycle," as art historians often refer to the set of episodes comprising his story, has not been central during many other parts of Christian history. But in late antiquity, we find Jonah under every rock: etched into bowls, cast as a set of small statues, adorned in a mosaic, painted in the catacombs, even carved as the marble base of a table. Walking a bit further into the Pio Cristiano to behold its famous "Jonah sarcophagus" can help to unravel the mystery of his ancient popularity. The Jonah sarcophagus, usually dated around the end of the third century, is the very first sarcophagus featured on the Vatican's website for the Pio Cristiano (Figure 5.3). And in the United States, when the curators of the evangelical Museum of the Bible

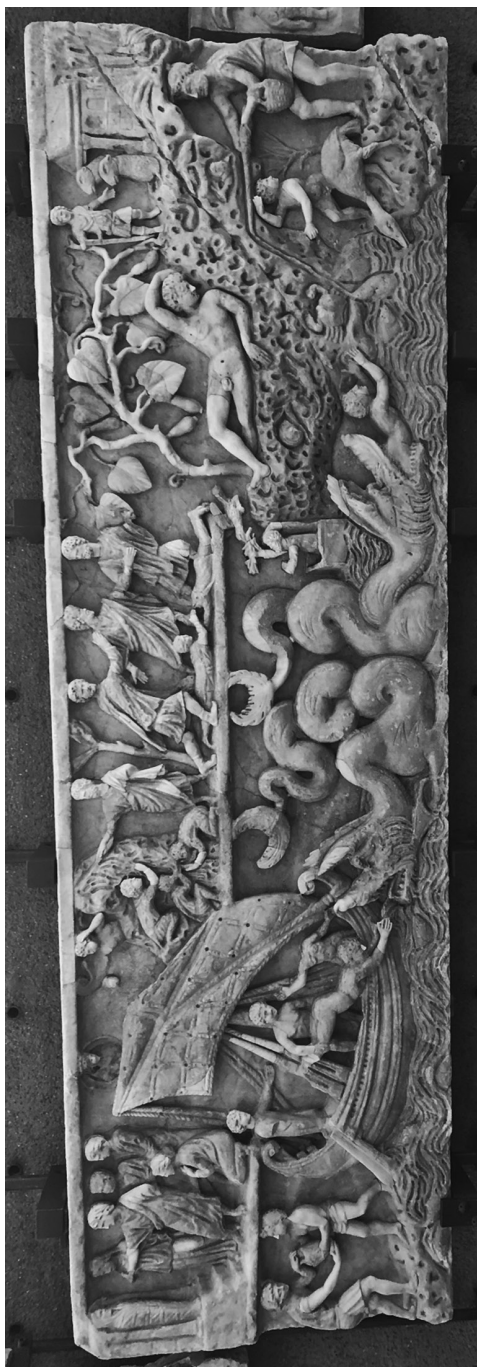


FIGURE 5.3 Jonah sarcophagus, 3rd c., Rome. Pio Cristiano museum, Vatican City. Photograph by author.

created a “Treasures from the Vatican Museums” exhibit to bolster their Catholic credentials, they centered it around a full-size replica of the Jonah sarcophagus—a true classic of biblical art.

Before analyzing the details, one can zoom out to take in the overall design scheme. The images might appear jumbled at first glance, but an order slowly emerges. The upper-left and upper-right corners frame the upper register with small columnar buildings, from which figures emerge toward the center. The lower register depicts men laboring on shore, loading a ship on the left and fishing with a rod on the right. Two sea monsters dominate the center of the sarcophagus, their winding bodies and fearsome heads forming a mirror image that divides two halves of the Jonah cycle. How do we read the story of Jonah in this art?

The textual version of the short story begins with God calling Jonah as a prophet to go east and preach repentance to the Gentiles of the great city of Nineveh (ancient Assyria; modern Mosul, Iraq). On the left the men load a boat, which Jonah has disobediently boarded to sail westward, away from Israel and away from God’s prophetic commandment (Jon 1). Moving to the right, the men throw Jonah into the sea, in an attempt to quell the raging storm, which they (rightly) interpret has been caused by Jonah’s disobedience to his god. In this artistic version, he dives straight into the mouth of the great fish—portrayed here, as elsewhere, like a sea monster—and prays to God for salvation over three days and three nights (Jon 2). He is then spit out onto shore and commanded again by God to preach repentance to Nineveh (Jon 3). He does so but then becomes disgruntled when the Ninevites *do* repent and God does *not* enact his planned punishment. Despite having been saved himself, Jonah doesn’t think these others are deserving of God’s mercy. So God teaches him a final lesson (Jon 4). While Jonah pouts alone outside of the city, God provides a large new plant to grow over Jonah, to protect him from the desert sun. This scene dominates the upper-right register, with Jonah reclining nude under bountiful shade, as if in a blessed afterlife. But as quickly as the plant grew, God sends a worm to destroy it, so that Jonah is again near death—first from a tempest-tossed ocean, and now from a sun-scorched desert. The story concludes with God delivering a prophetic sermon to his reluctant prophet: if Jonah is concerned over the life and death of just one plant that emerged and vanished so quickly, how much more should God be concerned with the fate of the thousands of lives in Nineveh, at that time the largest city in the known world?

The textual version of the story ends, like many prophetic oracles of the Old Testament, with a question. The question hangs in the air for ancient

listeners and modern readers, opening up to reflection and discussion about the tension between justice and mercy, about God's commitment to a chosen people while offering salvation to others, and about the persistent self-centered ways of even God's chosen messengers. The earliest Christian textual interpreters seized on two aspects of the story. First, as represented by the Gospel of Luke, Jesus interprets "the sign of Jonah" for his generation to be a call toward repentance (Luke 11:29–32). Just as he began his ministry with, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," along with John's baptismal ritual to enact such repentance, so, too, does he connect his preaching to the universalism of Jonah's mission. Luke thus emphasizes chapters 3 and 4 of Jonah, but Matthew's version of Jesus' teaching draws from the action of chapter 2. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days, "so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights" (Matt 12:40). Matthew includes the same teaching of repentance as Luke but also adds the unique interpretation of Jonah's "death" and "resurrection" as a foreshadowing of Jesus' own. This second idea comes to dominate the subsequent reception history. Then, when the apostle Paul describes immersion baptism as a ritualized participation in death and resurrection (Rom 6:3–4), the resources are all present to close the loop on the Jonah cycle. The story of Jonah therefore portrays (for Christians) the necessity of repentance, the salvific role of immersion in water as a death and resurrection, and the universal message of the God of Israel for all people, whether Jews or Gentiles. No matter how wayward a son of Israel has been, no matter how wicked a king of the Gentiles has been, God's mercy is available and boundless.

The artist of the sarcophagus surrounds the Jonah cycle with other stories to reinforce these meanings for the viewer. Looking closely at the water, between the sea monster and the reclining Jonah, one can see an inset Noah. Depicted in the "Jack-in-the-box" style typical of this era, Noah emerges from the ark to find the dove messenger returning with an olive branch (Gen 8:11), signifying the end of the flood and the salvation of those in the ark.<sup>9</sup> Early Christian artists often juxtapose various stories of salvation near or through water. One might even read the fisherman on the lower right, whose line casts near to where Jonah comes on shore, as a symbol of Jesus' first metaphor for preaching and discipleship: "Come, follow me," Jesus said to Simon Peter and Andrew while they were fishing, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 5:19).

The upper left features Jesus' raising of Lazarus, a "sign" performed in the Gospel of John that bears obvious connection to the "sign of Jonah" in



the Gospel of Matthew. The center of the upper register shows two scenes that are open to multiple interpretations. One possibility is from the Old Testament: here depicts Moses drawing “water from the rock” to satisfy the thirst of the Israelites wandering the wilderness during the exodus (Exod 17 / Num 20); to its right might then be the rebellion of Israelites against Moses (perhaps Num 16). Another possibility involves a different “water from the rock” miracle, that of Peter summoning a spring of water with which to baptize his repentant jailers. This is a non-canonical story about Peter’s life, but one apparently in very wide circulation, as there are at least 225 examples of it preserved from early Christian art.<sup>10</sup> The scene to its right would thus be the arrest of Peter, another non-canonical but widely depicted story. Either option signifies God’s miraculous provision for salvation through water, whether through thirst-quenching or a new covenant with God. The upper right shows a shepherd guiding sheep out of a mausoleum-like structure, and this calls to mind various biblical images of a shepherd and flock as salvation from death: the “Lord is my shepherd” (Ps 23), the parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15 / Matt 18), and the “good shepherd” and “gate” for the sheep (John 10), among others. Whoever “enters the gate” of death through Jesus will be saved, say the Gospel of John and the Jonah sarcophagus in unison. Both Jews and Gentiles will be “one flock” with “one shepherd” (John 10:16).

With these details in mind, we can zoom back out to see the big picture one final time. If you allow your eyes to be guided by the overall flow of the shapes and lines, you will see a curved arc of descent and ascent. Begin above the sail of the boat, where there stands in the sky what looks like a person peering through a circular portal in the heavens. In fact, this is the Roman sky god Caelus, who is often pictured this way during the Roman imperial era, with a billowing garment over his head. This personification of the sky or heaven (hence the word “celestial”) was adopted frequently in early Christian art as a way to communicate heavenly realms to the viewer (see also Figure 5.6 below). Some Roman writers even identified the God of Israel (as a sky god) with the Roman god Caelus, so we might imagine him here as a symbol of divine command over the drama below.<sup>11</sup> His gaze looks down along the line of the sail and follows the halyard directly into the snout of the beast. The arc flattens at the center of the sarcophagus and then bends upward through the right-facing snout, upward along the reclining Jonah’s left arm, then his right arm, and above to the plant of his blessed afterlife. From its tiny details to its overall form, this artistic masterwork conjures a treasury of biblical stories and frames the hoped-for arc of salvation from death.



Across the modern city of Rome, in the Museo Nazionale, stands another sarcophagus that also captures the early Christian pull toward the miraculous (Figure 5.4). The well-preserved frieze and lid date to the mid-fourth century and were dedicated to a certain Marcus Claudianus, labeled as “VC,” or *vir clarissimus* (a well-regarded man), which was probably indicative of his status as a member of the Roman Senate. The artist of this sarcophagus has composed an impressive quantity of biblical scenes in rapid succession, a style art historians sometimes call *staccato* (based on the musical term for notes played quickly and clipped-off close together). The main body of the work features seven scenes, surrounding a central figure praying in the typical Roman *orans* posture. The veiled figure in prayer is likely either the wife of the deceased or a personification of his pious soul in prayer for salvation. Two multiplication miracles of Jesus surround the central axis: on the left the changing of water to wine at the wedding at Cana (symbolized by jars), and on the right the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (symbolized by baskets). Taken together, these signify the miraculous power of Jesus to provide superabundant nourishment, while the bread and the wine also represent the funerary meal of the Eucharist. Moving to the right, Jesus heals a blind man, predicts Peter’s denial



FIGURE 5.4 Sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus, 4th c., Rome. Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome. Photograph by Lee M. Jefferson for Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

(signified by the rooster at his feet), and raises Lazarus from the dead, with either Martha or Mary (one of Lazarus' sisters) supplicating at Jesus' feet. Only the Gospel of John narrates the miracle at Cana (John 2) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11), and John's version of the healing of a blind man (John 9) is far more detailed and memorable than those in the other Gospels. Such examples have led Lee Jefferson, a leading scholar on the use of miracle scenes in early Christian art, to highlight "a devoted interest in the Johannine narrative, and its usefulness in exhibiting the divine ability of Jesus over and against any rival or critic."<sup>12</sup>

The left portion shows two more scenes from the life of Peter, making a total of three overall. But unlike the scene of Peter's denial, the two scenes on the left are not found in the text of the Bible as we have it. To the left of Cana are the arrest of Peter and Peter's drawing from a miraculous water source to baptize his jailers, who kneel at the base of the flowing spring. Jesus' raising of Lazarus on the right side, with a genuflecting figure below, is visually balanced on the left side by Peter's miracle of salvation, with genuflecting figures below. Roman Christians in the fourth century took a keen interest in the lives of Peter and Paul, using storytelling, visual arts, and rituals to establish them as the founding saints of Roman Christianity.<sup>13</sup> There was seemingly no concern about whether such well-circulated stories about Peter were written in a text or not. If Peter was eventually executed as a martyr, certainly he had been arrested prior to that; and if God had freed him from his jail cell in Jerusalem (Acts 12:3–19), certainly God could have worked miracles in a Roman jail as well.

The main panel of the sarcophagus surprisingly lacks scenes from the Old Testament, but the lid does offer two. On the left, one first sees the Nativity of Jesus and his healing of the woman with a flow of blood. Next come a depiction of Abraham poised to sacrifice Isaac and Moses' ascending the mountain to receive the Law from God. To the right of the inscription stands an unveiled relief bust of Marcus Claudianus himself, unfurled by two angelic figures modeled after the Roman god of victory. Two scenes of harvest round out the lid, with a man gathering wheat on the left and one gathering grapes on the right. Marcus Claudianus prays to be counted among the heavenly harvest and welcomed into the banquet of abundant bread and wine. The images of harvest and banquet as salvation are found, of course, throughout the Bible. Thus at least a dozen scenes from the Bible or biblical characters are portrayed on this remarkable monument to one of Rome's most socially prominent early Christians. As with the Jonah sarcophagus interpreted above, most of the biblical scenes depict salvation from malnourishment, from illness, or from death.

Considering the entire corpus of extant early Christian sarcophagi, the most frequent biblical scenes are the Jonah cycle, the miracle of the multiplication, and the healing of the blind.<sup>14</sup> Others in wide circulation included the raising of Lazarus, the three scenes with Peter, Daniel in the lions' den, the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, and eventually, the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi. Catacomb paintings show a similar canon of biblical art, with slightly more emphasis on Moses, on the shepherd and sheep, and on Jesus' healings.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the art on the sides of sarcophagi and the walls of the tombs, sometimes early Christians buried artifacts alongside the deceased as well.

We conclude this section with one such example, a bowl base of gold glass (Figure 5.5) from approximately the same time period as the sarcophagus



FIGURE 5.5 Bowl base with miracle scenes, gold glass, 4th c., Catacomb of St. Callixtus, Rome. Metropolitan Museum of Art 16.174.2, New York. Open Access.

of Marcus Claudianus. Reportedly found in 1715 in the catacomb of St. Callixtus, the bowl might have been buried with funerary votive offerings inside or perhaps used at a commemorative graveside meal for the deceased.<sup>16</sup> Beginning at the top, the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace are easily identifiable, but their miraculous salvation seems to occur through the figure of Jesus to the right, who holds a staff (*virga*) as a symbol of his power. Thus the Hebrew children were not confined to their historical time and place (pre-Christian Babylon), but were reimagined as inspiration for Roman Christian martyrs from the third and fourth centuries. (In catacomb art, we see other examples of the Hebrew children cast in the context of martyrdom trials before Roman statue busts.<sup>17</sup>) Then again, we might think of the presence of Jesus in the story as an allegorical mode of interpretation. When the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fire, he saw not three but four human forms—the fourth figure appearing like a son of god (Dan 3:25). Considering the early Christian perspective on Jesus as God's son, it is not a stretch to draw him back into the story, as a saving figure across all time and space. As for his wonder-working staff, which he also holds in the Marcus Claudianus sarcophagus and elsewhere, it is not best interpreted as a "magic wand" but more like the staff of Moses—a fulfillment of "New Moses" typology.<sup>18</sup> Moving clockwise, the scene of the paralytic is shown (with the successful result only), as he carries his four-legged bed away, following Jesus' healing. The third miracle is either the turning of water into wine at Cana alongside a solitary catch of fish or, taking both images together, the multiplication of loaves and fishes, in which the baskets appear differently than they usually do. Regardless of which multiplication miracles are referenced, Jesus' miraculous power of provision concludes the triad of nourishment, healing, and salvation.

All three ideas are expressed by the text at the center of the bowl. Once one has finished consuming the bowl's contents, a message is revealed in a kind of Greek-Latin hybrid. The word *ZESES* makes the most sense as the Greek verb meaning, "So that you might live!" Like the well wishes of *L'Chayim!* or *Salud!*, this text invokes a life of material nourishment, physical health, and spiritual salvation. The Bible of early Christian art was, above all, a Bible that saves.

### Power on Earth, Power from Heaven

Salvation from hunger, from illness, from torment in the afterlife—these are hopes of people from all times and places. But in the late third and early

fourth centuries, Christians in the Roman Empire also prayed for salvation from the punishment of state-sanctioned violence. Many traditional accounts of early Christian persecution have been overblown. Christians were not usually hiding in catacombs, communicating in secret codes, and being thrown willy-nilly to lions in the Colosseum. But evidence of persecution, however sporadic, is solidly attested; some rulers (then as now) lashed out at populations with different beliefs and customs than the dominant culture. Salvation from the era of martyrdom eventually came from the top, from the Roman emperor himself, when Constantine converted to Christianity in the year 312. Inaugurating first an era of toleration for Christians and eventually a conversion of the empire, the Roman emperors of the fourth century laid many of the foundations for what would become Roman Catholicism.

The effects of the Constantinian turn are difficult to overestimate. Imperial funding of Christianity meant a sudden influx of wealth. The Council of Nicaea (325) codified crucial Christian beliefs and doctrines. Large-format, expensive codices were commissioned to contain the fullest extent of scriptures yet assembled. The technology of the codex—a rectangular format of pages with long-edge binding that we call a “book”—was at the time replacing collections of scrolls. These codices had the effect of influencing the idea of canonization, since a codex/book has two covers that literally bind the contents. In addition, organizational structures of church authority were made somewhat more uniform across different regions. Traditional Roman religious imagery and rituals were phased out, though some aspects were resilient. But the effects of the Constantinian turn can be seen perhaps most clearly, from our modern vantage point, in the art and architecture that emerged in its wake. These artists drew heavily from the Bible and expanded the repertoire of biblical art. From the fourth to sixth centuries, the visual themes of early Christian art shifted from the power of salvation to the power of governance.

Christian artistic themes of governance emerged anew or were emphasized more than before. During and after the Constantinian turn, artists produced more of the following scenes: Christ enthroned, centrally and above the apostles; Moses receiving the Law from God; Christ handing “the law” to Peter and Paul (*traditio legis*); Christ crowning Peter and Paul as heroic martyr saints and co-founders of Roman Christianity; Christ entering the city in a kind of “triumph”; portrayals of dynastic lineage through Mary and David; stories of Davidic monarchy. Most of these are biblical, but some are expansions about biblical characters. They connote stability



and order. Let's return to the Vatican's collection for the classic example of these epochal changes, captured as a snapshot in real time.

Imagine that in the year 303 the emperor of Rome enacted a large-scale, decade-long, bloody persecution of Christians, generating hundreds of martyr stories. Now imagine that only fifty years later, the prefect of the city of Rome—something like the modern mayor of a large city or governor of a state—has *himself* become a Christian and felt comfortable *advertising* that fact in public. This remarkable turn of events is exactly what happened with Junius Bassus, whose sarcophagus is perhaps the crown jewel of early Christian art from Rome (Figure 5.6). Highly regarded for centuries, a detailed engraving of its relief sculpture was included already in Antonio Bosio's *Roma sotterranea* (1632), the first publication about exploration of the catacombs.<sup>19</sup> It has been usually housed at St. Peter's Basilica, but there was also a duplicate cast of it in the Pio Cristiano on my most recent visit.

Like Marcus Claudianus, Junius Bassus is listed as a “VC” (*vir clarissimus*), but he is also identified as a *neofitus iit ad Deum* (one “newly initiated who has gone to God”).<sup>20</sup> He likely converted later in life, which is not surprising



FIGURE 5.6 Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, 4th c., Rome. Original in treasury of St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. Cast in Pio Cristiano museum, Vatican City. Photograph by Miguel Cuesta. Wikimedia Commons.

considering that Christianity was barely legal when he was young (he lived from 317 to 359). The lower register from left to right shows panels of deep (skilled and expensive) relief sculpture separated by columns: the suffering of Job; Adam and Eve; Christ's entry to Jerusalem; Daniel in the lions' den; and the arrest of Paul. The upper register shows: Abraham and Isaac; the arrest of Peter; the *traditio legis*; and a two-paneled scene of Jesus' trial with Pontius Pilate. It includes some common imagery of salvation from earthly suffering (Job), from sin (Eden), and from death (Daniel and Abraham/Isaac).<sup>21</sup> But four of the panels also emphasize the theme of Roman justice (or not), which befits a sarcophagus for the Roman prefect. One can almost feel the Christian neophyte Junius Bassus and his collaborating artists processing inherited guilt on a Roman imperial scale: Should his predecessors have arrested and executed Peter and Paul in Rome? Should the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, have executed Jesus? He might have wondered what those trials were really like, as he himself administered law and justice in Rome at the cusp of its Christian revolution. Is justice done on earth or only in heaven?

The central panels embody the belief that indeed there is some connection between governance on earth and in heaven. Jesus is shown below as a ruler on earth, entering the city of his (supposed) power, just as Roman emperors were portrayed with equestrian statues, reliefs, and coins across the empire. The biblical Jesus enters here as a kind of king, a son of the Davidic monarchy. And his rule is not over: following the vertical axis upward, above the sky god Caelus demarcating heaven from earth, the enthroned Jesus now governs the cosmos from the upper panel. In this non-biblical scene that proliferated after the Constantinian turn, the heavenly Christ administers law to his selected representatives Peter and Paul. Like Rome founded by the pair Romulus and Remus and governed for centuries by two rotating consuls, so, too, would the Christian era of Rome be administered by two founders.<sup>22</sup> Guilt for their martyrdoms having been processed in the surrounding panels, now Jesus, Peter, and Paul are shown secure in heaven—and in charge of earth.

Another way of saying "power of governance" might be to say "uniting of earthly power and heavenly power." For premier examples of how the Bible was used to express that idea in church art, we can pop over from Rome to Ravenna, where some of the most spectacular artworks from late antiquity have been preserved. As Christians in the Roman Empire moved out from house-churches to purpose-built churches, it was not immediately obvious



how to do so. Sacred spaces tend to endure. Even when walls and images are destroyed, even when one religion's building is replaced with another's, the locality of holiness is preserved more often than not. A grotto to the Greek god Pan in Galilee becomes a temple to the Roman god Augustus. Hagia Sophia in Constantinople becomes a mosque (in Istanbul), then a museum, and now perhaps again a mosque. Evangelical church planters in the United States take over a shuttered Catholic parish. But back in the fourth century, Christians did not usually take over Roman temples. For starters, not everyone was yet Christian, and Roman temples did not have enough interior space for large gatherings. More important, Christians wanted to distinguish their religious beliefs and rituals from traditional Roman worship, which typically involved sacrifice in the presence of a divine statue (or, pejoratively, an "idol"). The mediation of the God of Jesus Christ between heaven and earth would be enacted differently, but more on that later.

Instead, many Roman Christians (and later, Byzantine Christians in the eastern empire) took over or built basilicas. The ancient meaning of *basilica* was related to its Greek root for "king/kingdom" or "ruler/reign," and Roman basilicas were thus administrative buildings of imperial governance. They were associated with power, order, and justice. A basilica had a rectangular, linear floor plan largely free of interior structures, and its long nave culminated in one or more apses, which are upper-register half-hemispheres. To adorn these spaces, Christians of this era mostly avoided the use of statues for biblical figures and instead greatly expanded the use of wall mosaics as artistic media.<sup>23</sup> And what a grand new medium it was! Christian wall mosaics of late antiquity brought biblical imagery and ideas to radiant life. They were not fully three-dimensional—the viewer could not walk around them, as with a statue—but neither were they merely two-dimensional like paintings. With their raised texture and shimmering presence of light, they seemed "alive" and interactive with a viewer in ways that other flat media did not. They thus answered to some degree the need for three-dimensionality in worship.

Many basilica mosaics use biblical themes to evoke a connection between heaven and earth. Consider the sixth-century apse mosaic (Figure 5.7) of the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, the port city of Ravenna. Its design unmistakably centers the viewer's attention on the jeweled cross, which hovers in a cosmic portal above a figure praying on earth below, labeled "Saint Apollinaris," the patron of Ravenna. The vertical axis runs up



FIGURE 5.7 Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, apse mosaic, 6th c., Ravenna. Photograph courtesy of Robin M. Jensen.

from the saint's prayers, which are gathering the needs of the twelve representative sheep who process toward him, and then it rises through the vertical beam of the cross toward the hand of God in the golden clouds. The horizontal axis of the design would have been even more striking to an ancient viewer; the vividness of the shimmering color palette would have stood out starkly in a world mostly devoid of gold and blue artificial hues. The green of the earthly paradise contrasts with the gold of heaven, while the cross is situated as a vertical bridge between the two.

Without textual labels, one might assume the two figures in heaven are angels. But they are labeled "Moses" and "Elijah," thus causing a reconsideration of the overall scene. If this is a depiction of the Transfiguration—the episode in which Jesus' appearance is "transfigured" on a mountaintop while Peter, James, and John gaze in wonder and Moses and Elijah chime in—then where is the figure of Jesus? And where are the three disciples? This artist has chosen to represent Jesus by the cross itself, along with a miniature portrait bust of Jesus at its central crux—still a cross of glory and not a crucifix, but a step in that direction.<sup>24</sup> Peter, James, and John are symbolized by the three sheep who stand at the top of earth and look toward the glorified cross. The asymmetry of three sheep in this otherwise perfectly symmetrical

design confirms that this is indeed the Transfiguration scene—biblical interpretation in an ethereal dimension.

A few miles away, in Ravenna proper, the Basilica of San Vitale preserves a second mosaic program of artistic grandeur and biblical sophistication. The overall effect is “one of variety and overwhelming richness that combines actual objects, real and fictive architecture, narratives, symbols, and ornament in a complex theological system.”<sup>25</sup> These artists were concerned with projecting biblical stories and themes, and also with the vexing problem of divine mediation. That is to say, how is the presence of God mediated on earth? The apse of San Vitale portrays Christ as ruler of the cosmos (Figure 5.8). The youthful ruler, clad in imperial purple, sits on a blue orb as a symbol of the whole universe. He holds a scroll with seven seals, a detail inspired by the victorious Christ of the book of Revelation (Rev 5–8). The Christ of San Vitale neither suffers nor saves; he simply reigns. Like at Sant’Apollinare in Classe, the earthly paradise is green and blue, with the four rivers of paradise flowing underneath, while the heavenly realm is arrayed in gold. Earthly power connects with heavenly power along this vertical axis, and the horizontal axis confirms the patron saint Vitalis (to whom Christ hands a crown) and the bishop Ecclesius (who hands Christ a model of the church building). The walls below the apse suggest that heavenly power has blessed the current earthly rulers, too: the emperor Justinian, empress Theodora, and bishop Maximian are



FIGURE 5.8 Basilica of San Vitale, apse mosaic, 6th c., Ravenna. Photograph by Petar Milošević. Wikimedia Commons.

all depicted—Justinian in purple and gold with a golden halo like Christ's above. As if the point were not clear enough, the mosaic of the military soldiers who flank the emperor emphasizes a shield with a large monogram of Christ. Thus the cosmic Christology of the artistic program is thoroughly designed to legitimate the earthly rule below.

But one must go to the rest of San Vitale's walls to fill out the artists' ideas about divine presence—and we must also imagine the rituals happening between the walls. Recall that for traditional Romans, as for almost all ancient Mediterranean peoples, gods were embodied in statues.<sup>26</sup> Whereas mosaics might occupy the walls above or the floor below, divine statues in antiquity typically stood on a pedestal at the focal point of a ritual space. For post-Constantinian Christians, what occupied this nexus was not so much art, but ritual. In temples of traditional Roman religion, sacrificial altars were not below the apse but usually outside the front entrance, while the area of the apse was “a show-case” for the statue; but in Christian basilicas, the area below the apse became the setting for a new kind of sacrificial ritual.<sup>27</sup> The Eucharistic liturgy on the altar of a basilica or martyr shrine thus mediated the presence of the hoped-for divine power, in place of a statue. The Roman mindset presumed the visibility and three-dimensional embodiment of the gods; the Christian negotiation of its Jewish heritage and its newly emphasized Roman-ness thus brought the body of their god, “the body of Christ,” to the place where a statue might have stood. They did not multiply and disseminate the divine presence of Christ through replicated statues, but through a different notion of visibility and embodiment—the “flesh” and “blood” of the body itself. The Christ in the apse above reigns beyond suffering; but the Christ on the altar below is sacrificed, again and again.

Other parts of the artistic program at San Vitale show the resilient biblical logic of sacrificial ritual and imagery. For example, the sacrificial offerings of Abel (Gen 3) and Melchizedek (Gen 14) are lifted over an altar portrayed to resemble the real altar on the floor below, and the hand of God signals approval from heaven (Figure 5.9). Abel is a household name, but the shadowy figure of Melchizedek appears only briefly in Genesis, the Psalms, and Hebrews. In Genesis, he was a king and priest to whom Abram (later called Abraham) paid homage, and his superior status later led the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews to emphasize his attributes as a foreshadowing of Christ. In her book *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, art historian Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis makes a strong case that the artistic program of San Vitale overall can be read as an interpretation of



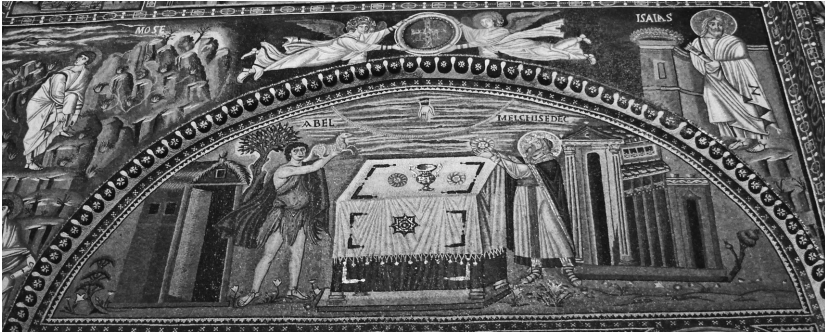


FIGURE 5.9 Basilica of San Vitale, south wall mosaic, (detail), 6th c., Ravenna. Photograph by Gianni Careddu. Wikimedia Commons.

Hebrews. It highlights Hebrews' themes of cosmic Christology and sacrificial ritual, along with many of the same biblical characters.

[The mosaics] can all be connected to the Epistle to the Hebrews. . . . The overarching theme that links all the mosaic images from the floor to the vault is Offerings to God. The scenes were viewed as types, or foreshadowings, of the Eucharistic offering; . . . The offering metaphor was in fact fully multidimensional, since the offering of the Eucharist was enacted at the church's main altar just below the mosaics; the liturgical drama both enhanced and was enhanced by the imagery above it. In the vault, all creation offers praise; . . . in the apse, [earthly rulers offer their gifts]. In the lunettes of the presbytery, Abel's is the offering acceptable to God, Melchizedek offers bread and wine, Abraham feeds the three strangers with three loaves of bread, and offers up his son on an altar. In these conflated scenes, the central element is the table or altar, above which the Hand of God receives the offerings, while in the background are the tabernacle and the temple. Thus Old and New Testament narratives are linked to the real-life world of the court, the bishop, and the Eucharistic celebrant, which themselves become part of universal Christian history, existing outside of time and space. Mosaics and participants are united by the Lamb in the vault of the presbytery and by Christ in the apse, to whom all gifts are ultimately presented.<sup>28</sup>

Thus one of the earliest detailed interpretations of the biblical book of Hebrews is not found in a homily or textual treatise, but rather in a mosaic program that connected Bible, art, and ritual. The text of Hebrews was

read not with pages of a book but with fragments of stone and bread surrounding the sides of an altar.

The art of mosaics and the liturgy of Eucharist were media of divine presence that also largely avoided the potential problems of divine statues. Notwithstanding the “emperor mystique” on display in some mosaics of Christ, these were not likely to be confused with images of emperors or other gods, as statues might have been.<sup>29</sup> Mosaics were also acceptable in Jewish synagogue art of late antiquity, a tradition simultaneously developing its own iconography and media. In addition, the potential problems of defacement or theft with mosaics were real but far less probable or dramatic than with statues. When mosaics were installed high above, they were virtually immune to desecration; when installed in the floor, they actually invited physical interaction from those walking on them.<sup>30</sup> With the Eucharist, Christians did replicate a “body” of Christ, but one of “flesh” and not stone or precious metal, as denounced in biblical idolatry critique. Through both mosaics and the Eucharist, the divine presence was thus mediated in a tangible way, while continuity with Jewish rejection of divine statues (“idols”) could plausibly be defended. Centuries later, Roman Catholics would eventually create countless statues of biblical figures and saints, but that time had not yet come.

A final, crucial difference from statues is that both mosaics and the Eucharist were—though undoubtedly holy—not whole. Whereas statues were only broken by their opponents, these media radiated brokenness by design. The very form of a mosaic issues forth in fragments. There is no materially uniform place where one can point that captures divine presence, as with a statue of unbroken marble or a biblical golden calf. A mosaic negates by its very nature the presumption of biblical idolatry, since it comes pre-broken, confessing the insufficiency of its own image. So, too, with the biblically mandated Eucharist: in place of a statue of Christ stood individuals around a consecrated Christ in the form of broken bread. The biblical traditions related to the Eucharist emphasized its essential brokenness, frequently using the Greek word for “broken” or “fragment” to signify the ritual.<sup>31</sup> This divine presence was made to be broken. Contrary to a statue, what made this presence real was its fracture.

### **The Bible and the Birth of Christian Monarchy**

The second part of this chapter has analyzed artistic renderings of the relationship between heavenly power and earthly power—and how the Bible

factored in to those artistic programs. I conclude by returning to the Bible's representation of Israelite monarchy, which began to play a bigger role for Christians in this period. Put yourself in the shoes of Ambrose of Milan, a brilliant scholar and orator, but one presented with a unique challenge in the year 395. At the funeral of the Christian emperor Theodosius, the one who brought the Constantinian turn to near completion, what is the preacher supposed to say about *Christian monarchy*? Recall that there are no good earthly rulers in the New Testament. So, in trying to incorporate the Bible into his eulogy, Ambrose does the only thing he *can* do: he harkens back to Israelite royal ideology from the Old Testament.

In the funeral oration, his references to the Old Testament are about twice as frequent as those to the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> And the Old Testament references are not drawn from the prophets, as was so typical for Christian preaching. Rather, Ambrose first relates aspects of Theodosius's rule to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; inspiration is also drawn from Moses and Joshua. But most of all, the ancient kings David, Solomon, Josiah, and even lesser-known kings like Abijah, Amon, and Asa provide exemplary models (or cautionary tales) for the behavior of Roman rulers. This is a revolution in the Christian appropriation of the Old Testament, looking to the kings of Judah and Israel not only as heralds of a coming Messiah but as divinely scripted patterns of earthly governance.

Like the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Ambrose tries to make sense of how Roman rulers can adopt the faith they once persecuted. Building on the story of the discovery of the "True Cross" in Jerusalem (about which see the next chapter), Ambrose describes a transfer of part of that Roman cross into the very crown of the Roman emperors. "By the generosity of Christ our rulers are to have the privilege that what has been said of the Lord can be said of the Roman emperor: 'You have placed on his head a crown of precious stones'" (Ps 21:4 [Vulgate 20:3]).<sup>33</sup> Here Ambrose finalizes the through-line of monarchy he hopes to establish. The heavenly ruler Jesus Christ has granted the privilege of earthly rule to the Roman emperor, and such divine favor is proven through the promises and prophecies of ancient Israelite kings. Such interest in ideologies and lineages of kings would only strengthen in the coming centuries, as medieval Christians would come to emphasize the divine election of Christ as king from his birth. They would soon promote both the royal genealogy that preceded his birth and, after his Nativity, the tribute paid to him by kings from east and west.



## From Stained Glass to Passion Plays

AT THE FAR NORTHERN TIP of Manhattan, amid one of the most developed, modern cities in the world, you can step away from subways and coffee carts and find yourself transported, alone, in a medieval Catholic chapel. Treasures of art surround you, situated among monastic buildings imported from Spain and France and majestically rebuilt on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River. The Cloisters, which houses the highlights of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's medieval collections, is a pinnacle of American museums. It is also a fitting place to ponder the foundations of how the Bible of modern Catholic visual arts came to be. Here at the Cloisters one does not see many of Jesus' miracles of salvation; on the contrary, the Bible of medieval Catholic art emphasizes the beginnings and endings of Jesus' life. Catholic devotional art dwells on the paradox of Jesus: the universal ruler from birth who becomes the model of humble, pious suffering. In these twin roles of regal glory and devout pain, Jesus is joined by his mother, Mary, whose artistic repertoire is more biblical than it seems at first glance. During and after the medieval era, his devoted follower Mary Magdalene also becomes a more central figure alongside his male disciples, who had dominated earlier eras of biblical art. Through the media of stained glass, sculpture, painting, pilgrimage artifacts, and liturgical drama, Catholics have continued to create vivid modes of biblical imagination.

### The Regal Birth of Christ

When I bring my students to the Cloisters, we pause below a fourteenth-century stained-glass window from the chapel of an Austrian castle (Figure 6.1).



FIGURE 6.1 Adoration of the Magi from Seven Scenes from the Life of Christ, stained glass, ca. 1390, Austria. Metropolitan Museum of Art 1986.285.1, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.

And I ask them, “In the Bible, how many kings came to visit the infant Jesus, to pay him homage and bring gifts?” The story is only recounted once in the canon, in the Gospel of Matthew, but most students, even the secular ones, think they know the answer. Students of Latin American heritage have no doubt, as “Three Kings’ Day” is a major holiday in many countries (*Día de Los Reyes*, elsewhere called Epiphany). Eventually, someone states the obvious: “It’s three kings, professor—unless this is a trick question.”

Indeed, it is a trick. The textual Bible describes the visit of “magi” (or “wise men”) from the east, not “kings”; moreover, the text does not say how many of them visited (Matt 2:1–12). They brought three *gifts*, but it could have been two people with three gifts or ten people with three gifts. One ancient Syriac manuscript of a text dated as early as the second or third century narrates the story from the perspective of twelve or more magi.<sup>1</sup> So why does everyone assume there were *three* visitors? And how did they come to be thought of as *kings*? The answers run through the Bible of Catholic art.

Visually, it just makes sense to put three gifts in the hands of three people. The scene was established artistically as early as the third century, with the oldest extant version in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. Other Roman examples exist on the fifth-century wooden doors of Santa Sabina and numerous sarcophagi (see Figure 5.1). The three are eventually given names—usually Gaspar/Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar—and the sixth-century wall mosaic at Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna inscribes these names for posterity (Figure 6.2). No one knows where the names originated, but most of the important yet unnamed figures in the Bible eventually get names in the tradition.<sup>2</sup> The Samaritan Woman at the Well becomes Photina, the Roman centurion at the Crucifixion is Longinus, the “good thief” on the cross is Dismas, etc. Among the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the gift of gold implied a kind of royal tribute. Art historians have suggested that the developing imagery “seems to reflect aspects of a Roman imperial court ritual, the *aurum coronarium* [crowning with gold], in which representatives of provincial cities, members of the Senate, or foreign ambassadors presented golden crowns to an enthroned ruler or conquering general” to show “the donors’ fealty to an acknowledged sovereign.”<sup>3</sup> As with other examples of the visual Bible, these artists looked as much to their surrounding visual culture as they did to textual scripts.

The gold was eventually worn, too, by the visitors themselves: medieval versions often show golden crowns atop their heads, as foreign “kings” paying tribute.<sup>4</sup> The stained-glass example (Figure 6.1) shows one “king” genuflecting and offering gold to the newborn “king,” having removed his own golden crown in a display of deference. To secure this interpretation of



FIGURE 6.2 Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, nave mosaic (detail), 6th c., Ravenna. Photograph by Carole Raddato. Wikimedia Commons.

the three visitors as kings bearing tribute, Christian artists relied on a biblical text from the Psalms. Recall that throughout the premodern period of Catholic biblical interpretation, typological methods were dominant. If visitors came from afar to bear tribute to Jesus as king, then certainly, medieval Christians thought, there must have been a foreshadowing or *type* in the Old Testament (from Greek *typos*, meaning pattern or model). Psalm 72 (Vulgate Ps 71), a prayer for the Israelite king to have universal rule, seemed tailor-made:

O God give your judgment to the king;  
 your justice to the son of kings. . . .  
 May he rule from sea to sea,  
 from the river to the ends of the earth. . . .  
 May the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring tribute,  
 the kings of Arabia and Seba offer gifts.  
 May all kings bow before him,  
 all nations serve him.  
 For he rescues the poor when they cry out,  
 the oppressed who have no one to help. . . .  
 Long may he live, receiving gold from Arabia,  
 prayed for without cease, blessed day by day.<sup>5</sup>



The “kings of Arabia and Seba” were prophesied to come from the east and south, and the new Israelite king would “receive gold.” Churchgoing Catholics will find this text familiar to their ears: for centuries it has been a reading on the feast of Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas, proclaimed on January 6 or the Sunday closest to the holiday. It is one of the few Psalms that a Catholic in the pew will hear recited every single year.

Some visual artists crafting the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi made the typological interpretation explicit. Walking to a different room of the Cloisters Museum—and moving slowly, so as not to miss miniature treasures—one will find displayed a late medieval wooden rosary bead of exquisite detail (Figure 6.3). Measuring less than 2.5 inches (6 centimeters) in diameter, this devotional diorama demands attention (and, ideally, a magnifying glass). It is a “*Pater Noster*” bead, one of the “Our Father” beads that segments the decades of the rosary, and it perfectly encapsulates how the rosary activates biblical imagination (see chapter 4). The bead is a sphere when closed, and it can be opened in half and then the top half opened again. The carvings inside invite meditation on the events of Christ’s birth (top) and death (bottom). Focusing our attention on the top half, the left panel of the triptych door shows the journey to Bethlehem and the Nativity; the center shows the visit of the magi/kings, with animals and other common parts of the *crèche*; and the right panel shows the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem. Amid all the figurines, what focuses the viewer’s mind on the adoration of the kings is the text that encircles the scene. Moving clockwise from the top, it reads: *reges Tharsis et insul[a]e munera offerent, reges Arabum et Saba dona adduc[e]nt* (“The kings of Tarshish and the islands bring tribute, the kings of Arabia and Seba offer gifts”; Ps 72:10 / Vulgate Ps 71:10). Thus the typological interpretation of the three visitors as kings was enshrined in both the lectionary read from the pulpit and the devotional art in the palm of a hand.

As discussed previously with respect to the Constantinian turn (see chapter 5), it is impossible to find examples of good kings or other earthly rulers in the text of the New Testament. After the conversion of the Roman Empire, Christian leaders searched the Old Testament for ways to anchor positive notions of monarchy, to secure a kind of dynastic succession for Christ as king and thereby bolster European monarchy. The lineage of King David and Solomon was, of course, foundational, and medieval artists developed a creative image of a royal family tree. Often called the “Jesse tree,” the pictorial political ideology is named after David’s father Jesse and the well-known messianic prophecy of Isaiah: “A shoot shall sprout from the



FIGURE 6.3 Prayer bead with the Adoration of the Magi and the Crucifixion, Boxwood carving, early 16th c., Netherlandish. Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.475, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.

stump of Jesse . . . ” (Isa 11:1), cited frequently in full as a prediction of Jesus Christ. Genealogical ideas came to be so important that some Old Testament figures who are known *only* for being listed in the genealogy of David had works of art devoted to them. For example, a stained-glass

window from a medieval French abbey features Abiud/Abihud as part of a pictorial cycle of Jesus' ancestors, though nothing is known about him except his spot in the lineage (1 Chr 3:21 and Matt 1:13).<sup>6</sup> This window could very well have been part of a Jesse tree, since other extant medieval examples include him and still more obscure members of the ancestral line. Medieval artists developed a penchant for portraying Jesus' ancestors "in many locations, from the facades of churches to miniatures in manuscripts. The columnar figures of sculpted ancestors that frequently flank church doorways appear literally as well as metaphorically to hold up the church."<sup>7</sup>

A twelfth-century biblical manuscript of the Psalms at the J. Pierpont Morgan Library shows a classic Jesse tree (Figure 6.4).<sup>8</sup> The tree sprouts from the deceased Jesse at the bottom, growing upward through generations of fourteen crowned kings (Matt 1:17), interlaced with scenes of annunciations of miraculous birth announcements to Zechariah (John the Baptist) and Mary (Jesus). The tree culminates in the bust of Jesus Christ at the top, with the Holy Spirit's dove alighting upon him, like an angel upon a Christmas tree. The surrounding panels show the coronation of King David and entry into Jerusalem at the top and move immediately to the Visitation of the Virgin Mary with Elizabeth and other scenes of the Nativity. In some other illuminated biblical manuscripts of this period, the Jesse tree acts as a bridge between the text of the Psalms and the text of the Gospels (recall that before the printing press produced full Bibles, copies of the Psalms and the Gospels were the most prevalent books in Europe). Thus the Jesse tree provided an interpretive link between the words of King David (Psalms) and the life of "king" Jesus (Gospels). The confident linearity of these biblical forms whitewashes any ambivalence about David's character and smooths out the bumpy spots in biblical genealogy. By doing so, this medieval biblical art likely appealed to the courts of European kings, who propagated their rule by "divine right" and often funded the expensive production of the manuscripts themselves. Whereas in early Christian art, the Old Testament had been a treasury of stories about salvation, it had now become a resource to bolster the power of dynasty.

Returning now to the Cloisters and the three kings, some medieval artists were not satisfied with only eastern kings coming to pay homage. What about those predicted "kings of Tarshish and the islands," the *western* parts of the Mediterranean world? A late medieval triptych of the Nativity shows how an artist could blend canonical and non-canonical narratives to completely fulfill the prophecy of the Psalms—with some extra prophecies



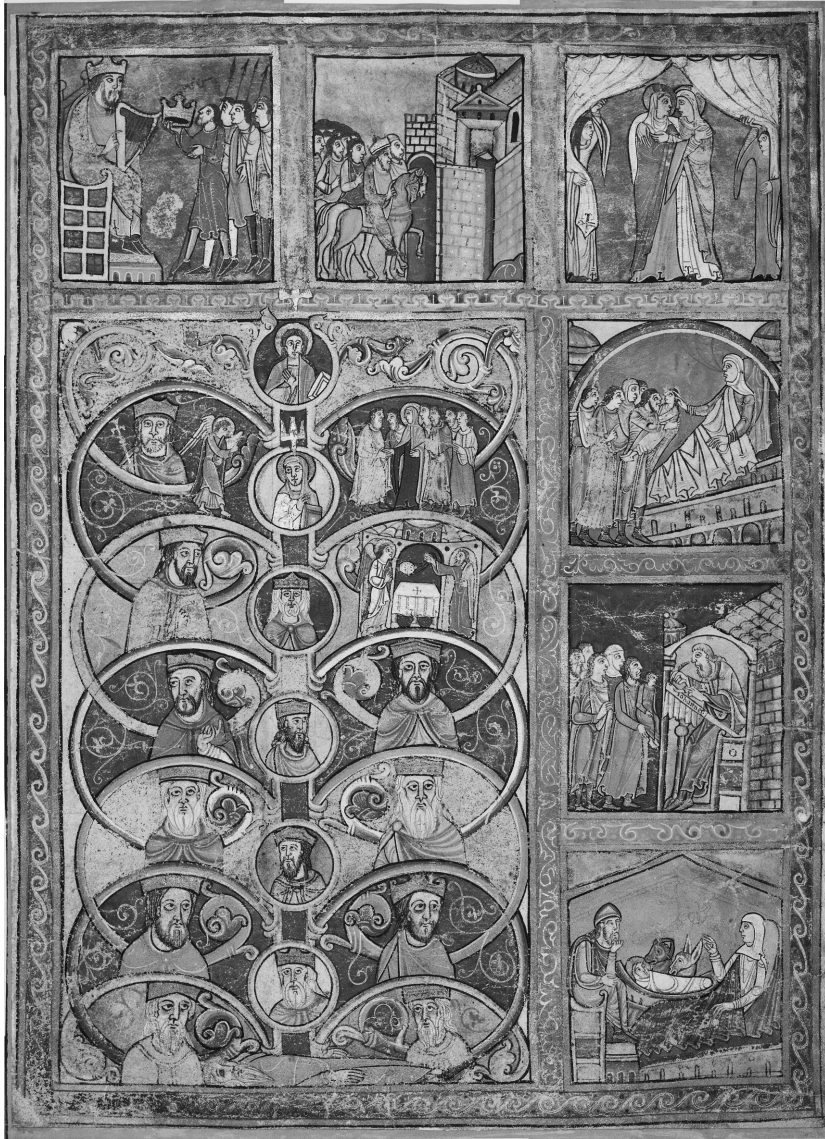


FIGURE 6.4 Jesse tree, with scenes from the lives of David, Mary, and Jesus, illuminated manuscript of the Psalms MS M.724v, ca. 1155–60, Canterbury, England. Photograph used by permission of The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

to boot (Figure 6.5). First, the familiar scenes: the center features the Holy Family, with God the Father in an upper register as King of heaven. The right side shows the three kings in three different stages: their vision of the Messiah in heaven (an infant within a sunburst); their journey and bathing in preparation for arrival; and their giving of homage to mother and child. The far left shows the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, but what is happening in the near-left panel?

One can search the Bible endlessly and not find the reference. Rather, this panel depicts a scene from the exceedingly popular medieval *Golden Legend*: here the Tiburtine Sibyl, one of the Sibylline oracles—trusted prophetesses of Rome—announces to the Roman emperor that a new ruler has been born (see chapter 3, for a Sibyl's appearance in the *Dies irae*). Augustus sees a vision of mother and child as through a sunny portal in the sky, and he offers incense in honor, mimicking the frankincense of the kings from the east. Therefore, in their search to contrast good earthly rulers with the wicked ones (Herod), Christian biblical artists conjured them from both scripture and legend. The kings of the east and king of the west both receive non-Israelite, non-biblical prophecy that proves the universal rule of the newborn king. Finally, this universality is captured by the diversity of the three kings from the east. Many versions of the medieval magi (both versions shown in this chapter) cast them as differently aged characters: one young, one middle-aged, and one old. And many versions (though not the two shown here) further give them different skin tones, to

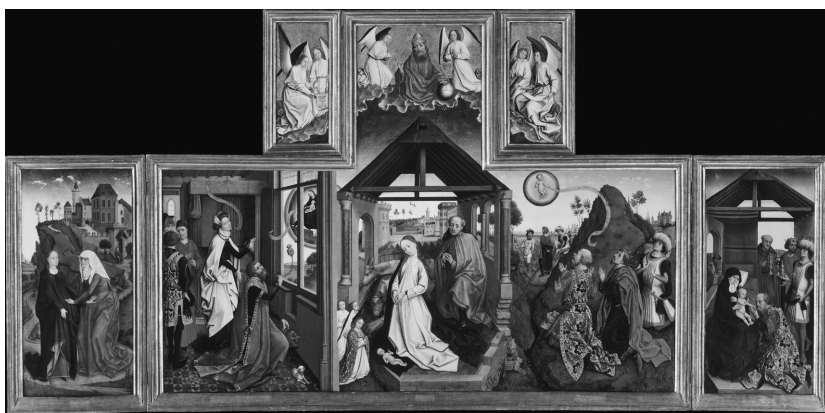


FIGURE 6.5 *The Nativity*, from workshop of Rogier van der Weyden, triptych painting, ca. mid-15th c., Belgium. Metropolitan Museum of Art 49.109, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.

symbolize the peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa—in other words, all the peoples of the world known to the artists.<sup>9</sup>

Christian artists had a textual problem, though, with this pro-Roman ideology regarding the emperor Augustus. In the Gospels, it was on a *Roman* cross, a torture and execution device of *Roman* imperial domination, that Jesus of Nazareth was hung to die. How did they navigate this artistic challenge? In this particular example, as with the rosary bead, there is a faint biblical text to guide the viewer's interpretation. The text scrolling from the Sibyl's lips says, "*cor contritum non despicias*" ("you will not look down upon a contrite heart," Ps 51:19 [Vulgate Ps 50:19]). In most textual versions of the *Golden Legend*, the Sibyl instead says to Augustus, "*hic puer major te est, ipsum adora*" ("this child is greater than you, worship him").<sup>10</sup> The artist has done a bit of biblical interpretation here, then, by encouraging contrition on the part of Augustus. Using the biblical words of King David, pleading for mercy from God for his sin, the Roman prophetess exhorts the Roman ruler also to plead for mercy. His genuflection and incense suggest both worship and an ancient guilt. From the perspective of medieval Roman Catholic art, the representative of Roman power needed to be forgiven for having crucified the one worthy of Roman worship.

### The Cross, from Anchor to Crucifixion

The cross, whether with or without the body of Jesus depicted on it, is one of the most recognizable symbols on earth. So new students of art history are dumbfounded to learn just how many centuries it took to develop as the central image of Christianity. Let's return to ancient Rome to chart that story. The oldest extant images of the cross are either mocking or cryptic.<sup>11</sup> The very earliest one ever discovered, the "Palatine graffito" or "Alexamenos graffito," shows a crudely drawn human figure worshipping a figure on a cross, with the inscription "Alexamenos worships (a) god." The figure on the cross, however, appears to be half-man, half-donkey, with its posterior facing the viewer. This artifact from the Palatine Hill in Rome is usually interpreted as a mockery of a second-century Christian named Alexamenos, when Christianity was still a small minority religion. Indeed, it was difficult for early Christians to make the decision to present crucifixion visually in a positive light, since everyone knew it was a grisly form of torture and execution. For symbolic art, they instead preferred imagery of doves, fish, and anchors.



In terms of the biblical record, one of these is not like the other two. Doves call to mind the story of Noah and the Baptism of Jesus. Fish are obvious symbols of many stories from the Gospels and of Jesus himself as the “*ichthys*” (ΙΧΘΥΣ), the Greek word for “fish” which doubled as an acrostic that meant “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”<sup>12</sup> But anchors do not seem to be self-evident symbols from the Bible—nor was Rome a port city full of nautical tradesmen. Yet there are over 550 anchor inscriptions or graffiti in Roman Christian burial sites, and in the oldest sections of the Catacomb of Priscilla, it occurs with a much higher frequency than any other symbol.<sup>13</sup> The anchors’ prevalence in early Christian graffiti has caused scholars to ponder their iconographic resemblance to the cross. When combined with fish and salvation symbolism, as in the famous epitaph of Licinia Amias (Figure 6.6), the development of early cruciform iconography makes more sense. In addition, there is one biblical reference to an anchor that carried relevance for some early Christians: in a section about the eternal



FIGURE 6.6 Epitaph of Licinia Amias, marble, 2nd–3rd c., Rome. Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome. Photograph by author.

priesthood and eternal sacrifice of Jesus, the book of Hebrews exhorts readers to “be strongly encouraged to hold fast to the hope that lies before us. This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm” (Heb 6:18–19). The Christian hope of the promise of eternal life, secured by a heavenly sacrifice, is an anchor for the soul. Biblical scholar Jason Whitlark has compellingly argued that the text from Hebrews remains the most likely reason for the prevalence of anchor imagery, especially (I would add) when combined with the anchor’s cruciform shape.<sup>14</sup> At least three catacomb examples connect the anchor to the word for “hope,” making the biblical connection even more likely.<sup>15</sup> An anchor was thus a cultural symbol with cryptic biblical resonance that enabled the development of cruciform iconography without depicting the horror of crucifixion. For these reasons, Clement of Alexandria included it in his list of appropriate images that a Christian might put on a signet ring: “Let the seals be of a dove or fish or ship in full sail or of a musical lyre (such as Polycrates used) or of a ship’s anchor (like the one Seleucus had engraved on his signet); or, if anyone be a fisherman, let him make an image of the Apostles and of the children drawn out of the water.”<sup>16</sup>

For one of the most sophisticated expressions of the cross in early Christian art, let’s return to the Pio Cristiano. On display is a beautifully carved and well-preserved columnar sarcophagus with scenes from the Passion narrative—extremely rare for this period of biblical art. The “Passion sarcophagus” or “sarcophagus of Domitilla” shows four scenes of relief sculpture, surrounding an innovative central panel (Figure 6.7). The ideas for all of the panels can be drawn from the Gospel of Matthew. The left side depicts Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross of Jesus (Matt 17:32 and parallels) and the crowning of Jesus (Matt 27:29 and parallels). The right side shows Jesus being led by a Roman soldier toward Pontius Pilate and Pilate washing his hands (a scene found only in Matt 27:24), a weak attempt at self-exculpation from the decision to execute Jesus.

The central panel is neither Crucifixion nor Resurrection scene; rather, it combines multiple ideas into one devotional image. The cross dominates the design, extending upward into a *chi-rho* monogram of Christ (☩, a “Christogram”) encircled by a wreath. The wreath is held from above by a large eagle, whose wings form an arch, flanked by personifications of the sun and the moon. Two smaller birds stand on the crossbeam and support the wreath, similar to common funerary iconography that shows two birds holding a garland over the deceased. Thus the death of Christ is commemorated: he is on the cross in the form of his monogram, while



FIGURE 6.7 “Passion sarcophagus” or “sarcophagus of Domitilla,” 4th c., Rome. Pio Cristiano museum, Vatican City. Photograph by author.

other typical features of funerary iconography surround him. But who are the two figures under the cross? They are not Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross, as on later Crucifixion iconography. Rather, these are the sleeping Roman soldiers posted outside Jesus' *tomb* (a scene found only in Matt 27:65–66; 28:11–15). Over time, these sleeping guards will become prominent in iconography of the empty tomb; and here this fourth-century artist seems to be at the vanguard of this new visual motif. With the resurrection story in mind, one's eye is drawn upward again to the eagle, whose very wings form the firmament of the sky and seem to be drawing the symbol of Christ heavenward, like an eagle bearing a Roman emperor aloft to his divinization.<sup>17</sup> This wreath represents the victory of Christ over death. And that crown which the Roman soldier places on Jesus—is it actually the “crown of thorns” from the biblical text? The carving looks more like a jeweled crown of laurels than a thorny one, thereby removing the sting and mockery from the text's kingship parody.<sup>18</sup> Taken together, therefore, the panels do not have one-to-one correspondences with neatly sourced texts or stories. They do not illustrate or represent texts from scripture, so much as they invite the viewer to encounter a multi-layered biblical meaning: a crucifixion, resurrection, coronation, and ascension in one.

### *Scripture Renders the World*

Devotion to the cross as a symbol was further catalyzed by the fourth-century discovery—whether in fact or legend—of the site of Jesus' Crucifixion and part of the “True Cross.” According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius' biography of Constantine, when the emperor learned from his mother, Helena, of the discovery of the site of Jesus' Crucifixion, burial, and Resurrection, he ordered that the most beautiful church building in the world should be built on the site.<sup>19</sup> That church building would become the “New Jerusalem” for which Christian scriptures had longed. Emperor Constantine, at least as portrayed by Eusebius, had brought the Christian hope of a future heavenly Jerusalem down to earth.

The decision to construct the Church of the Holy Sepulchre would come to have broad ramifications for Christianity. It centered Christian pilgrimage on the events of Jesus' final days and bolstered the rituals of Good Friday and Easter. Judging by the extant evidence of the period from the refounding of Jerusalem by Constantine to its conquest by Muslims, pilgrimage to the Holy Land was a vibrant enterprise. Soon ascetics from all over were emigrating to set up hermitages and monasteries in this holiest



of lands. Growing flocks of pilgrims were not far behind. The most famous of these are known through their travel diaries passed down through history: the “Bordeaux pilgrim,” the “Piacenza pilgrim,” and the preeminent example, “Egeria,” who offers detailed accounts of Holy Week in Jerusalem. All three of these pilgrims to the Middle East came from the Latin West, which was centered on Roman Christianity.

Most do not give reason for their journeys, but pilgrims were likely drawn by the allure of religious blessing from both holy places and holy people. They memorialized their experiences with ritual objects, some of which have been well preserved. Through decades of leadership, art historian and museum director Gary Vikan has curated our interpretation of the genre of early Christian pilgrimage art from the fifth to the seventh centuries. For these pilgrims, “the word *eulogia* (Latin, *benedictio*) held special meaning, referring to the blessing received by contact with a holy person, holy place, or holy object, sometimes realized through the reenactment of the event that had initially sanctified the *locus sanctus* [holy site].”<sup>20</sup> On their way to the culminating experience of reverence for the cross in Jerusalem, pilgrims visited a number of holy sites, and their mementos from this journey feature a *locus sanctus* cycle ranging from four to twelve scenes—a biblical “canon within the canon” created by pilgrimage. The events commemorated by the locations were inscribed on metal flasks, terracotta tokens, armbands, censers, reliquaries, and more.

Pilgrims used all their senses and “sometimes sought blessing through mimesis—action imitative of the sacred heroes and events along his or her route.”<sup>21</sup> A personal favorite example of such biblical re-enactment is the tradition of throwing stones at the tomb of Goliath, as recounted by the Piacenza Pilgrim.<sup>22</sup> So many previous pilgrims had done it, that there was not a movable stone to be found for miles around. But in addition to throwing something at the tomb of an archetypal enemy, they could also gather something from the tomb of their Lord, once they finally arrived there. As the Piacenza Pilgrim notes, dirt was brought into Jesus’ tomb from outside, so that “those who enter it bear away a blessing with them from it when they depart.”<sup>23</sup>

Most importantly, pilgrims brought back iconography of and reverence for the cross, which was featured prominently in the ritual encounter orchestrated by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The popularity of the cross itself was the greatest artistic legacy of the increase in religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem. We are grateful to have a substantial collection of metal *ampullae* (flasks for holy oil or holy water) that have survived to the modern era, most

of them housed in Monza and Bobbio, Italy.<sup>24</sup> Many capture a fascinating midpoint between the empty cross and the full Crucifixion scene. The lower register of this example (Figure 6.8) shows a typical empty tomb scene of this period, with two women at the tomb being greeted by an angel. The upper register presents a detailed Crucifixion scene, with criminals crucified on the right and left, the sun and moon above, two figures kneeling below and two others standing off to the side. But the central cross of Jesus seems to be made of palm fronds, perhaps symbolizing the “wood of life” in the Greek inscription around the flask’s circumference. The cross is also mysteriously empty. The rest of the scene attempts a snapshot of the Crucifixion in real



FIGURE 6.8 Pilgrimage *ampulla* (flask), metal, 5th–7th c., Holy Land. Front side of Monza no. 11 in André Grabar, *Ampoules de Terre Sainte*. Photograph by Denise Fourmont.

time—but as for Jesus, his head seems to float above, with a radiate, cruciform halo. Iconographically, his disembodied head occupies a similar role to the Christogram and laurel wreath of the Passion sarcophagus (Figure 6.7), corroborating the reality of Jesus' death on the cross but emphasizing the Resurrection and Ascension to come. Images such as this also foreshadow later Catholic theology about Holy Week, in which the "Triduum" of three days from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday really comprise *one* ritual experience. In fact, each and every Sunday Mass is both a commemoration of the Crucifixion and a celebration of the Resurrection, tied together in one "Paschal mystery," just like this type of pilgrimage artifact.

The earliest detailed narrative of a Christian pilgrimage comes from the late fourth century. A woman named Egeria, probably from Spain, reports back in colloquial Latin letters to her "sisters" about her experiences in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> Only part of her narrative has come down to us, but in it we see a Jerusalem that already had developed an ornate pilgrimage calendar. One could stand in the spot where Lazarus' sister Mary ran out to confront Jesus (John 11:31–35); one could sit in a cave on the Mount of Olives and listen to Jesus' apocalyptic sermons being read from the Gospel of Matthew. These places animated the biblical imagination in ways that must have been thrilling to pilgrims from a world away. Mary Baine Campbell describes how the stories of the Bible were like a map that Egeria could follow, whether the reality of her senses aligned with the mental map or not. "In the inevitable zigzagging between the sacred map and the distortion it suffers through her temporal experience of it, her allegiance is chiefly with the map. This is clear in the suppression of almost all personal details of the journey: the names of people she meets, the nature of the gifts she receives, the identities of her fellow travelers, the feelings evoked by what she sees. . . . Places not appearing in the Scriptures are, to her, empty."<sup>26</sup>

Egeria's travel journal spends its longest entry describing the rituals of Good Friday, the climax of which is the procession to touch the cross:

The bishop's chair is placed on Golgotha behind the cross. . . . A table is placed before him with a cloth on it, the deacons stand round, and there is brought to him a gold and silver box containing the holy Wood of the Cross. It is opened, and the Wood of the Cross and the Title [the placard saying "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews"] are taken out and placed on the table. As long as the holy Wood is on the table, the bishop sits with his hands resting on either end of it and holds it down, and the deacons round him keep watch over it. They guard it like this because what

happens now is that all the people, catechumens as well as faithful, come up one by one to the table. They stoop down over it, kiss the Wood, and move on. But on one occasion (I don't know when) one of them bit off a piece of the holy Wood and stole it away [to Syria], and for this reason the deacons stand round and keep watch in case anyone dares to do the same again.<sup>27</sup>

Those poor deacons—they always get the tough jobs, whether organizing pre-marriage counseling or having to keep pilgrims from biting pieces off the cross (!). But we learn, through Egeria's eyes, that the cross had become the ultimate contact relic on the biblical tour.

Some pilgrimage artifacts make that point vividly. One stunning ninth-century reliquary (Figure 6.9) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art features an enameled Crucifixion scene on its top lid, another Crucifixion as one of four *locus sanctus* scenes on the underside of the lid, a metal embossed cross on the bottom surface, and—if that's not enough—the inner compartments



FIGURE 6.9 The “Fieschi Morgan Staurotheke,” pilgrimage reliquary of silver, gold, and enamel, with cross-shaped container, 9th c., Holy Land. Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.715a and b, New York. Open Access.



to hold the relics from the pilgrimage are also divided in the shape of a cross.<sup>28</sup> The size of the object resembles a codex and the bottom seems to be stylized like a book cover, which suggests that the completed reliquary, with all its compartments filled, contains a tactile form of the Gospels.

In a way, one can think of items like this as “souvenirs.” But pilgrims like Egeria were not typical “tourists” writing travelogues about everything they saw in far-off lands. Rather, the stories of the Bible had generated her itinerary and, in a very real sense, created the visuality that pilgrims experienced. In the words of Catherine Sider Hamilton, “Scripture and the land are intimately interwoven. Scripture shapes her journey so thoroughly as to transform the fourth-century landscape: current events, local customs, politics on the edges of a weakening Roman Empire, the daily life of a busy city like Jerusalem—none of this interests her. . . . *Scripture thus renders the world*: what Egeria sees is the story of Moses and the Israelites, of Melchizedek and the vine-filled valley, of Jesus and the cross and empty tomb—not the contemporary exotica of a foreign land.”<sup>29</sup> We do not know what form of the Bible she possessed on her journey—a few scrolls, a small codex, or perhaps no text at all except the memorized words in her mind. But she walked the dusty landscape with biblical eyes.

The “Sancta Sanctorum Blessings Box” (Figure 6.10), a unique example of a pilgrim’s full reliquary combined with early Christian painting from



FIGURE 6.10 The “Sancta Sanctorum Blessings Box,” pilgrimage reliquary of painted wood, with inset stones, 6th c., Holy Land. Vatican Museums inv. 61883, Vatican City. Photograph by Fabrizio Garrisi.

the Holy Land, captures well the interface of Bible, art, and ritual on the pilgrim's path—and serves as a fitting conclusion to this section. The box is packed with rocks, earth, and wood from various sites, and some of the mementos' labels are still visible. One might grab a piece here from the Mount of Olives, a piece there from the wedding at Cana. The underside of the lid has five painted scenes from the *locus sanctus* cycle: Nativity, Baptism, Crucifixion, Women at the Tomb, and Ascension. It is housed with some of the most prized possessions in the Vatican Museums, what used to be a secret papal "Holy of Holies" of artifacts.<sup>30</sup>

The scene at the tomb perfectly demonstrates how, as is often the case in biblical art, the image's correspondence to a biblical text was supplemented by its reminiscence of a ritual—in this case, the pilgrimage to the contemporaneous holy site. That is to say, this painting of the empty tomb event

shows an architectural ensemble modeled on the tomb aedicula itself and the Anastasis rotunda as they existed at the time of the painting. . . . In the eyes of the pilgrim, the tomb aedicula was not a building but a large contact relic, on a par with the True Cross, both sanctified and empowered by having been touched by the body of Christ. In emphasizing the real, historical structure of the tomb at the expense of the biblical narrative, the painter of the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary lid was sharpening the focus of this documentation to show less the ultimate, biblical origin of sanctification and more the proximate, relic origin.<sup>31</sup>

For pilgrims arriving in the Holy Land, the Bible indeed rendered their world. But the experiences while there in turn re-created their biblical imagination, an imagination they brought back to European Christianity.

### *Man of Sorrows*

Despite its True Cross legend and the name by which it came to be known, Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre is actually centered on the site of the Resurrection. Pilgrimage in late antiquity still did not primarily emphasize the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Not until the late medieval era in the West did Catholics develop a visuality devoted to suffering. Returning to the Cloisters Museum in New York, one can see the timeline of this change. Once when I was there with my students, a tour guide encouraged me to walk through the museum and consider all the Crucifixion scenes *chronologically*. By doing this, one can watch a multi-century iconographic transition,



as if captured on an epic time-lapse setting: with each passing century, the head of Jesus tilts and his body buckles a little bit more. At the beginning of the medieval era, he is upright, eyes open, alive, and still somewhat powerful on the cross; by the end, he is a bent, crumpled, corpse. The Gothic art from central and northern Europe became increasingly, well, Goth.

The most prominent crucifix in the museum hangs in the apse from San Martín at Fuentidueña, a reconstruction of a medieval Spanish chapel transported to New York in the 1950s and exhibited on long-term loan from the government of Spain. This twelfth-century wooden crucifix in a Romanesque style measures over eight feet tall and still retains much of its original paint, cutting an imposing presence through the air of the chapel's apse (Figure 6.11). The body of Jesus does not slump too much below

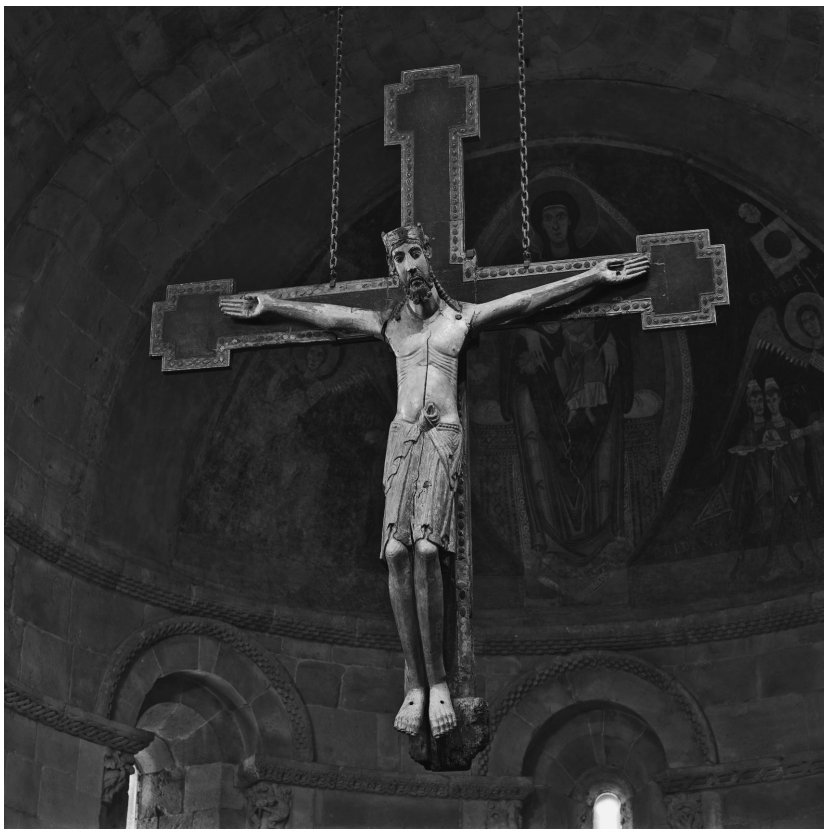


FIGURE 6.11 Crucifix, painted wood, 12th c., Spain. Metropolitan Museum of Art 35.36a and b, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.

the horizontal axis of the crossbeam, and the vertical axis is only slightly curved—though certainly more so than earlier examples (Figures 6.9 and 6.10). The eyes of Jesus are open, and he does not appear to be suffering; indeed, his crown is not made of thorns but is of golden hue and is shaped like the crown of a king (compare the jeweled crown of the Passion sarcophagus, Figure 6.7). By contrast, three hundred years later, the body of Jesus at the center of a German triptych looks more like the letter Z than the letter T (Figure 6.12). The iconography of suffering had developed, such that this torso hangs far below the crossbeam, his head is almost horizontal, his eyes are closed in death, and his ribcage is grotesquely visible through his skin. The transition from the upright, regal crucifix to the macabre, morbid crucifix can be explained, in part, by the sudden onslaught of human suffering and death during the intervening centuries: in between these two examples, in the middle of the fourteenth century, the Black Death ravaged Europe. Historians usually estimate that one-third of the population of Europe died during that pandemic, and it took almost two hundred years for the size of the population to recover. Amid such unbearable suffering, it makes sense that Catholic Europe would imbue the imagery of Jesus and Mary with more pathos and pity. One can behold late medieval biblical art with the words of one of the era's most popular hymns in mind: the *Stabat Mater*, the thirteenth-century hymn of biblical visualization, which vividly imagines the suffering of Mary while standing (*stabat*) at the foot of the cross. In one stanza, the singer begs to empathize with the suffering of Jesus and his mother, asking Mary, "Make me to weep with you devoutly, to share the suffering with the crucified one, as long as I shall live."<sup>32</sup> Suffering with Jesus and Mary thus became a form of affective Catholic piety, a spiritual transition reflected in the very development of European languages. The Latin adverb translated as "devoutly" from the *Stabat Mater* would become the root in English of both *piety* and *pity*—or, in Italian, *pietà*. As the plague consumed the life of Europe, to feel pity was to be pious.

Other artistic examples present the details of both Jesus' sacrificial suffering and the promise of resurrection. A wooden miniature altarpiece captures this Paschal mystery, with a similar artistic style to the carved *Pater Noster* bead described earlier (Figure 6.3). Here behind the triptych's main doors is revealed a busy Crucifixion scene (Figure 6.13), with a Resurrection scene behind the circular doors below (Figure 6.14). The crucified Jesus slumps to one side, and the artist creates a kind of crown of interlocking thorn-like branches that hover over the whole scene. The



FIGURE 6.12 Crucifixion triptych (detail of center panel), wood, 15th c., Germany. Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.172, New York. Open Access.



FIGURE 6.13 Miniature altarpiece with the crucifixion (detail of top half), wood, early 16th c., Netherlandish. Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.453, New York. Open Access.

blood from his wounds is not visible, but the salvific effects of the blood are made clear: the spear-wielding Longinus touches his eye, indicating that he has been healed by the blood which dripped from Jesus' side (a story which circulated in the *Golden Legend*). The text inscribed underneath corroborates the image: "Christ suffered for us," it says in Latin abbreviations.





FIGURE 6.14 Miniature altarpiece with the crucifixion (detail of bottom half), wood, early 16th c., Netherlandish. Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.453, New York. Open Access.

The ingenious design of the altarpiece also offers biblical interpretation of the Old Testament through the images and textual references of its interior door panels. Surrounding the Crucifixion scene, the left door shows Abraham and Isaac, interpreted by Christians since antiquity as a foreshadowing of God the Father's willingness to sacrifice his Son. Here in the early 1500s, as the printing press is beginning to change European culture, one can see underneath the picture the emergence of a more *textual* biblical awareness. It reads "*Ge cap 22*" (Latin abbreviations for "Genesis, chapter 22"), the sort of text-minded reference that had begun to make more sense as print culture proliferated. The right door depicts another typological foreshadowing of the Crucifixion, when Moses raised up the "bronze serpent" on a pole in the wilderness as a sign of God's power to heal (Num 21:9). The Gospel of John had interpreted this act as a prophecy that "the Son of Man" must "be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). The altarpiece cites the text "*Nu cap 21*," ensuring again that viewers find the appropriate Old Testament typology in their textual Bibles. Pictorial Bibles, which had spread in the fourteenth century, often used a similar layout: "a central scene from the text of the Gospels, flanked by two of its prefigurations taken from the Old Testament. These scenes are accompanied on the page by the

portrait of prophets who predicted the event.”<sup>33</sup> Thus the typological, thematic correspondences between Old Testament and Gospel were enacted through both liturgical artworks and illustrations in biblical manuscripts.

The resurrection panels, surrounding a triumphant Christ who tramples the sleeping guards, continue this education in Old Testament typology. The right side should be very familiar by now, showing the resurrection “sign of Jonah,” as he is expelled from the sea monster (see Figure 5.3). But the left side is much rarer: a rugged, bearded man with a flowing headband carries two doors under his arms. This is the mighty Samson, who was ambushed and trapped inside the city gates of Gaza by his enemies. So he waited until the middle of the night and then “rose, seized the doors of the city gate,” and “hoisted them on his shoulders” (Judg 16:1–3). This gripping story is attested in art as far back as Jewish synagogue mosaics from late antiquity.<sup>34</sup> It was later interpreted by Christians as a foreshadowing of Jesus’ miraculous midnight escape from a sealed death—and becoming himself the “gate” through which the sheep are saved (John 10:9). Both Samson and Jesus busted through the doors of their fate, while those assigned to guard them slept unawares.

Medieval motifs of the dolorous death of Christ multiplied through countless examples in diverse artistic media. Some seem to fetishize suffering, like visual parables meant to shock the viewer into awareness and repentance.<sup>35</sup> A trend usually called the “Man of Sorrows” expressed this late medieval theme of the Catholic biblical imagination, a stark departure from the previous thousand years of visual depictions of the Crucifixion. An amazingly well-preserved fifteenth-century woodcut with hand-colored details is housed at the Art Institute of Chicago, having been saved from deterioration by being pasted inside a wooden book cover (Figure 6.15). There is no concern for realism here, as the body of Jesus hovers in front of the cross, bleeding profusely yet unattached to the crossbeam. The image also features all the implements of his torture: thorns, spear, and scourges. The crown of a king is long gone, and even his halo is not golden but blood-red. For the Gothic biblical imagination, bloodiness is next to godliness.

These sections on medieval art have demonstrated an emphasis on the beginnings and endings of Jesus’ life, and so we wrap them up with one of the first examples to combine the two: the Cloisters’ *Vesperbild* (Figure 6.16), a Germanic forerunner of the *Pietà*. “*Vesperbild*” means “evening image,” suggesting the time of day Jesus was taken off the cross and perhaps also a use for devotional evening prayer. Like the later Italian *Pietà* of



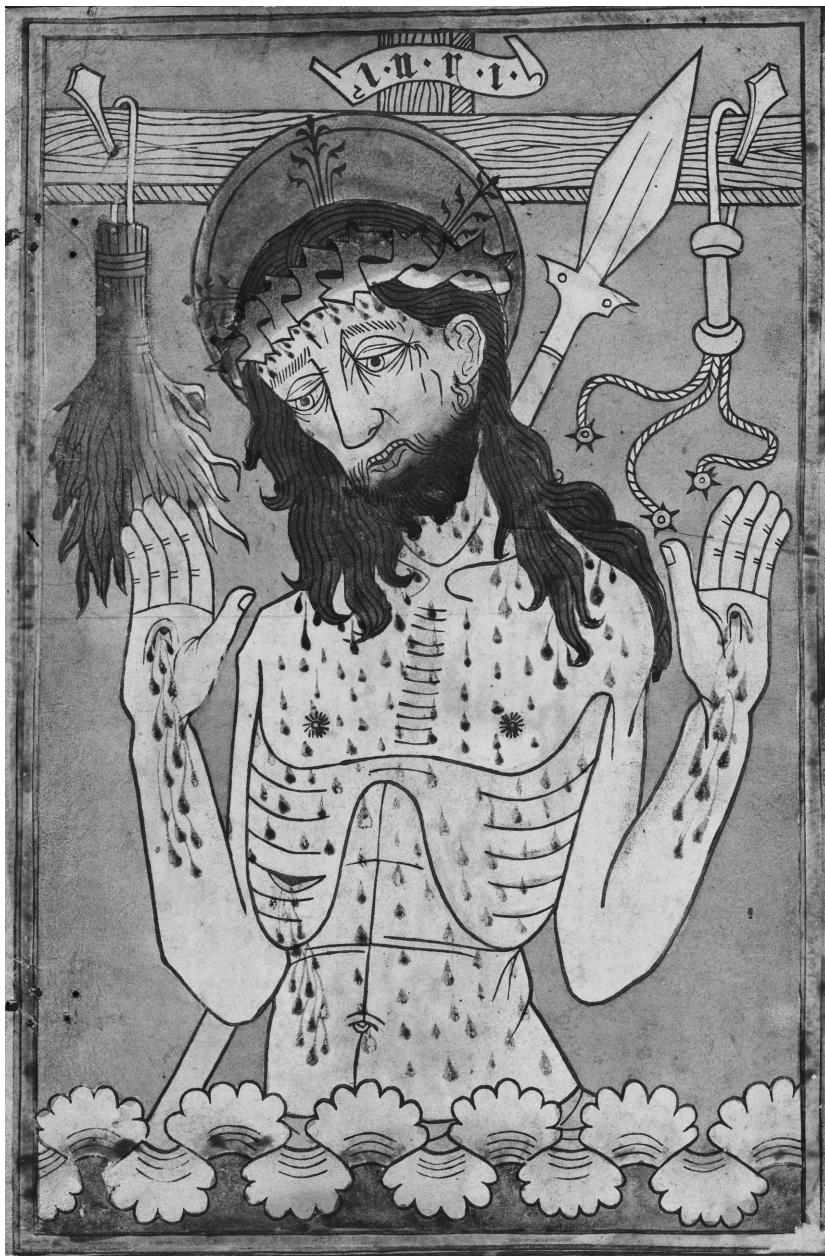


FIGURE 6.15 *Man of Sorrows*, colored woodcut, 1465–70, Germany. Art Institute of Chicago 1947.731, Chicago. Open Access.



FIGURE 6.16 *Vesperbild*, painted wood and plaster, 1375–1400, Germany. Metropolitan Museum of Art 48.85, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.

Michelangelo (Figure I.1), this example invites the viewer's imagination to flicker back and forth between Jesus' birth and death, though with a different artistic device. Michelangelo crafted a full-size adult Jesus cradled on an oversized lap, and the temporal sign of Jesus' birth was signaled by the too-young face of Mary. The fourteenth-century German artist of this painted wooden *Vesperbild* sculpted a regular-size Mary holding Jesus as a miniature adult. The absurdity of his disproportionate size shatters any sense of realism and thrusts the viewer into meditation on the meaning. In a way, parents always see their children as younger than they really are, seeing the child inside and wanting to protect them from harm. Though the harm here is undeniable—painted streaks of blood, accentuated ribcage, and limp limbs—the viewer nonetheless sees Jesus as someone's human child, as cherished by the eyes of a grieving mother, the *Mater Dolorosa*.

### Marian Iconography and the Bible

"All generations shall call me blessed," she predicted in her famous song of prayer, the Magnificat (Luke 1:48). Certainly, the topic of Mary in Catholic art could occupy entire bookshelves of analysis. She is simply the most famous woman in the Christian tradition, and her presence in visual arts rivals that of Jesus himself.<sup>36</sup> From late antiquity to the present, images of Mary during her miraculous pregnancy, cradling of the infant Jesus, suffering at his death, prayer at his Ascension, and Coronation as a heavenly queen have populated Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, and beyond. She has appeared in regionally distinct versions in the predominantly Catholic countries of Costa Rica, France, Italy, Mexico, Poland, and more. Whether appearing through a miraculous black stone (in Costa Rica) or intervening against a threatening lava flow (in Italy), the Virgin Mary has adopted multitudinous forms in the Catholic imagination. Catholic doctrine acknowledges these diverse forms of popular piety toward the Virgin Mary, while stressing that "true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity" with respect to Marian devotion.<sup>37</sup> After briefly summarizing her main characteristics in the history of art, this section will then address the question: in what ways are these images of Mary *biblical*?

In *The Catholic Imagination*, Andrew Greeley summarizes the devotion to Mary that sprouted in medieval Europe, much of which continues relatively unchanged to this day:

What did the Mary metaphor mean in the late Middle Ages? Go to Paris or Chartres or Amiens and learn what it meant: life and superabundant life. We have not seen anything like it, not really, ever since. Of the actual mother of Jesus we know almost nothing historically. What we do know does not really account for the power of the metaphor she has become. Four New Testament scenes, however, have been seized on by the Catholic imagination—the visit by Gabriel, the birth in the cave in Bethlehem, the Babe in her arms (the classic Madonna pose), and the Pietà, which depicts her receiving the dead body of her Son. If such images were attractive to great artists . . . the reason was that the stories and the lurking metaphors had enormous appeal to the human imagination. Once humankind recognized the Mary stories, they became irresistible.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to the medieval explosion of Marian devotion, late antiquity did offer some prime examples of her iconography. Following the Council of Ephesus (431), which confirmed her doctrinal status as *Theotokos* (Greek for “God-bearer” or, colloquially, “Mother of God”), the Roman basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore was constructed. Pope Sixtus III (432–40) celebrated the council’s decision by overseeing a *maggiore* mosaic program of new artworks about the life of Mary, installed on the arch over the apse.

Covering four horizontal registers on both sides of the arch, the gilded mosaics show scenes from the Annunciation (Luke) through the Flight to Egypt (Matt), weaving in details from non-canonical stories, too. The first two scenes (Figure 6.17) show the Annunciation to Mary and a separate annunciation to Joseph above an extravagant scene of the Nativity. The Annunciation imagines Mary as a Roman woman of noble, even regal lineage, arrayed in gold and enthroned, while weaving from a basket to her side. Since the Annunciation scene in the Gospel of Luke does not indicate any location, the earliest Christian depictions place her either outdoors at a water well or in the act of spinning (weaving) near or within the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>39</sup> These are both part of a double Annunciation narrative in the earliest non-canonical biography of Mary, a widely-circulated text from the second century.<sup>40</sup> (Later medieval and Renaissance depictions place her almost exclusively indoors in a home.) Mary is surrounded by a fulsome set of angels, not just the lone Gabriel, suggesting a powerful entourage of protection. In the Nativity, she has demoted herself somewhat, giving up her seat and her heavenly entourage to the infant Jesus. The star above and the



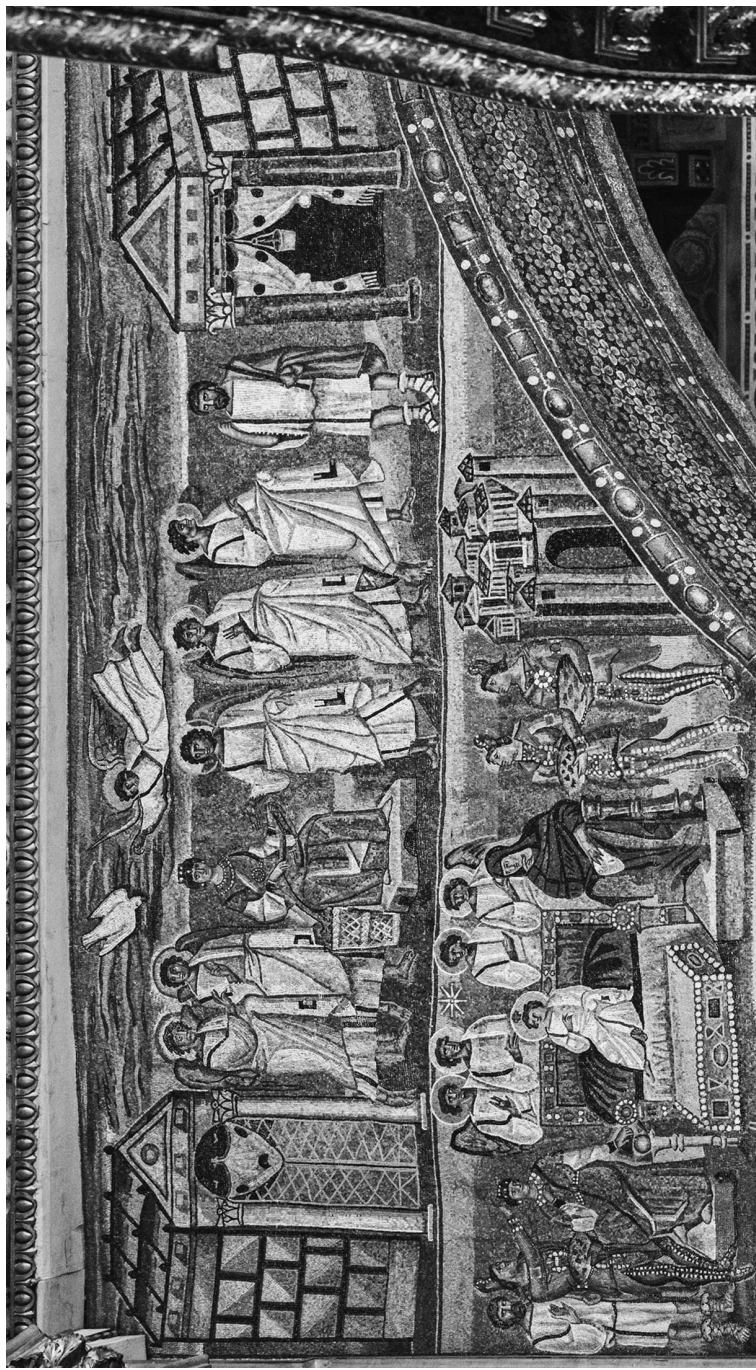


FIGURE 6.17 Triumphal arch, left side (detail of Annunciation and Nativity), mosaic, 432–40, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome. Photograph by Steven Zucker; used with permission.

identifying halo on the infant guide the way for the magi. The imagery overall shows the story of a ruling lineage, but one in conflict with enemies at home (Herod) and abroad (in Egypt). Thus the artistic program, besides honoring the new status of Mary as *Theotokos*, also echoed the challenges faced by imperial Rome, which had recently been sacked (410) by foreign armies for the first time in eight hundred years.

The mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore were necessarily innovative and, in some ways, peculiar forays into Marian iconography. By the late medieval era, though, the visual vocabulary had stabilized. Several core images are captured efficiently by a fourteenth-century painted triptych from Venice (Figure 6.18). Central is the Madonna and Child, a tender image of Mary as an everyday mother, a picture more devotional than literal. The text of Luke does state that she “wrapped him in swaddling clothes” before laying him in a manger (Luke 2:7), but one hardly needs a text to prove that a mother held her child. The primary goal of this artwork is to foster devotion to the maternal bond of Mary with Jesus, and the framing biblical scenes are like citations—references to enhance reverence.



FIGURE 6.18 Triptych of the Virgin and Child with Scenes from the Life of Christ, painted wood, 1310/30, Italy. Art Institute of Chicago 1968.321, Chicago. Open Access.



In narrative order of the surrounding scenes, the first is the Annunciation, which jumps across the spandrels of the central panel, above the arch. This resembles in miniature how the Annunciation was often featured in church architecture and painting—Gabriel and Mary separated by a window, door, or otherwise open space. Moving on the left side downwards, we see the Nativity and the Presentation of Jesus as an infant in the Temple (Luke 2:22–38). After receiving blessing there from the prophet Simeon, she was warned that her son would be opposed and “a sword will pierce” her heart, too (Luke 2:35). The artistic program uses that as a springboard to jump straight to Jesus’ suffering and death, leaving out the presence of Mary at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12). Here as elsewhere after late antiquity, the miraculous ministry of Jesus has been subordinated to his beginning and ending. Jesus is mocked and flogged, with Mary prevented from being present to comfort him. She then reappears in the upper-right panel, fainting from grief at the cross, her soul pierced as was prophesied. To the right of the cross, standing in a posture not of grief, but of faithful awe, is Mary Magdalene. Identified by her bright red garment and unveiled hair here at the cross and at the Resurrection appearance below that, Mary Magdalene was emerging as an influential female counterpart to the Virgin Mary during the medieval era (about which, see later in this chapter). Finally, the Virgin Mary again takes center stage in the scene of the Ascension, positioned as a leader of the small band of disciples in Jerusalem after Jesus’ Resurrection (Acts 1:14). Among those present, only she has the halo of a saint, being closer to the angels, it seems, than to the twelve male disciples.

### *Mary in the New Testament*

To assess the ways in which Marian art is biblical art, we can categorize the most common images of her into three groups: those derived from the New Testament; those derived by typological interpretation of the Old Testament; and others that are visualizations between or beyond the lines of scripture.<sup>41</sup> Many of the most frequently depicted Marian scenes are, in fact, drawn from the New Testament. By far the most prominent is the Annunciation, which will be covered in this book’s conclusion as the Catholic biblical story *par excellence*. In his magisterial *Mary Through the Centuries*, historian Jaroslav Pelikan surmises that if we had a complete citation index of all Christian art, the number of references to the Annunciation would exceed the references to all other Marian scenes

combined.<sup>42</sup> And the story is profoundly biblical, expressing not only this unique moment of Incarnation but also resonating with the miraculous pregnancies and mysterious ways of God's activity in the Old Testament. The fifteenth-century Annunciation panel by Jan Van Eyck (Figure 6.19) magnificently shows how biblical interpretation can be painted through this story.<sup>43</sup>

Iconography tends to accumulate features over time. One sees here Mary's traditional blue garment; the lilies symbolizing her purity; her book open to the prophets, even as her heart was open to her unexpected visitor; the written dialogue of *Ave, gratia plena* ("Hail, full of grace") and *Ecce, ancilla Domini* ("Behold, [I am] the handmaid of the Lord"); and the Holy Spirit as a dove riding the lines of Incarnation from heaven. To these traditions, Van Eyck has added even more biblical depth. For Luke, the Incarnation is a "Holy Spirit" which would descend upon Mary; for John, the "life" that came into the world at this moment was "the true light" of the whole human race (John 1:1–9). That life enters as light through clear glass, a substance which allows light to penetrate inside without losing its intact purity.<sup>44</sup> The clear glass of the Incarnation, while clearly symbolizing the perpetual virginity of Mary, is also a biblical interpretation of John. As for the dove, it glides down not along one but along seven streams of light; this, too, is a biblical expression of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, which it stands to reason Mary received at this moment of grace. These gifts, enumerated in the same messianic prophecy that generated the Jesse tree, were a model of saintly rule (Isa 11:1–3). To round out the biblical allusions, we move past the light-soaked windows to inspect the shadowy walls and even the floors of this room. They are painted with relevant scenes from the Old Testament: the upper wall shows the miraculous salvation of Moses as a baby and his later reception of the law from God. The floor underneath Mary's feet shows snapshots of valor from the Old Testament: two from the life of Samson and David defeating Goliath. Mary's song, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), had praised how God showed "might with his arm" (like Samson) and "threw down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly" (like David over Goliath).<sup>45</sup> The Old Testament stories suggest that this building is Van Eyck's imagining of the Jerusalem Temple, where many non-canonical stories situate Mary during the Annunciation. Surrounding the action contained therein, the very building itself thus establishes typological possibilities for biblical interpretation, like a visual sermon on this most popular of Mary's stories.



FIGURE 6.19 Jan Van Eyck, *Annunciation*, oil on canvas, 1434/36, Netherlandish. National Gallery of Art 1937.1.39, Washington, D.C. Open Access.

Other frequently depicted Marian stories from the Gospels and Acts include the Visitation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. We have seen examples of these earlier (Figures 5.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.8, 6.9, 6.10, 6.12, 6.13, 6.17, 6.18), but a few further remarks are in order. First, we note that the miracle at Cana recedes into the background. And as for Mary's questioning of her son and Jesus' stern rebuke of her in the Gospels—in the artistic record, that might as well have never happened (Mark 3:31–35). Second, the presence of Mary at the Ascension is not directly stated but inferred from the text. In Luke, Jesus' final moments on earth are with "the eleven and those with them" (24:33), and in Acts, Mary is listed among the first community in Jerusalem (1:14). For this reason, early Christian interpreters generally position Mary at the Ascension.

The question of identifications of women in the empty tomb and Resurrection sequence is more complex. While scenes that portray the women at the cross and the tomb are relatively common from the fifth century onward, it is a vexing process to discern how they are depicted as individuals, and not merely as a group of female disciples. Though the Crucifixion panel of the medieval triptych (Figure 6.18) is clear—Mary Magdalene unveiled in red, the Virgin Mary veiled in blue—examples from earlier eras are less so. The textual traditions of the Gospel narratives take most of the blame: in addition to Mary the mother of Jesus, one reads about Mary *Magdalene*, Mary *of Bethany* (sister of Martha and Lazarus), and *the other* Mary (whoever that is, if it is even someone different than the previous three Marys). Early non-canonical literature, such as the *Gospel of Mary*, also leaves readers in doubt about which of the early Christian Marys is the intended referent of a text. Some scholars have argued that characteristics of various Marys have been blended into a composite textual figure.<sup>46</sup>

For several centuries, the norm was portraying two women at the tomb, who over time were individuated as Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary (e.g., Figure 6.10). But this appearance of the Virgin Mary at the tomb is nowhere to be found in the texts of the canonical Gospels. Mary Magdalene is the consistent textual presence, while the Virgin Mary joins her as a consistent artistic presence (at least in the Western tradition).<sup>47</sup> We might think of this not as a departure from the biblical text, but as an attempt to make sense of it. If Jesus' mother is there at the cross (in John) and also in Jerusalem with the disciples after the Resurrection (in Acts), then

wouldn't it make sense for her to have been present in between? And surely his grieving mother would have visited his tomb? Just like her holding his lifeless body off the cross in the *Pietà*, her attending to his burial was a natural biblical imagination derived from the story.

Beyond the explicit references in the Gospels and Acts, Mary has also been found in the final book of the New Testament, the Apocalypse or "Revelation." The central section of this obscure, image-filled vision narrates a cosmic battle between good and evil, with dragons, beasts, warrior angels, and more. To kick it off, "a great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth" (Rev 12:1–2). She gave birth to a son who was "destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod" and was "caught up to God and his throne" (Rev 12:5). With this messianic vision of Jesus, it was inevitable that the woman clothed with the sun would be interpreted as Mary. By the medieval and Renaissance eras, this identification had become "the normal way of reading the relevant text in Revelation."<sup>48</sup> With Revelation eventually integrated into the same textual canon as the Gospels, "the various images of the virgin, the woman at the cross, and the woman who gave birth to the Messiah would reinforce each other."<sup>49</sup> Among the first to connect this text with an image was the fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript called the "Cloisters Apocalypse" (Figure 6.20). The illuminations are faithful to their accompanying texts—sometimes terrifyingly so—and also include common interpretations of the time. Here we see the Marian iconography of her blue garment, a halo crown of twelve stars, surrounded by a sunburst, with the moon as her footstool. She hands her child, identified as Jesus by his cruciform halo, through a portal to God as his father. The upper left depicts the heavenly temple and the ark of the covenant described in the previous verse (Rev 11:19), and the juxtaposition suggests a typological interpretation. Just as God's presence had temporarily dwelt in the ark and temple in the past, so, too, was God's presence on earth incarnated in the womb of Mary. From medieval forerunners like this, one can easily understand later artistic versions of Mary as the woman clothed with the sun and crowned with stars, especially Our Lady of Guadalupe (see chapter 4) and the Immaculate Conception (see later in this chapter).





FIGURE 6.20 Woman Clothed with the Sun, from “The Cloisters Apocalypse,” illuminated manuscript, ca. 1330, France. Metropolitan Museum of Art 68.174, f. 20r, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.



*Finding Mary in the Old Testament*

Other appearances of Mary in Catholic art have been drawn from typological interpretations of the Old Testament cultivated through centuries of sermons, biblical commentaries, liturgies, and artworks. First, Mary has been positioned in salvation history as the New Eve. Such an idea flowed from the biblical identification of Jesus as the “Second Adam” or “New Adam” in the theology of Paul (1 Cor 15:45–49; Rom 5:12–21). But since the story of the Garden of Eden dramatizes Eve’s role, too, early Christian theologians found in Mary a resetting of humanity’s relationship to God. If the biblical Eve was known primarily for disobedience, Mary became known for her obedience to God’s will at the Annunciation (“Let it be done to me according to your word”). Medieval composers of poetry and music enjoyed expressing this idea of reversal through a Latin palindrome: the sin of Eve (Latin *Eva*) was reversed by the Annunciation’s “Hail” (Latin *Ave*). The widespread medieval chant, *Ave Maris Stella*, makes the claim explicit in its opening lines: “Hail, star of the sea, dear Mother of God and ever-Virgin, happy gate of heaven. Receiving that *Ave* from the mouth of Gabriel, establish us in peace, changing the name of *Eva*.”<sup>50</sup>

Catholic artists juxtaposed Eve and Mary as well, especially through the scene of the Annunciation. Fra Angelico’s fifteenth-century *Annunciation* at the Prado museum positions Mary and Gabriel in a colonnade directly adjacent to the Garden of Eden (Figure 6.21). The rear tips of Gabriel’s wings and the heel of his foot are still leaving Eden, as he crosses the threshold of space and time toward Mary in a single step. The beams of light, which carry the dove toward her, originate from the sunshine over Eden; the “let there be light” (*fiat lux*) of God’s creation is recapitulated in the new creation of the Incarnation (“let it be done to me,” *fiat mihi*). The glorious colors of Mary’s dress seem plucked from the abundant flowers of Eden’s paradise, highlighting their contrast with the subdued grays of Eve’s garment. But beside their clothes, Eve and Mary look quite like twins separated at birth, embodying the twin realities of suffering and grace.

If Adam and Eve were a couple, then the “New Eve” idea implies that Jesus and Mary were also a couple. This seems decidedly non-biblical at first glance. But Mary as the “bride” of Christ—and thus a symbol of the Church as bride of Christ—was an artistic expression also rooted in typological interpretation of the Old Testament. The biblical key here is the Song of Songs, the romantic (and candid) Hebrew love-poem which fits awkwardly into the Old Testament canon. From at least the third century,



FIGURE 6.21 Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, ca. 1426 (Italy), tempera on panel, 162.3 x 191.5 cm, (P000015/001). © Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado.

Christians have interpreted this text primarily as an allegory of God's salvific love for humanity (following the tradition of Jewish allegorical interpretation of the work).<sup>51</sup> If a person walked into the Roman church of Santa Maria in Trastevere without knowing much about Catholic history or iconography, one might think the resplendent twelfth-century apse mosaic depicts a regal couple, perhaps an Italian king and queen from centuries ago (Figure 6.22). To be sure, the imagery is regal, with gold and blue garments, thrones, and a crown atop the female figure. The man's right arm is wrapped around her back and shoulder. The cruciform halo gives away his identity, though, and one realizes that this is Jesus and Mary. As if responding to the viewer's momentary confusion, each figure holds a Latin textual message. Mary's says, "His left [arm] is under my head, and his right embraces me." This quotation from the Song of Songs (2:6) only partially describes their pose in the mosaic, but it does signal the biblical typology at work: Mary represents the Church's role as the



FIGURE 6.22 Santa Maria in Trastevere, apse mosaic (detail), 12th c., Rome. Photograph by Hugo DK. Wikimedia Commons.

beloved of Christ. For his part, Christ's message comes not from scripture but from the *Golden Legend*, when he welcomes his mother into heaven as his "chosen one upon my throne."<sup>52</sup> Thus the traditions about Mary's afterlife are presumed knowledge for the medieval viewer, about which more will be said below.

Another of the bride's quotations in the Song of Songs has influenced Marian imagery in a quite different way. One of the first things the beloved says in the poem is "Black am I, and beautiful" (1:5). Due to the typological connections between this bride and Mary, the textual bride's blackness seems to have influenced the artistic tradition of "Black Madonnas" (or "Black Virgins") throughout the Catholic world.<sup>53</sup> These are sculptures or painted icons—some dating to the medieval period—that depict Mary (or Mary and Jesus together) carved of dark material or painted with dark skin tones. One catalog of Black Madonnas attests almost two hundred examples, mostly in Europe, with some in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Americas.<sup>54</sup> Among the most famous in Europe are Our Lady of Einsiedeln (fifteenth century, Austria) and Our Lady of Czestochowa (ninth–fourteenth century, Poland), the latter of which is among the most popular



pilgrimage destinations in Europe. Most of them have mysterious origins and wondrous effects on individual pilgrims and national identities.

Just southeast of San Jose, Costa Rica, in the town of Cartago, stands a grand Catholic church built to house a very small item: an eight-inch-tall carved black stone, an image of Madonna and Child. (Figure 6.23 shows



FIGURE 6.23 Facsimile statue of *La Negrita*, installed opposite chapel at Villa Blanca, Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve, Costa Rica. Photograph by author.

a greatly enlarged copy, as the original is tiny and encased almost entirely in a reliquary shrine.) It is known as the “Virgin of the Angels” (*Virgen de Los Angeles*), because it was found in 1635 on August 2, the day Franciscans commemorate Our Lady of the Angels. Colloquially in Costa Rica, she is simply called *La Negrita*. Each year leading up to her feast day, which is a national holiday, approximately two million pilgrims (almost half the population of the country) visit her in Cartago, most of them on foot from San Jose. The location is crucial, as the founding story of *La Negrita* proves that she is not easily movable. According to the tradition, both Juana Periera, who found the stone in 1635, and the pastor who assessed her situation had moved the stone from its original find-spot—only to discover that it kept miraculously returning to that place. So on that spot they built her first church.

But why do Costa Ricans continue their devotion four centuries later? Scholar of religion Elina Vuola, who has done extensive fieldwork interviews with Costa Rican women about *La Negrita*, found that Mary’s virginity is not an emphasized feature.<sup>55</sup> Rather, they talk at length about the experience of motherhood, struggle, and the empowerment they feel from *La Negrita*. This is the biblical Mary of the unplanned pregnancy, the one who prays to “lift up the lowly” and “fill the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:52–53). Unlike many Marian apparitions around the world, *La Negrita* did not speak to the person who first met her, yet the historical context and later reception show there was another clear meaning. “The common interpretation of the story is that *La Negrita*, who herself was dark-skinned and appeared to a person of despised race, had a clear message: that both ‘whites’ (*blancos*) and ‘blacks’ (*negros*) are God’s children and thus equal.”<sup>56</sup> A colonial encounter combined with a “black and beautiful” Madonna to empower women and foster national unity, too.

A final example of typological interpretation of the Old Testament concerns Mary’s “coronation” as a “queen.” If Mary was a heavenly “bride” of Christ, and Christ is heavenly “king,” then Mary must also be “queen.” She wears a crown in the apse mosaic of Santa Maria in Trastevere (Figure 6.22), and three of the top four Marian antiphons (chants) from medieval Catholic liturgy have “queen” in their title (*Salve Regina*, *Regina Caeli*, and *Ave Regina Caelorum*). Undoubtedly some of this fervor for her Coronation stemmed from zeal for monarchy in Europe; however, it lives on still through the annual custom of “May crowning” of statues

of the Virgin Mary. Protestant observers look askance at such rituals, but Catholic theologians have long established their biblical warrants, especially through the “royal Psalms” of the Old Testament. Psalm 45 (Vulg 44) has been one of the most interpreted Psalms among Christian theologians, as it seems to be filled with predictions of a coming messianic king. That Davidic king had “a queen at his right hand, arrayed in gold” (Vulg Ps 44:10). Just as medieval interpreters found three New Testament “kings” hidden in the Psalms, here they also find their “queen.” She deserved opulent regalia, such as Paolo Veneziano used in his fourteenth-century *Coronation of the Virgin* (Figure 6.24). Not only is the gold leaf abundant (as the Psalm states), but the royal blue of their exquisitely textured garments is *lapis lazuli*, an extravagant pigment made from a deep blue rock imported from the Middle East. And like any regal ceremony or festive Psalm, this one is surrounded with music. The heavenly choir sings and plays the full slate of medieval instruments: trumpets, lutes, harps, tambourine, and even portable pipe organs. The angels in the back row are the singers and—to help the viewer sing along—Veneziano has subtly provided lyrics along the platform’s base. *Regina caeli, laetare, alleluia; quem meruisti Christum portare, alleluia* (“Queen of heaven, rejoice, alleluia; the Messiah whom you were worthy to bear, alleluia”). Of course, most viewers knew the opening words of *Regina Caeli* by heart. A medieval melody, reimagined through a royal Psalm, arrayed in gold.

### *Mary between the Lines*

A third category includes Marian art produced between and beyond the lines of scripture, such as the *Pietà*. Many examples craft Mary with everyday maternal postures and gestures, like the countless versions of Madonna and Child (e.g., Figures 6.18 and 6.23). Mothers also nurse their children, and so there are thousands of examples of the Nursing Madonna (*Virgo lactans*)—a style perhaps influenced by iconography of ancient maternal deities like the Egyptian Isis. These went out of fashion during the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation, but a rich earlier example anchors this fourteenth-century reliquary from France (Figure 6.25). The nursing mother is surrounded by enamels of her most prominent biblical scenes, painted to look like stained glass. Other types show Mary in the pose of a busy mother, holding her baby on her hip while moving about



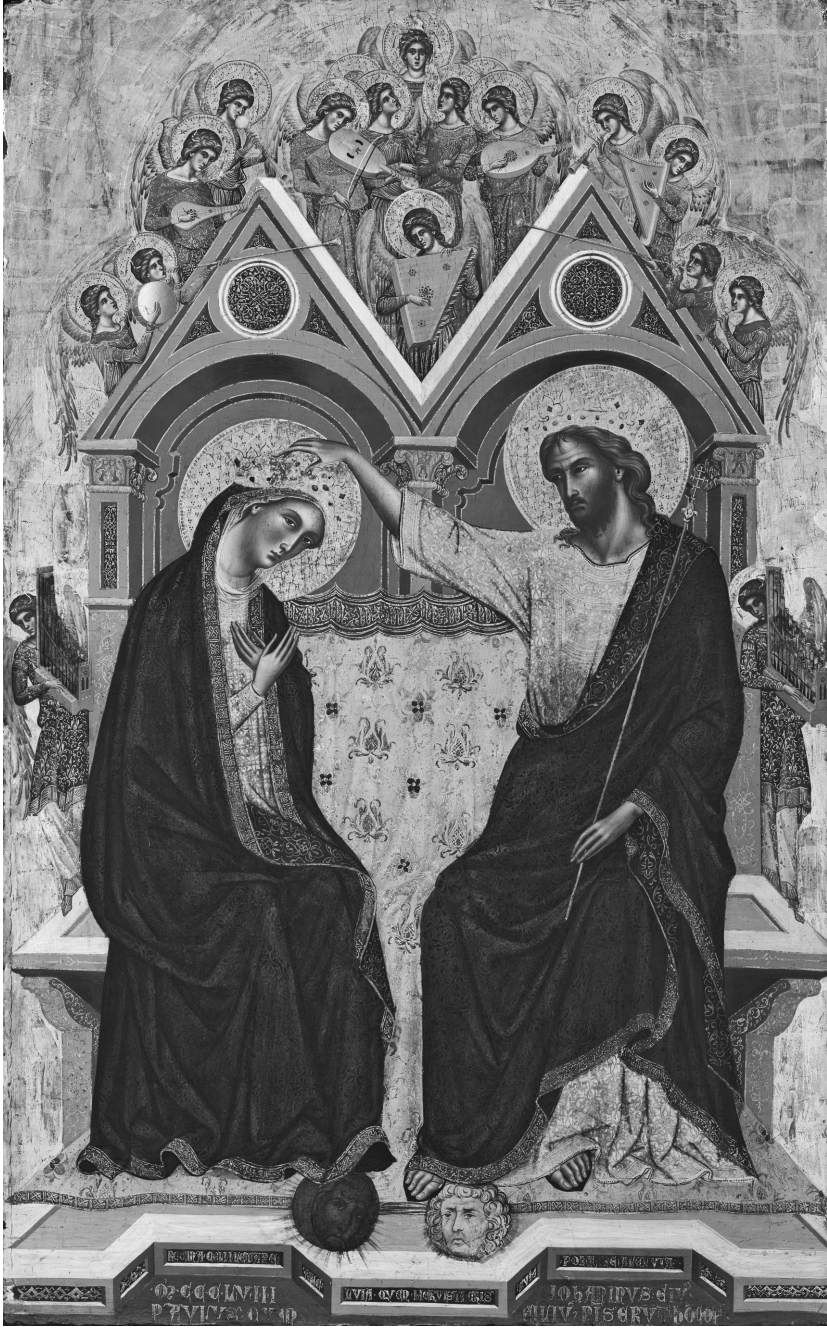


FIGURE 6.24 Paolo Veneziano, *Coronation of the Virgin*, tempera on panel, 1358, Venice. The Frick Collection 1930.1.124, New York. Copyright The Frick Collection.



FIGURE 6.25 Reliquary shrine with *Virgo lactans* and scenes from the life of the Virgin, gilded silver, enamel, and paint, 1325–50, Paris. Metropolitan Museum of Art 62.96, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.

(Figure 6.26). The boy clutches at her garments, like any regular child would do, even as her crown reminds the viewer of his unique destiny. Like the Costa Rican women devoted to *La Negrita*, women in medieval France were drawn to the quotidian responsibilities of Mary as a mother.

The modern Catholic Church has promulgated two dogmas about Mary that bookend her life. The dogma of her Immaculate Conception—the belief that, like Jesus, Mary was conceived without sin—was officially defined in 1854, but its theological roots go back to early Christianity. Once Augustine had laid out the Western idea of original sin as an unavoidable sexually transmitted culpability for all people (Eastern Christians and Jews interpreted the Garden of Eden story differently), then the question arose



FIGURE 6.26 Virgin and Child, painted limestone, 1340–50, France. Metropolitan Museum of Art 37.159, The Cloisters Collection, New York. Open Access.

about the backstory of Jesus' sinlessness. Was his virgin mother sinless, too? Augustine himself chose to punt on this crucial point of his argument and instead "make an exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in whose case, out of respect for the Lord, I wish to raise no question at all when the discussion concerns sins."<sup>57</sup> Protestants interpreted Augustine one way and Catholics another, the latter bolstering their belief with art and ritual. The



artistic versions of the Immaculate Conception are not too distinctive, a regal Mary with a crown of twelve stars (as in Rev 12). But the rituals can be impressive.

Consider the Italian city of Torre del Greco, which is the closest town to Mt. Vesuvius—the famous volcano that buried Pompeii—and has maintained a spectacular devotion to Mary's Immaculate Conception. Throughout its history, the town had been ravaged by Vesuvius, which sometimes destroyed the central church. Then, in 1861 on December 8, the feast day of the Immaculate Conception, a terrifying eruption began again.<sup>58</sup> The lava, pyroclastic flow, and ashes threatened Torre del Greco for almost two weeks, and the townspeople prayed fervently to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception to intervene and stop the volcano. They promised to dedicate themselves to her veneration and to build her a great chariot and process her through the city. The eruption ceased, the church was spared, and they kept their word. The annual tradition continues still today on a grand scale, with a month-long construction in the church of a huge chariot for the statue (the *carro dell'Immacolata*) and then an all-day procession through hundreds of thousands of people across their city, carried by rotating teams of about 150 people.

If the beginning of Mary's life was divinely inspired, what about her end? Her death is not recorded in the New Testament, and thus many traditions developed about her departure from this life. There are no spectacular rituals to report here, but the artistic tradition of Mary's "Dormition" or "Assumption" is pervasive. As a woman "full of grace," did she go straight to heaven? Until recently, the dogma of the Assumption seemed like a late-breaking idea; the official Catholic dogma that Mary was "assumed" body and soul into heaven was not promulgated until 1950. I myself had considered the idea a modern Catholic attempt to self-define vis-à-vis Protestantism, and I thought the artworks were recent and gaudy. My assumptions, it turns out, were wrong.

There were already well-known biblical precedents for the bodily assumption into heaven of particular holy souls: Enoch, who "walked with God" and "God took him" (Gen 5:24); and Elijah, who was taken up in a flaming horse-drawn chariot and whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:11). And then esteemed historian of religion Stephen Shoemaker devoted decades to uncovering, collating, and translating the evidence of early beliefs and rituals about Mary. His culminating argument, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*, demonstrates that traditions about her Dormition (falling asleep) and Assumption (ascension to heaven) were actually well

developed in late antiquity.<sup>59</sup> The evidence doesn't allow us to see much before the fifth century, but that is true for many topics of early Christian history. By the fifth century, there is a solid textual tradition of liturgy; by the sixth century, a calendrical feast day; and it only grows from there.

At the same time as Shoemaker's research, Ally Kateusz was adding to the art-historical repertoire of the Assumption. Through a surprising and persuasive argument published in the top journal of its field, Kateusz shows that a fifth-century artistic image of Mary's Assumption had been hiding in plain sight.<sup>60</sup> The well-known wooden doors of the Roman church of Santa Sabina preserve some of the earliest extant Christian biblical art, including one of the earliest depictions of the Crucifixion. Eighteen panels show individual biblical scenes, most of which have solid identifications. But one panel (Figure 6.27) has always puzzled commentators; even Princeton University's magisterial database, the *Index of Christian Art*, wasn't sure how to label it. The upper register shows Christ encircled by a wreath with *alpha* and *omega*, holding an unfurled scroll with the IXΘΥΣ acrostic (see Figure 6.6). The symbols of the four Gospels are in the corners, as in other contemporaneous imagery of the heavenly realm. The lower register centers on a veiled female figure, arms extended in prayer and gaze raised heavenward. She is flanked by two male figures (one balding) who hold a circle inscribed with a cross over her head, while the sun, moon, and stars shine above, separating earth from heaven. This has often been identified as the Ascension of Christ, but there are two chief problems: first, the artistic focus of the carving is the action over the head of *the female figure*; second, there is already a depiction of Jesus' Ascension *elsewhere* on the Santa Sabina doors. Instead, and based in part on Shoemaker's research, Kateusz argues that this is an early visualization of the Assumption of Mary, while Peter and Paul honor her crowning achievement. Christ is not ascending; he is *descending* to retrieve her.<sup>61</sup>

If Kateusz is correct, then we have already in fifth-century Rome—around the same time as the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore with which this section began—a depiction of Mary's Coronation and Assumption. These are still celebrated today in Catholic liturgy, using the same biblical sources. On the feast day of the Assumption (August 15), what parts of the Bible are proclaimed each year at Mass? The first reading, normally drawn from the Old Testament, is instead drawn that day from the book of Revelation. The congregation hears first from Revelation 12, followed directly by a call-and-response excerpt from Psalm 45: that “woman clothed



FIGURE 6.27 Basilica of Santa Sabina, wooden doors (detail), panel showing Assumption of Mary (?) / Ascension of Christ (?), 5th c., Rome. Photograph by F. X. Bartl, courtesy of German Archaeological Institute, Rome, D-DAI-ROM-61.2579.



with the sun and crowned with twelve stars” is also a “queen arrayed in gold.”

### Biblical Characters in Liturgical Drama

Catholics have interpreted the Bible not only through visual arts, but through varieties of performing arts as well. One simply cannot appreciate Catholic biblical reception without pondering the scale and features of liturgical drama. The scripts for the plays enacted in cathedrals and other churches of Europe were drawn mostly from the Bible—with ample imagination between the lines, of course. There were well-known plays for major feasts like Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter, with staging, props, and starring roles. You might say that liturgical dramas around Easter launched the career of Mary Magdalene. The wide distribution of the plays was also impressive: “over one thousand versions of the same Easter play existed in church communities throughout Europe, with striking similarities in text and music.”<sup>62</sup> They offered immersive biblical encounters that could sometimes surprise with their emotion and boldness.

While the “Passion Plays” of Holy Week are justifiably famous—the one in Oberammergau, Germany, has been staged once per decade since 1634—some of the most elaborate dramas deal with lesser-known parts of the Bible. Consider the *Procession of the Prophets* from Rouen (northern France), which called for twenty-eight costumed biblical prophets, a model fiery furnace for re-enacting the book of Daniel, and an actor impersonating Balaam’s donkey from the book of Numbers.<sup>63</sup> (The Latin title *Processionis asinorum*, “Of the procession of the asses,” alludes to the character of the talking donkey.) Major and minor prophets line the aisles, amid “secular” prophets Virgil and the Sibyl, too. The congregation (audience?) gets a sense of how grumpy an ancient prophet might have been: Habakkuk is staged as an old man who eats radishes and beats the audience with a long palm branch.<sup>64</sup> The prophets of the Old and New Testaments are interrogated regarding their predictions, especially concerning the Messiah.

The dramatic highlights are the re-enactment of the stories of Balaam (Num 22) and, in an apparent use of pyrotechnics, the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace (Dan 3). The king Nebuchadnezzar commands Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego to worship an idol, and when they refuse, they are (in some staged way) thrown into the fire. “The furnace, which has been the focal point of the production, since all speakers must stand in front of

it to deliver their prophecy and must retire beside (or behind) it afterward, is set on fire. From inside the fiery structure, the boys praise God. The choir then directs King Nebuchadnezzar to prophesy. Gesturing toward the furnace, he testifies to the presence of a fourth figure among the youths, all of them unburned.<sup>65</sup> Thus the wicked Babylonian king, too, becomes a “prophet” of the Messiah, having seen the son of God himself saving the children from the fire. (Compare the depiction in the ancient bowl base of gold glass, Figure 5.5.) If in fact a large fire was set ablaze in the middle of the nave of the church, one can easily imagine that this annual spectacle drew a crowd! More important, considering how rarely texts from the Old Testament were proclaimed in Catholic liturgy prior to Vatican II, such liturgical dramas might have been the most exposure many Catholics had to the stories of the prophets.

### *Mary Magdalene Takes Center Stage*

A focus on medieval liturgical drama also enables us to better understand the emergence of Mary Magdalene as a central figure in Catholic biblical art and piety.<sup>66</sup> The biblical account about Mary Magdalene contains relatively few details, but her central significance is indubitable: a disciple of Jesus who followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem and provided for his ministry out of her resources, after Jesus had cast out seven demons from her (Luke 8:1–3); a faithful witness to his crucifixion (all four Gospels); the primary witness to his empty tomb (all four Gospels) and to his resurrection, whether alone (John 20:11–18) or as the leader of a group of women disciples (Matt 28:9). Beyond these points, everything else about her life and character is filled in by later homilists, commentators, artists, and composers of liturgical drama.

In the Pinacoteca of the Vatican Museums, a glass case contains a relatively rare sequence of three biblical scenes, painted on wooden panels in tempera and gold, titled *Storie di Maria Maddalena*. These were part of a *predella*, a series of narrative images on the lower part of an altarpiece, painted by Cenni di Francesco in or near Florence around 1370–75. What distinguishes the sequence from other biblical art is the centrality of Mary Magdalene to the three scenes, clothed in bright red and interacting with Jesus in the middle of each painted panel. Though she was pictured in Crucifixion and Resurrection scenes already in late antiquity, her character was not often centered in the scenes, as she is here. Moreover, the inclusion of the scene in which she is pictured as the penitent, anointing woman at

the house of Simon the Pharisee—a character unnamed in Luke’s Gospel but dubiously identified as Mary Magdalene in the Western Christian tradition centuries earlier—makes the three panels into a kind of complete set.

By far the most significant turning point in her post-biblical legacy was the identification of her with that unnamed penitent woman (Luke 7:36–50, Figure 6.28). This conflation of an unnamed character with another named character is not uncommon in the development of literature. But when Gregory the Great in 591 CE connected the unnamed woman of Luke 7 with the introduction of the named Mary Magdalene in Luke 8, he catalyzed a process by which she came to be thought of *primarily* as sinful and penitent.<sup>67</sup> He further interpreted her seven demons as seven vices, the cardinal sins of Roman Catholicism. After Gregory, her character went on to collect other attributes, especially ascetic traits by association with Mary of Egypt, a wilderness ascetic and holy woman whose stories circulated widely and were blended with Mary Magdalene’s.

By the medieval period of Western European Catholicism, the elements of Mary Magdalene’s verbal hagiography and visual iconography had



FIGURE 6.28 Cenni di Francesco, *Storie di Maria Maddalena* (1 of 3), 1370–75. Pinacoteca, Vatican Museums inv. 40182, Vatican City. Photograph by author.

coalesced to three attributes: the “apostolic,” the “eremitic,” and the “penitential.”<sup>68</sup> The penitential quality arose from the conflation of her biblical character with that of the unnamed penitent woman of Luke 7, and other legends had built up around her life after Christ’s departure—how she continued to preach the gospel (apostolic) and performed works of impressive individual asceticism (eremitic).<sup>69</sup> Through imagery such as the *predella* mentioned earlier, which shows her *below* the dinner table at the house of Simon the Pharisee, *below* the cross of Jesus, and *below* the resurrected Lord, her characteristic penitence—weeping, wailing, groveling—thus became her very identity. Over time, the adjective “maudlin” evolved from the name Magdalene itself. Even though her “penitential quality, when amplified, was last in order of time to be added to her accumulated virtues,” it is “the one with which she is most associated today. Thus the least traditional element has become the most popular.”<sup>70</sup> How did she become so suddenly popular in late medieval Catholicism?

Art historian Magdalen Lurow has shown that the liturgical dramas of Holy Week greatly influenced how this biblical figure was understood. Indeed, probably the earliest known snippet of liturgical drama, dated about 936, offers a call and response at the tomb on Easter morning—*Quem quaeritis?* (“Whom are you seeking?”)—that centers her character.<sup>71</sup> Over the subsequent centuries, this “trope,” as such units of dialogue and mimetic movements are called, was greatly embellished.<sup>72</sup>

The great period of liturgical drama was from about 1100 to 1275, and Mary Magdalen’s role in them should not be underestimated. Building on and augmenting her popularity, she appears almost as frequently as does the Virgin. In [the dramas] *The Visit to the Sepulchre* and the *Lazarus*, she has the leading role, and second only to the Virgin Mary in *The Lament of Mary*. In all three, she is a good example of the medieval ability to accept and transform the earthly. Although she appears in her whore’s dress of red, she is the most warmly spiritual character in the entire repertory and on a much more substantial basis than the modern sentimentalized whore-with-a-heart-of-gold. Evidence of her leadership is everywhere. . . . [In *The Visit to the Sepulchre*,] she sings no less than nineteen (fifteen are solo) of the musical items of the play, thus making more than half the substance of the play hers.<sup>73</sup>

Earlier, this book noted how many Catholics don’t read the Bible but claim to “know the stories,” and regarding the stories of the Passion





FIGURE 6.29 Spinello Aretino, *Saint Mary Magdalen Holding a Crucifix*, processional painting, tempera on canvas, ca. 1400, Italy. Metropolitan Museum of Art 13.175, New York. Open Access.

narrative, the claim is true. The biblical readings of Holy Week offer a gripping drama at the crux of the Catholic calendar, when the highest numbers of Catholics attend church. Consider, then, the depth and breadth of encounter with Mary Magdalene during this season—the cathedrals of Europe resonated with her songs for hundreds of years, with “more than half” of the most popular Catholic drama putting her at center stage. Her starring role in liturgical drama is reflected in the growth of confraternities (lay religious movements) devoted to her and related visual arts. A processional painting commissioned by an Italian confraternity around 1400 (Figure 6.29) enthrones Mary Magdalene in her dramatic red, holding symbols of her biblical presence at both the Crucifixion and the empty tomb (the container of anointing unguents). Her frontal seated position, holding the *death* and *resurrection* of Jesus in her lap, formally resembles and complements the enthroned Virgin Mary, holding the *birth* of Jesus on her lap. Mary Magdalene’s demeanor is calm and her hair is well kept and partially veiled, suggesting a role more apostolic than penitential. The members of the confraternity kneel below her, themselves veiled not out of shame but because, in real life, they covered their faces when performing acts of charity to the needy in



FIGURE 6.30 Margaret Beaudette, *St. Mary of Magdala Proclaims the Resurrection*, 2014. New York. Photograph by author.



their city. This, too, was an adaptation of the Bible—following Jesus' injunction that charitable acts ought to be done in secret, so that only God knows the identity of the almsgiver (Matt 6:1–4).

Over the past fifty years, the image of Mary Magdalene in modern Catholicism has been rehabilitated to some degree. Critical biblical scholars and historians attuned to the propagation of gender ideologies have attempted to reclaim the biblical Mary Magdalene, Jesus' close, faithful disciple to the end and uniquely graced witness of his Resurrection. In scholarship, on screen, and in Christian liturgy, the portrayal of Mary Magdalene has been less negative, penitential, or maudlin—and more apostolic.<sup>74</sup> The rehabilitation has begun to occur in contemporary Catholic art as well. For example, a recent artistic commission for a Catholic parish in New York City emphasizes Mary Magdalene's traditional role as *apostola apostolorum* ("apostle to the apostles"): she is standing upright, walking from left to right, arm raised in a posture of proclamation, addressing a mixed group of male and female disciples (Figure 6.30).<sup>75</sup> In a reversal of the previous artistic script, she approaches a male disciple who is on his knees, centered in the scene, himself being comforted by a female disciple who stands over him. Though the penitent Magdalene still endures in the Catholic imagination, her characteristics are subject to changes in emphasis, just as biblical characters have been for centuries.

## Poetry, Fiction, Song, and Screen

JUST AS THE BIBLE INFUSES Catholic worship, prayer, and visual arts, it also does so with literature, lyrics, and film. Poets and fiction writers from Catholic regions of Europe, the Americas, and beyond have remixed biblical characters and themes into new guises with powerful effects. As with other media we have analyzed, Catholic fiction draws biblical inspiration primarily from the Gospels, Psalms, prophets, and stories from Genesis—biblical sections also emphasized in Catholic worship and visual culture.

A chapter such as this could extend almost infinitely, due to the global reach of Catholicism. Here's why I chose the figures treated in the pages that follow: all are deeply and explicitly influenced by both the Bible and Catholic culture; they are storytellers working in different genres and with diverse forms of Catholic piety; and for this book's audience in North America, they are all household names (or should be!). Finally, they share moral and tonal affinities with one another and, as you will see, one directly influences the next, in a chain of succession through the Bible and the Catholic literary imagination.

### Dante: Mother Tongue of the Imagination

Perhaps the most influential product of the medieval Catholic imagination was that world of suffering, testing, cleansing, grace, and beatification so richly portrayed by Dante Alighieri. Though he aimed his brilliant poetry squarely at the audience of his day—fourteenth-century Italians—his *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*) left lasting impressions on the

symbolic landscape of Christianity that still shape thinking today. Dante was a visionary, social critic, philosopher, linguist, and theologian. At heart, he was a poet, permeated with the Bible.

Peter Hawkins has devoted his teaching career to chronicling “Dante’s intense engagement with the Christian Scriptures . . . not only scriptural text and commentary but also the Bible as experienced in sermon and prayer, hymn and song, fresco and illumination, or less consciously, in everyday aphorism.”<sup>1</sup> For Hawkins, the study of Dante reanimated the Bible, whose imagery can become dead through repetition. “Dante seemed to bring the Bible to life for me precisely by appropriating it so boldly for himself. He saw the Exodus of Israel out of Egypt as none other than *his* story, chose Good Friday as the day that he, too, would descend into hell, and appointed Easter dawn as the time of his emergence on the shores of purgatory. I found myself reading the Bible because of what I found in the *Commedia*.”<sup>2</sup>

Dante was not a biblical scholar per se, as no such thing yet existed. Nor was he a scholastic commentator like many of his medieval predecessors. His sensibility for the Bible was born first from the experience of commonplace medieval Christians, for whom “the Bible was as much an event as a book.”<sup>3</sup> Dante was not reactivating Scripture by consulting scholarship or writing “with footnotes in mind.” Rather, he

called upon his knowledge of scriptural metaphor, narrative, and traditional interpretation in a much less calculating, more spontaneous and fluid way. His knowledge would have been so deeply assimilated as to inform his thought reflexively, almost unconsciously, more a mother tongue of the imagination than a technical lexicon deliberately acquired. In this regard he was no doubt like most of his contemporaries, whose experience of Scripture came primarily from the whole sensorium of medieval culture rather than from study, who continuously “overheard” the Bible or saw its visual representation in passing, or had it somewhere in mind.<sup>4</sup>

Dante’s biblical imagination resembled that of great medieval mystics infused with the Bible. In the words of Jean Leclercq’s study of medieval monastic writers, the imagination and memory “nurtured” by the Bible caused them “to express themselves spontaneously in a biblical vocabulary.” But these “reminiscences are not quotations, elements of phrases borrowed

from another. They are the words of the person using them; they belong to him. Perhaps he is not even conscious of owing them to a source.”<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that Dante acquired his biblical knowledge only haphazardly or on the street. He also sought his education by attending “the schools of the religious and the disputations of the philosophers” for about thirty months; it is probable that he studied with the two major mendicant orders in Florence, the Dominicans and the Franciscans.<sup>6</sup> In one of his early treatises, Dante displays cognizance of the four medieval senses of biblical interpretation, comparing them to the different ways in which one can interpret poetry.<sup>7</sup> He likely received his biblical and theological education by attending “the frequent sermons—often two a day, in both the *studia*—that were the focal point of contact between mendicant religious on the one hand, and pious lay people on the other.”<sup>8</sup> Prior to Dante’s vernacular poetry, sermons were “by far the predominant genre in vernacular theology. It is estimated that for the period c. 1150–c. 1350 there are extant about one hundred thousand sermons, written in Latin (as was the tradition, regardless of the language in which a sermon was or could actually be delivered).”<sup>9</sup>

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante narrates a guided tour of descending levels of hell (the *Inferno*), stages and types of cleansing of sin from the deceased (the *Purgatorio*), and an ascent through heavenly realms to the beatific vision of the divine (the *Paradiso*). Dante is guided by the ancient Roman poet Virgil at first; later, an enigmatic paragon of virtue named Beatrice takes over for the final stages (where the non-Christian Virgil cannot go). Throughout the work, Dante relies on sources both biblical and classical to construct his moral and spiritual quest. He does pay homage to the whole biblical canon, most vividly near the end of *Purgatorio*, where the sections of Scripture are categorized and symbolized (*Purgatorio* 29). Yet similar to Catholics before and since, “the Scriptures that Dante uses most often come precisely from those books that were privileged in the church’s worship: the Gospels, the Psalms, and the Epistles of Paul.”<sup>10</sup> His allusions are often merely a name or a single word meant to unfurl the whole of a biblical precursor. For example, the penitents who move up Mount Purgatory “receive a particular Beatitude appropriate to their new level of understanding. The Scripture they receive signals both the virtue they have obtained and the capital sin that has been purged.” Yet “in all cases but one, the Beatitudes are indicated by a single Latin word or catchphrase that

recalls the entire saying, so that the listener supplies the whole of a verse that is given only in part.”<sup>11</sup>

That is to say, the reader searching Dante for biblical *quotations* will not find many, but the Bible animates every canto of the poem, like an invisible source of heat or magnetism that generates energy for the work of art. As a poet and visionary, Dante prefers not to cite but to rewrite Scripture “by reactivating it, by writing it again. He keeps the biblical imagination vital and fecund, open to the possibilities of a new vernacular—the language of his time.” Every biblical scripture “becomes a script for his dazzling pageant, a new account of everything old.”<sup>12</sup>

For example, consider the way Dante re-imagines a famous story from Genesis and plumbs its theological depths. In Canto 31 of the *Inferno*, as Dante and Virgil approach the ninth and lowest circle of hell, getting near to the lake of ice in which Lucifer himself is partially frozen and tormenting the most wicked souls of human history, they behold what appear to be towers rising out of the pit. “I had not long kept my head turned that way,” says Dante, “when I seemed to see many lofty towers.”<sup>13</sup> Virgil clarifies that the enormous figures, shrouded in gloomy darkness, “are not towers, but giants, and they are every one in the pit, round its banks, from the navel downward.”

As when mist thins off, the sight little by little re-shapes that which the vapour hides that loads the air, so, as I pierced the thick and murky atmosphere and came nearer to the brink, error fled and fear grew in me; for, as on the circle of its walls Montereggione [a military fortress near Siena] is crowned with towers, so on the bank encompassing the pit towered with half their bulk the horrible giants whom Jove [the highest Roman god, Jupiter] still threatens from Heaven when he thunders. And I began now to distinguish the face of one, the shoulders and the chest and a great part of the belly, and down by his sides both arms. Nature assuredly, when she gave up the art of making creatures like these, did right well to deprive Mars [the Roman god of war] of such executors; and if she [Nature] does not repent of elephants and whales, one looking at it [the towering giant] carefully will hold her more just and prudent for it. For where the equipment of the mind is joined to evil will and to power, men can make no defence against it.

At this point, Dante has called to our minds only Roman and Italian references. The towers resemble a contemporary Italian military fortress.

During his era, these towers were “one of the most conspicuous and sinister features of Italy, the towers of the warring nobles and cities with which the land bristled in his day and which were the public signs of brute-force and arrogance and treason against every divine purpose.”<sup>14</sup> The giants recall the ancient mythology of the gods’ battle with the giants of earth, which Jupiter/Jove won by his thunderbolts (referenced previously in Canto 14).

But the biblical resonances are present, too, for the attentive reader. Genesis describes a mysterious, archaic tale of the breach of the divine-human boundary. In between the creation of Adam and Eve and the flood, a mixing of heavenly beings with human beings (Gen 6:1–4) upsets God’s plan to keep humanity separate from knowledge as gods (Gen 3:22). And a race believed to have been giants, the Nephilim, “were on the earth in those days, and also afterward. . . . These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown” (Gen 6:4). Humans “seemed like grasshoppers” in comparison to these aboriginal giants (Num 13:33). The Lord responds to this breach of the divine-human boundary by immediately deciding to punish the earth with the great flood (Gen 6:5–8:19).

Genesis’s opening narrative of humanity’s self-aggrandizements and humiliations culminates in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9). A humanity united in “one language and the same words” builds “a tower with its top in the heavens” in order to “make a name for ourselves.” The desire to transcend the divine-human boundary here becomes spatial, with humanity’s first skyscraper conceived as both an escape from any future floods and an ascending staircase to divinity itself. The divine speech of the story recalls both the Garden of Eden and the flood accounts, as the Lord decides to “go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand another’s speech.” They are then scattered over the earth, confused by each other’s words. In both Roman and biblical traditions, therefore, the self-aggrandizements of towers and giants symbolize the quintessential sin of pride.

Returning now to the *Divine Comedy*: after Dante surveys the towering figure, it opens its mouth to speak (Figure 7.1). “‘*Raphel may amech zabi almi*,’ began the savage mouth to cry, for which no sweeter psalms were fit.” The language is meaningless babble, Dante’s imitation of Middle Eastern phonetics. Virgil rebukes the figure and then identifies him: “He is his own accuser. This is Nimrod, through whose wicked device the world is not of one sole speech. Let us leave him there and not talk in vain, for every language is to him as his to others, which is known to none.” Who is Nimrod? He is a very minor figure in the Bible, but one of only a few characters to appear in all three parts of the *Divine Comedy*. Following the flood story,





FIGURE 7.1 Manuscript illustration of Canto 31 from *La Commedia*, with commentary by Christophorus Landinus, colored woodcut, 1487. Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York. Public Domain.

he is listed among Noah's descendants as "the first on earth to become a mighty warrior" and "a mighty hunter in the presence of the Lord" (Gen 10:8–9).

In ancient and medieval Christian interpretation, however, Nimrod was considered one of the primeval giants of earth and the chief designer of the Tower of Babel project.<sup>15</sup> "The beginning of his kingdom was Babel," continues the biblical text (10:10), and that affiliation was all medieval commentators needed to fashion his identity. Augustine characterizes Nimrod as a giant, the arrogant and impious founder of Babylon and the Tower of Babel—not a mighty hunter *in the presence of* the Lord but one *against* the Lord.<sup>16</sup> Prior to Augustine, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus had described how Nimrod led humans to believe not in God but in their own power.<sup>17</sup> Through ancient and medieval interpreters, "the biblical Nimrod has been transformed, so that his life is seen in the same pattern as that of the classical giants and of Lucifer: glorying in his own power, challenging the highest God, and then punished by humiliation."<sup>18</sup> In this canto, therefore, "the enormity of earthly pride, its irrational defiance of the whole divine order of things, is set forth with astonishing dramatic force."<sup>19</sup> It sets up the reader for when we next meet Nimrod in the *Purgatorio*, when his cardinal sin of pride is being purged from ascendant souls (*Purgatorio* 12).

The bottom of the ninth circle of hell is a clever place for Dante to place Nimrod. He had designed a tower to heaven, to transcend human limitations and reach divine heights, but ended up himself as a stationary tower at the center of the earth—by Dante's reckoning, at the universe's most distant point from his goal. Whereas he had used the unity of human language to try to unify all people in a great task, now he babbles to himself in a language that no one else understands. At the bottom of the inferno, he is as far as possible from God's Spirit that descended on Christians at Pentecost and empowered them to speak multiple languages (Acts 2:1–11), the reversal of Nimrod's error at Babel.

Dante lived at a time when reflection on the diversity of human language was becoming more sophisticated, and he himself was one of the first theorists of what we now call the "Romance language" family. In his prior work on linguistics, Dante reflected on the ancient history of human speech: "A certain form of speech was created by God along with the first soul. . . . In this form of language Adam spoke; in this form of language spoke all his descendants, until the building of the Tower of Babel

(which is interpreted the tower of confusion). . . . To [the Hebrews] alone it remained, so that our redeemer, who was to descend from them (in so far as He was human), should not speak the language of confusion, but that of grace.”<sup>20</sup> But Dante revises his view in *Paradiso* 26, where Adam clarifies, “The tongue I spoke was all extinct before Nimrod’s race gave their mind to the unaccomplishable task” of building the Tower of Babel. Language must necessarily change, since “no product whatever of reason . . . can last forever.”<sup>21</sup> Even the names given to God have changed, says Adam, leading Dante’s reader to conclude that “Adam’s language is as fallible as any other . . . even the language of the scriptures is caught up in the accidents of history.”<sup>22</sup>

This harkens back to Dante’s notion of Scripture as a script to be performed ever anew. His focus on the “mutability of human language” refers “both to the durability of Dante’s poem and even to the Holy Scriptures themselves, whose fluidity Dante demonstrates by their openness to translation and reworking through interpretive, poetic, or literary transformations.”<sup>23</sup> According to Dante’s Adam, human language is always in flux, “like a leaf on a branch, which goes and another comes” (*Paradiso* 26). The words of humanity are opposite from the word of God, according to the biblical prophet Isaiah: “the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa 40:8). Dante’s biblical interpretation about divine and human language reveals “a world that is imperfect because multilingual, and multilingual because imperfect.”<sup>24</sup>

What began as a seemingly arcane reference to the biblical Nimrod as an incoherent giant in hell develops into a rich reflection on the sin of pride, the boundary between humanity and divinity, and the role of speech in salvation history. With speech God creates and orders the cosmos (Gen 1); the power of speech is what distinguishes humans from other animals, and enables them to name and have dominion over animals (Gen 2); but with speech from one talking animal, the first human sinned of pride (Gen 3); the unity of human speech empowered an attempt to build a bridge to God, and the scattering and punishment of human arrogance occurs through a confusion of speech (Gen 11); God returns to save humanity through the Incarnation of God’s “Word” (John 1); that “Word” departs earth, but passes on a Holy Spirit that empowers multilingual abilities (Acts 2); and finally, the cosmos is consummated by the Lord as an all-encompassing alphabet, “the Alpha and Omega” (Rev 1:8).

All this theological reflection on speech returns us to Dante the poet. A poet is, after all, a master of language *par excellence*. What is Dante's role as an author of divine revelation, rewriting the script of scripture? The "Examination Cantos" of the *Paradiso* are a fitting place to conclude our inquiry. In successive cantos on the theological virtues, Dante explains his faith to St. Peter (24), his hope to St. James (25), and his love to St. John (26).<sup>25</sup> Rich with biblical allusions, the sequence also reflects on the very notion of who has theological "authority" (Latin *auctoritas*). Albert Ascoli has demonstrated Dante's self-conscious sophistication on the theological debates over authority in his time. Following the recovery of Aristotle and other classical texts alongside the Bible and church tradition, Dante was a part of "the renegotiation of the relationship between the divine and the human authors of the Bible over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries."<sup>26</sup> Many of the ideas of the Reformation were already swirling about, debated at the newly created universities (both Paris and nearby Bologna), and activated later by the catalyst of the printing press. In addition to the authority of the Bible, classical philosophy, and political leaders, Dante was especially keen to carve out *auctoritas* also for the poet. To demonstrate his authority, he stages for himself a university-style *disputatio* before three saints in the Examination Cantos. He would prove his theological authority as a poet of virtue, animated by the Bible.

The three phases of Dante's final exam before the heavenly saints feature a "crescendo of authorizing gestures and symbols": coronations, gaining of new vision, angelic choirs praising his answers.<sup>27</sup> Scholars of Dante have long noted how he compares himself to Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, John, and others. Feeling a spiritual kinship with the visionary John of the book of Revelation—"John is with me"—Dante believed that the "plentiful rain of the Holy Spirit" that fell upon "the Old and New parchments" had fallen too upon his poetry.<sup>28</sup> The culmination of his sense of self as authorized poet on par with biblical human authors comes in *Paradiso* 26. Asked by St. John who "directed his bow" on the "target" of the highest virtue, "the Alpha and Omega of all the scripture that love reads to me," Dante answers first that philosophical authorities guided him. But then he continues: "The voice of the truthful Author sets it forth, who says to Moses, speaking of himself: 'I will make you see every Goodness' [Exod 33:19]. *You set it forth for me as well*, beginning the high proclamation that cries out the secrets of this realm down there, beyond all other blazoning."<sup>29</sup> As a biblically and spiritually inspired poet, Dante claims more authority than a



commentator, interpreter, or preacher. Yet through all his examinations at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, he does not designate himself as biblical *co-author*. Rather, he is a biblical *poeta*, “a title in this part of the poem which seems calculated to replace, or to stand in for, that of *autore*.”<sup>30</sup>

In this capacity—as a poet who creates language, who names—Dante ends the work in paradise like Adam, who is the last biblical figure to speak in the examinations. No human speech can last forever, Adam reminds Dante. Nimrod’s plans to unite humanity in speech were prideful and thus thwarted. Even the name of God changed in Scripture, Adam concludes, for the words of mortals are “like a leaf on a branch.” True though that may usually be, in this case Dante’s biblical poetry—his word of God in human words, his scripture as script—seems destined to last forever.

Dante’s visions, of God and the Bible and of virtue and vice, were imprinted onto centuries of Catholic readers across Europe and beyond. His method of re-imagining biblical figures and tales for new settings and audiences could be traced in countless subsequent authors. Many imitated him by “adapting, one might even say appropriating, the scriptures so as to renew their message.”<sup>31</sup> We turn now to the modern era, to the twentieth-century American South, where we find one particular and peculiar Catholic devotee of the Bible (and Dante) who sought to renew biblical revelation through prophetic fiction.

### Flannery O’Connor: Prophets and Parables

The first time I read Flannery O’Connor—the rural, Southern, Catholic master of the twentieth-century short story—I was shocked, perplexed, even a bit disgusted. It was the final assignment in one of my undergraduate course packets, the old-fashioned kind with the plastic spiral-comb binding. The short story was so out of place in comparison to all the other assigned readings that semester that I actually wondered if the copy center had placed the wrong text into my course packet. But, no, there it was, listed on the syllabus for the final day, with the innocuous bullet point: O’Connor, “Revelation.”

There is nothing innocuous about reading O’Connor. Sure, the stories begin innocently enough—riding a bus, sitting in a waiting room, or some such everyday occurrence. She might well have written a prizeworthy opening page about watching paint dry on the side of a barn or scattering seed in a field. “Revelation” lulled my late-semester brain to sleep that night before class . . . right up until the plot exploded in a violent frenzy

and left me looking around the room, wondering what the heck I had just read.

I didn't know what the story meant, but I knew I didn't like it.

The next day, when the professor prodded us for interpretations, I was mute. To my recollection, not one of us said anything of value, though I'm sure a few eager underclassmen tried. This story had come out of nowhere and smacked us in the face, like the book thrown at the story's protagonist. But we had no revelation that day, at least I didn't. The story simply made no sense. It was absurd, maybe even blasphemous, as if someone had compared God to mustard. You could say that we didn't have ears to hear.

Lauded as a reclusive genius of Southern Gothic style and the moral imagination in fiction, O'Connor is more dangerous to her reader than you would guess. She draws deeply from the well of biblical prophetic literature and creates an experience for the reader akin to actually *meeting* a prophet, encountering some wild-eyed mystic convinced that God and the devil are forcefully active and executing judgment in the here and now. If we're honest, how comfortable would any of us really be meeting Ezekiel or John the Baptist? (Go back and read their descriptions, if you've forgotten.) One of O'Connor's Jesuit correspondents, upon reading her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, concluded as if he had just met a prophet: "My eyes are scorched. I seem to feel seeds opening in my blood."<sup>32</sup>

I've tried to re-create my own initial, jarring experience for others over the years, notably during a seminar I've taught about the Bible in the Catholic intellectual tradition. No warning, no preparatory materials, no interpretive key—just the short story "Revelation" and an implication that somehow, some way, this is supposed to connect to the Bible. After new readers wrestle with the story for a while, we unveil the ways in which O'Connor recapitulates biblical characters, imagery, themes, and convictions. Indeed, seasoned readers have identified many ways in which theology shaped O'Connor's works of fiction.<sup>33</sup> In *The Gospel of Flannery O'Connor*, Jordan Cofer argues that she views herself as a kind of prophet, using fiction to recapitulate biblical stories, to demonstrate the redemptive power of righteous anger, and to express anew the prophesied reversals of the biblical witness.<sup>34</sup> In what follows, I emphasize how her stories depict especially the themes of prophets and parables.

O'Connor's personal library was replete with well-worn and annotated works on the Israelite prophets and biblical studies.<sup>35</sup> She reviewed many works of biblical scholarship for her local Catholic newspaper. Moreover,



scholars of theological ideas in literature have identified a “parabolic mentality” at work in her stories.<sup>36</sup> The “word-orientation of O’Connor’s fiction” is “basically scriptural in inspiration and parabolic in effect.”<sup>37</sup> Her second and best novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, has been analyzed as an extensive application of the parable of the sower.<sup>38</sup> (The novel’s title is also a quotation of Matthew 11:12 in the Douay-Rheims translation of O’Connor’s day.)

Her short stories embody Jesus’ own parables in both form and content. Like Jesus’ parables, O’Connor’s stories function as a kind of moral or theological shock therapy. Both embody traditions of prophetic rhetoric: “Concrete, passionate, and imaginative, poetic in its form, prophetic speech is nonetheless ‘a sharp sword,’ conveying a vision ‘designed to shock rather than edify.’”<sup>39</sup> When interpreting Jesus’ parables, we often look for the part of the story that shocks us into awareness; the meaning of the story unfolds from that moment. Why on earth would a landowner pay the same wages for vastly different amounts of work (Matt 20:1–15)? What could be commendable about a household manager who skims his employer’s money for his own use (Luke 16:1–9)? And how in the world is the kingdom of God like a mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32)? O’Connor believed that shock was “necessary to create the possibility of true vision . . . to the hard of hearing, you shout, and for the almost-blind, you draw large and startling figures.”<sup>40</sup>

Both genres use distortion and extravagance to rouse listeners from complacency.<sup>41</sup> The king of Jesus’ wedding banquet parable responds to a rejected dinner invitation with preposterous violence and impossibly strict dress codes (Matt 22:1–14). During a nighttime wedding vigil, some bridesmaids—presumably friends and family!—run out of oil for the flames of their torches, and so the bridegroom shuns them from the event completely (Matt 25:1–12). A son squanders all of his inheritance and yet returns home to an over-the-top celebration in his honor (Luke 15:11–32).

There is an everyday realism to Jesus’ parables that suddenly gets shattered, like a sickle-flash slicing through a sheaf of wheat that had been growing uneventfully for months (Mark 4:26–29). And amid that brokenness, Jesus, like O’Connor, narrates the extraordinary through the ordinary.<sup>42</sup> In the words of Sallie McFague, O’Connor is “surrealistic in the sense of upending realistic narrative forms for the purpose of saying something other than what conventional expectations say.”<sup>43</sup> She brings readers toward mystery “through violence and distortion” because “their heads are

so hard that almost nothing else will work.”<sup>44</sup> When John Dominic Crossan said of Jesus’ parables, “I don’t know what you mean by that story, but I’m certain I don’t like it,” he could well have been describing O’Connor.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond the similarities in form identified by McFague and others, there are also themes of content shared between the two parblers. Both Jesus and O’Connor tell social parables that emphasize status-groups and status-consciousness, with frequent reversals of expectation about who is blessed and who is cursed. Through their stories, they probe the depths of pride and exalt the humble—if they can find any such souls. As McFague says elsewhere, a parable is “an assault on the social, economic, and mythic structures people build for their own comfort and security. A parable is a story meant to invert and subvert these structures and to suggest that the way of the kingdom is not the way of the world.”<sup>46</sup> Both Jesus and O’Connor stand convinced of divine judgment: that it is real, imminent, and revelatory. Finally, both use their fiction to express faith that grace operates through the natural world of sensory experience, if one has ears to hear and eyes to see. Citing the medieval sense of scripture, O’Connor describes the need for an “anagogical imagination . . . the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation.”<sup>47</sup> She uses the medieval term “in a wider sense to refer both to the soul’s relation to Divine grace and to the soul’s ultimate destiny.”<sup>48</sup>

O’Connor had so thoroughly consumed biblical literature, like Dante before her, that she manifests the biblical imagination in almost every story. In fact, she transmits the Bible not only from those texts themselves but also from the Bible as shaped by Dante. Her letter correspondences with writer and confidant Caroline Gordon show that she had structured *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* as an exposition of the seven deadly sins in Dante’s *Purgatorio*.<sup>49</sup> She had devoured the *Divine Comedy*, and her handwritten notes reveal a fascination with its biblical themes and divine judgment.<sup>50</sup> During the editing of “Revelation,” Gordon wrote to her: “It seems to me that you—or I or any other fiction writer—can find any technique we can muster right there, used to perfection by Dante.”<sup>51</sup> In an earlier letter, O’Connor had put it simply: “For my money Dante is about as great as you can get.”<sup>52</sup>

From the Bible through Dante to O’Connor, we turn now to “Revelation,” which contains perhaps her most densely packed biblical imagery and themes, especially those of the prophets and parables, while itself being delivered in parabolic form.<sup>53</sup> It centers on Ruby Turpin, an

older woman in a doctor's waiting room who cannot help but judge and comment on the qualities of everyone else there, while imagining herself to be the most respectable of the lot. Even her "hogs are not dirty and they don't stink. . . . Cleaner by far than that child right there, she thought." She obsesses over purity, decorum, and social rankings of the various types of Southerners; she "occupied herself at night naming the classes of people." Ruby becomes gradually antagonized by the gaze of a silently reading college student, "a real book worm" whose eyes had "a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give." The girl, Mary Grace, intermittently stares at Ruby, never laughs at the genteel banter, and finally boils over when the girl's mother and Ruby accuse her of being ungrateful.

"The book struck her directly over her left eye," writes O'Connor next, like a sudden thunderbolt during a calm drizzle. Then the girl viciously attacks Ruby and wrestles her to the floor. After the skirmish settles, Ruby looks into her eyes and concludes that "the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. 'What you got to say to me?' she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation. . . . 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,' she whispered."

Later, back at her farm, Ruby turns over the events of the day in her mind. Why was she, a hardworking, churchgoing woman, singled out for that message? After sleeplessness, denial, and unsuccessful consolation from others, she finally confronts the message in earnest while hosing down the hogs in the pen. "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" Interpreting the girl's message as one from God, she screams over the pasture, "Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and a bottom!" She remains there looking alternately at the hogs, "as if through the very heart of mystery." In the fading light of her surroundings, the colors take on an ethereal glow.

Finally, "a visionary light settled in her eyes." She sees the "purple streak" of sunset light as "a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire." A procession of people are "rumbling toward heaven," with the lowest social classes at the front. People like Ruby—clean, orderly, singing on key—are at the end. "Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away." The fires are purging vices and virtues, and the heavenly ranking reverses the earthly.

The path darkens, the natural sounds of evening merge with the heavenly sounds of singing, and Ruby remains alone.

The specific biblical roots of the whole story are too numerous to list here, but focusing just on the parables yields quite a harvest. Ruby lives an undeveloped faith, kept shallow by worldly desires, as criticized in the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:2–9). Her good deeds are done not out of compassion for others, but out of pride and self-regard (Matt 6:1–4). She lives precisely as the Pharisee in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, who praises himself for his religious propriety and wants to ostracize the self-abased tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). She fixates on others' positions in the waiting room and in society writ large, as in the choice of seating at weddings or banquets of the Pharisees (Luke 14:1–24). Ruby is frustrated that others who are seemingly undeserving receive equal or greater rewards than the seemingly deserving, as in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–15). Her moment of shock requires distorted, seemingly disproportionate violence, as in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt 22:1–14) or the Parable of the Tenants (Mark 12:1–12). And the final vision of heavenly reversal calls to mind the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, in which the destitute Lazarus goes to heaven while the rich man who failed to help him each day can only look up from Hades (Luke 16:19–31).

As for the unexpected prophet named Mary Grace, she is dirty (as with biblical impurity) and covered in acne (like biblical skin disease or the sores of poor Lazarus). Her eyes were rolled back like “a lunatic” or perhaps as if receiving a message from heaven. Like the four women of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:1–16), each of whom was associated with some kind of perceived scandal, Mary Grace is an unanticipated vehicle of God's word. That genealogy culminated in the grace that came through Mary, a young woman with a condition suspicious in the eyes of the world but revelatory in the eyes of God. Finally, like the prophet Jeremiah who raged at the hypocrites of the Jerusalem Temple (Jer 7–8), like Ezekiel who ate a papyrus scroll filled with words of woe (Ezek 3:3), or like Jesus who overturned the tables in the Temple's outer court (John 2:14–17), righteous anger bursts out of Mary Grace. For the biblical imagination, divine wrath and divine grace can be intertwined.

O'Connor's stories present the reader with existential decisions about the meaning of life and death, earthly merit and heavenly grace. The “dramatic center” of her fiction “is invariably the word of revelation spoken

to the protagonist that either achieves conversion or announces simple condemnation.”<sup>54</sup> The stories re-imagine the encounters of Jesus’ parables through which the listener is left with a decision: where do I read myself into the story? In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), am I the merciful Samaritan, a religious official who passes by without helping, the innkeeper who aids convalescence—or the man in the ditch? Which character in O’Connor’s parable am I?

For this function, O’Connor cleverly uses one of the tactics of Jesus’ Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.<sup>55</sup> Recall in that parable that the Pharisee begins his prayer, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income” (Luke 18:11–12). Ruby Turpin mutters all this and more during her vocal self-assessment, thanking Jesus profusely for making her just who she is and not like the others in the waiting room. But note what happens to us—the readers—as she descends into self-justification. As we read and become ever more appalled at her self-regard for her helping hands, her gratitude that she’s not poor or trash, and so on, we have a still, small voice inside our minds: *thank God I am not like Ruby Turpin*. And the very moment that thought whispers within, we have *become* Ruby Turpin, we have become the Pharisee of Jesus’ parable.

At the end of the parable of “Revelation,” as powerful as the epiphany appears to be, the reader actually doesn’t know if Ruby Turpin accepts it, whether she assents like Mary to the power of grace that makes no human sense, whether she believes in God’s salvation that either levels ultimate rewards for seemingly disparate individuals (Matt 20:1–15) or turns earthly status upside down in a heavenly procession, putting the last first and the first last (Matthew 19:30). The ending thus resembles Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son—perhaps better called the Parable of the Two Sons. Both Ruby and the reader are now put in the position of the older son, after the father’s unmerited offer of grace to the younger son. Moments before, Ruby had been like the younger son, experiencing the catalyst of her revelation in the hog pen, just as the prodigal son of Jesus’ parable had done (Luke 15:14–15). She had dialogued with God among the pigs, “with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge.” But in the end, she, like all of us, carries the possibilities of both sons within. As her vision of grace finishes, after the purgatorial “field of living fire” burns away the virtues and vices of the whole procession, she

stands outside “immobile,” like the older son of Jesus’ parable. The older son hears “music and dancing” of the salvation party for the younger son, just as Ruby sees “battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs . . . the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.” But the older son becomes “angry and refused to go in.” The older son argues, noting his many good deeds over the years for the father, just as Ruby had listed for God her meritorious “good order and common sense and respectable behavior.” And like Jesus’ parable, O’Connor does not narrate “what lay ahead” for Ruby Turpin. The door of the purgatorial “waiting room” from the story’s opening line now opens for us, the readers. Does the older son join the father’s joy in the younger son’s return? Does Ruby Turpin accept that ultimate grace upends the worldly system of merit? Do we?

The story of “Revelation,” its characters, and its theology seem to have mattered more to O’Connor than any others she had written. Her letter correspondences show great concern with getting the final scenes right—every color, gesture, and allusion. Her most trusted readers gratified her with praise, but not everyone interpreted the ending as she hoped. And some were turned off altogether. The effect of this, her final parable, thus resembled those of Jesus himself. Yet just a week before her untimely, suffering death from lupus, she was consoled by the story’s reception at the highest level. “We can worry about the interpretations [*sic*] of ‘Revelation’ but not its fortunes,” she wrote on July 25, 1964. “I had a letter from the O. Henry prize people & it got first.”<sup>56</sup>

Her last story shall be first.

### **Bruce Springsteen: Surrounded by God**

Around the same time as O’Connor’s short stories, another gifted storyteller was being reared by mid-twentieth-century, small-town Catholicism up north in Freehold, New Jersey. Musician and writer Bruce Springsteen—yes, the rocker you might associate with open roads, union cards, and dozens of hard-luck-but-laughing-and-loving-through-it-all hit songs—has made sustained and memorable contributions to the Catholic imagination. His stories and imagery express the fundamental mystery of the Catholic literary spirit: how grace and suffering are inextricable, two sides of the same shared experience, human and divine.

The Catholic aspects of his record catalog have been analyzed in the pages of Catholic periodicals, such as *Commonweal* and *America*. Way



back in 1988, none less than Andrew Greeley described Springsteen's music as:

profoundly Catholic, and it is so because his creative imagination is permeated by Catholic symbolism he absorbed, almost necessarily, from the Sacraments. . . . Prayer, heaven and God are invoked naturally and unselfconsciously, as though they are an ordinary part of the singer's life and vocabulary. . . . Moreover, religion is invoked to deal precisely with those human (as opposed to doctrinal) problems—love, sin, death, rebirth—that humankind in its long history has always considered religious.<sup>57</sup>

Historian of religion Brenna Moore concludes that “the Catholic stuff of his past—images of an only son on his way to death on a cross, of devils that haunt one's soul—provides ways to think about what may seem unthinkable. Perhaps Springsteen's faith allows him to invite grief into his life, to acknowledge its profundity.”<sup>58</sup> As we follow Springsteen's characters through darkness and danger, ecstasy and exaltation, love and loss, feasts and fasts, we encounter a sacramental worldview shaped by the Bible and passing on biblical themes to his listeners.

Springsteen's Catholic formation came not only through parish and place and prayer, but also through his favorite author, Flannery O'Connor. When asked in 2014 by *The New York Times* about “the one book” that made him who he is today, he replied, “One would be difficult, but the short stories of Flannery O'Connor landed hard on me. You could feel within them the unknowability of God, the intangible mysteries of life that confounded her characters, and which I find by my side every day. They contained the dark Gothicism of my childhood and yet made me feel fortunate to sit at the center of this swirling black puzzle, stars reeling overhead, the earth barely beneath us.”<sup>59</sup> Perhaps he has the final scenes of her short story “Revelation” in mind, but the quote encapsulates so much of what haunts O'Connor's world—and thereby the American Catholic imagination writ large. It is the mystery that does not confuse but halts through wonder; the experience of all life as pathos and glory; the stubborn refusal to separate nature and grace.

At the time of that interview, he was writing *Born to Run* (2016), a critically acclaimed memoir whose opening chapters rhapsodized a childhood consciousness permeated with Catholicism—its holiness and its

terror. “This was the world where I found the beginnings of my song. In Catholicism, there existed the poetry, danger and darkness that reflected my imagination and my inner self. I found a land of great and harsh beauty, of fantastic stories, of unimaginable punishment and infinite reward. It was a glorious and pathetic place I was either shaped for or fit right into. It has walked alongside me as a waking dream my whole life.”<sup>60</sup> Springsteen sounded similar notes during his one-man show, *Springsteen on Broadway* (2017), a veritable liturgy of music and story. Near the beginning of the show, he brings the listener into the world of his childhood, the block on which he grew up, surrounded by family and church and parish school and priests and nuns and saints above and below the grass of the cemeteries where his sister and he played hide-and-seek during the endless cycle of funerals—a childhood “surrounded by God.”

From this perspective on life he was launched: the show’s opening story becomes song, and the audience hears “My Hometown,” feeling through his evocative memories as if we, too, had grown up there.

We lived spitting distance from the Catholic church, the priests’ rectory, the nuns’ convent, the St. Rose of Lima grammar school, all of it just a football’s toss away across a field of wild grass. I literally grew up surrounded by God. Surrounded by God—and my relatives. All of us were jammed into five little houses on two adjoining streets. And when the church bells rang, the whole clan would hustle up the street, to stand witness to every wedding and every funeral that arrived like a state occasion in our little neighborhood.<sup>61</sup>

His twentieth-century world of faith and family—concentrically oriented around the edifices of parish and convent, morally oriented toward the Church, with occasional resistance to it—was not as distant from the medieval world of Dante as it seems. It was there on those few city blocks where Springsteen and his relatives “did the best that they could to hold off the demons, outside and inside, that sought to destroy them and their homes and their families and their town. Here we lived,” he suddenly cries out like a preacher, “in the shadow of the steeple, crookedly blessed in God’s good mercy, one and all.”<sup>62</sup>

At the end of the show, Springsteen recounts returning to his hometown as an old man and finding the majestic Copper Beech tree that had defined his block’s landscape now dead and gone, the timeless passed into

mortality like so many of his loved ones. And he once again felt “surrounded by God,” confessing about Catholics that “once they gotcha, they gotcha.” Those nuns and priests “did their work hard and they did it well, because the words of a very strange but all too familiar benediction came back to me that evening.”<sup>63</sup> And then “The Boss,” rocker extraordinaire, closes his one-man show with the “Our Father”—the biblical Lord’s Prayer—and invokes God’s blessing upon the audience.

So that’s how I get away with including the Boss among the likes of Dante and Flannery. A Catholic imagination, for certain. But what about this Catholic artist is explicitly *biblical*?

The clearest example of how the Bible shaped his Catholic imagination comes in a little-known ballad, “Jesus Was an Only Son,” from the 2005 album *Devils & Dust*. During the tour in support of that album, he introduced the song by describing that Catholic upbringing and all the family members surrounding the central parish church, workshopping material that would later appear in the memoir. The church exuded “mystery and terror, and there was also great beauty in it and enormous poetry, and it sort of worked its way into all my songs,” he said one night on tour. “I wrote a lot of songs about parents and children on this record, and so I thought, well, you know, I’m going to try to write something from the standpoint of Jesus as someone’s child. And what it’s like to have your children choose their own destiny, as they do. And of course, you’re along for the merry ride wherever it goes.”<sup>64</sup>

The ballad has six efficient stanzas of quatrains, set to a simple melody, sung over the basic three-chord major progression of folk music. The form and content of the music could not be much simpler, but the biblical reflection is deceptively deep. The lyrics resemble one of St. Ignatius Loyola’s spiritual exercises (see chapter 4) or the meditative practice of *lectio divina* (see chapter 8). Springsteen enters the biblical landscape and imagines Jesus simply as someone’s child. What would Jesus look like learning his ABCs? Would he have nightmares? How would Jesus feel about his fate, knowing he would leave his mother bereft? The biblical evidence for Jesus’ relationship with his mother is sparse: birth, death, and not much in between. Anyone who wants to think through these ideas and think with these minimal texts will have to do some reading between the lines.

With each stanza, Springsteen recalls a biblical theme but either redefines it or re-imagines its power. The title and first line already do just that: in the biblical tradition and the subsequent Creed of the Catholic Church, Jesus

is known as the “only son” of the Father. Centuries of Christian theology were concerned with the precise nature of that Father-Son relationship. In the Gospels and the Creed, being an “only Son” of God the Father connotes divine identity, unity of will, and earthly authority. But here we meet Jesus as an “only son” of his mother. The meaning of the phrase changes when one focuses on the mother: it connotes protection and education, then profound grief, the horror of losing a child. Grace meets suffering, as Mary “full of grace” is also *mater dolorosa*, “the sorrowful mother.” When did Jesus feel most like an only son to Mary? It was both when he approached his final fate (“as he walked up Calvary hill / His mother Mary walking beside him / In the path where his blood spilled,” verse 1) and during his early childhood years (“as he lay reading the Psalms of David / At his mother’s feet,” verse 2).<sup>65</sup>

Verses 1, 4, 5, and 6 meditate on suffering, but verses 2 and 3 express the grace of the everyday. What do mothers do every day with their children? They teach them, read with them, play with them. Jesus would naturally be learning with the most memorable texts of the Jewish tradition, the Psalms of David. Springsteen had seen plentiful artworks of the Madonna and Child, images like a late medieval sculpture at the Cloisters Museum, in which Jesus sits on his mother’s lap and realistically points at the pages of a book she holds with her right hand (Figure 7.2). This version of Jesus is not a “solemn miniature man” as in many other artworks, but a “chubby baby” learning from his mom.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps they read from the Psalms, the most well-worn Old Testament pages of the Catholic tradition. The Psalms prepare Jesus to understand and interpret his destiny as a suffering Messiah—a fate from which his mother strives to protect him, just like her left hand protects him from falling off her lap.

In verse 3, Springsteen evokes the prophecy that Mary’s heart would be “pierced” by her son’s death (Luke 2:35), a biblical text which he probably learned through the rosary’s meditation on the *mater dolorosa* and the corresponding artwork with seven swords piercing her heart. But he recasts the image as a hopeful wish from mother to son. She doesn’t want even his dreams to be pierced with any sadness. “Sleep tight, my child, sleep well / For I’ll be at your side,” she prays, and promises to protect him from any “shadow” and “darkness” that might “pierce” his dreams. Through this, Springsteen’s Mary utters an ironic prophecy of her own. Later in life, on “Calvary Hill,” she would again be *by his side*, as he is *pierced* under the



FIGURE 7.2 Virgin and Child (detail), painted limestone, 1415–17, France. Metropolitan Museum of Art 33.23, New York. Open Access.

ominous *shadow* of a *darkened* sky. She protects him as far as she can. But as Springsteen says, in a spoken-word section during a live version of the song, “The first thing you realize when you have a kid is this feeling that appears in your gut, that there’s nothing you wouldn’t do, no train you wouldn’t step in front of, to keep them safe. And that’s a life sentence.”<sup>67</sup>

Is there no one, then, who can save Mary's only son? In verse 4, a father appears for the only time. An earthly father is absent from this story—just as in the Gospel of Mark, the earliest written account of Jesus' life and death—and so the Jesus of Springsteen's song prays in Gethsemane to the "Heavenly Father," the one of whom Jesus is the "only Son" in the theological Creed. Contrasting with the protective mother, this father will not hear the requests. Jesus' biblical cry of abandonment from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—itself a quotation of the Psalms he learned at his mother's feet—is here prefigured in the encounter at Gethsemane.

At Springsteen's imagined Gethsemane, Jesus "prayed for the life he'd never live" (verse 4). During the live version, Springsteen here interlaces a poignant spoken-word meditation about Gethsemane, about the inner thoughts of Jesus that night. He performs *lectio divina* on the temptation of Jesus to walk away from his destiny, the temptation to "come down from the cross" and "save himself," which is biblical in origin (Mark 15:30) and famously expanded by the novel and film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (about which, see later in this chapter). Springsteen thinks it through in his own inimitable way:

If our choices are given wing and meaning by the things that we sacrifice, and we choose some part of life and we give up something else, I always figured Jesus had to be thinking about what he was going to lose. He must've been thinking "Galilee is really nice this time of year," that little bar down by the beach where he's sure they need somebody to manage the place. And Mary Magdalene, she could tend bar, and he don't have to quit the preaching, but just save it for the weekends. And they could have a bunch of kids, and get to see the sun fall on their face, and get to see the air fill their lungs at night while they're sleeping. And you get to see the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day.<sup>68</sup>

With this repeated mantra of hope for the next day, spoken plaintively over a two-chord progression swaying gently like a rocking chair on a Galilean lakeside porch, he brings that last temptation of Christ vividly forward from one line of scripture, a live Ignatian spiritual exercise woven into a composed one. Then the instrumentation ascends in volume, the poet gathers himself back from his meditative state, and he brings the song home.



What might Jesus' acceptance of his fate have looked like in his own mind? When he said, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:38), what imagery stirred his soul during prayer? Verse 5 steps back from the pattern of biblical visualization to reflect on the finality of death: to accept mortality is not to avoid mourning a "loss that can never be replaced" or to admit that the "light" of a loved one can ever be found "in another's face." And even though Jesus had walked upon the sea and stilled the storm, the "distance" of *this* "sea"—the chasm that separates the living from the departed—felt insurmountable on that Holy Thursday in Gethsemane.

The meditation ends by circling back to the childhood scene. Mary comforted Jesus as a boy afraid of his dreams; now Jesus comforts Mary as he approaches a fearsome demise. "Mother, still your tears / For remember the soul of the universe / Willed a world and it appeared" (verse 6). This, too, is rooted in the biblical witness, as Jesus cares for his mother from the cross (John 19:26–27) and addresses women of Jerusalem on his way there (Luke 23:28–31, transmitted liturgically also as the eighth Station of the Cross).

To conclude, recall how verses 1 and 2 intone the song's title, "Jesus was an only son." He was an only son of his mother *at the cross*; and he was an only son of his mother *during his childhood*. The chronology of Springsteen's poem oscillates only between those two time periods. In other words, this poem, this song, this spiritual exercise is nothing less than his musical *Pietà*. With a faith formed by the Catholic biblical imagination—the Gospels, the Psalms, family bonds, Jesus and Mary and Michelangelo's sculpture itself—Springsteen sings the inner thoughts of those marble figures with which this book began. In the Bible as in everyday life, grace and suffering flicker back and forth, the extraordinary shining through the ordinary, in birth and in death, surrounded by God and our relatives.

### Drama on Screen

The liturgical dramas that flourished in medieval churches, even those with captivating music and pyrotechnics, have lost influence by contrast to stories portrayed on screen. In recent years, the most prominent forms of dramatic arts have been movies and television, and here, too, the Catholic biblical imagination permeates the visuality of certain film directors. Some have transferred the imagery and storytelling of Catholic liturgical drama directly into motion pictures, as Mel Gibson did with his vivid feature film

*The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Gibson's *Passion* was a medieval play put on the silver screen, a high-resolution, stylized Stations of the Cross with plentiful slow-motion splattering of blood. Though criticized by many viewers for excessive gore, the movie was nonetheless very popular among Catholics with a particular baroque spirituality of suffering.

### *Scorsese on the Big Screen*

But when critics analyze directors who exude the deepest Catholic sensibility throughout movies today, they often point to Martin Scorsese. Raised a devout Catholic Italian American in New York, Scorsese's imagination was God-haunted from the start. Late in life he began to speak about it in more depth, especially after making *Silence* (2016), a film about Jesuit missionaries in seventeenth-century Japan.<sup>69</sup> During an interview with the Italian Jesuit journalist Antonio Spadaro, Scorsese said: "When I was young and serving Mass, there was no doubt that there was a sense of the sacred. . . . I remember going out on the street after the Mass was over and wondering: How can life just be going on? Why hasn't everything changed? Why isn't the world directly affected by the body and blood of Christ? That's the way that I experienced the presence of God when I was very young."<sup>70</sup>

Sidelined from many childhood activities by illness, Scorsese's time was spent in contemplation—split between the church and the movie theater. At only ten years old, his first storyboard for a film was a cinematic vision for the Stations of the Cross.<sup>71</sup> Scorsese "knew the stories," and he wanted to see them come alive on the big screen. After a brief time in the seminary, he realized he didn't have that calling and left the church for the cinema full-time. But like so many artists before and since, the Catholic imagination didn't leave him. "My whole life has been movies and religion," he once said. "That's it. Nothing else."<sup>72</sup> The opening scene of his first film, *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967), shows a Madonna and Child in a New York kitchen, and fifty years later, the last scene of *Silence* (2016) centers on a crucifix.<sup>73</sup> His artworks evoke the Incarnation and the Passion, from beginning to end.

In *The Catholic Imagination*, Andrew Greeley highlights *Mean Streets* (1973) for its biblical and Catholic themes. It's a story of sin and redemption, in which the rough process of forgiveness and absolution occurs not in a confessional but on the street. Nevertheless, "the churches, statues, and religious images which recur constantly in the film are not just part of its

atmosphere. They are central to the story of a young man determined to *be* grace, to reflect God's love in his care for other humans, however inept and doomed his attempts are."<sup>74</sup> Throughout his films that seem secular, Scorsese uses lighting and blocking positions that mimic the Madonna and Child or the Crucifixion or the *Pietà*, along with abundant scenes of prayer, stigmata, tattoos of Bible verses, and more.<sup>75</sup> According to critic Richard Blake, he evokes the dual identity of suffering and grace, the conviction that God's presence is mediated through unexpected encounters in the material world, and the necessity of communion/community for salvation.<sup>76</sup>

When Scorsese finally did make his explicit Stations of the Cross movie, it occurred in a markedly different way than his childhood self would have expected. Adapting Nikos Kazantzakis's controversial novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* for film meant that Jesus' full humanity would for the first time be expressed in a major motion picture.<sup>77</sup> The risk of blasphemy was palpable, but Scorsese said he made the movie "as a prayer, an act of worship."<sup>78</sup> And he was in a way being faithful to the biblical text. He used the idea that Jesus is not "unable to sympathize with our weaknesses," but rather "has similarly been tested [tempted] in every way, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Tempted in *every* way? That's a biblical idea, but what would that *look like* in a dramatic film? For Scorsese, it looked like temptations of pleasure, of control, of domesticity, of sexuality, of the worldly power desired by his friend Judas and the family life possible with Mary Magdalene. Even the eponymous "last temptation" is biblical—"come down from the cross," yelled the onlookers (Matt 27:42; Mark 15:32). Through these biblical meditations, "Scorsese wanted to explore the Savior's full humanity, by showing him struggle to resist temptation and experience uncertainty over his identity and purpose. This is what drew him to Kazantzakis's novel as source material. 'I thought this neurotic—even psychotic—Jesus was not very different from the shifts of mood and psychology that you find glimpses of in the Gospels,' Scorsese explained."<sup>79</sup> The stories of the Gospels (especially of Holy Week) and other biblical motifs were thus central to *Last Temptation*, the most controversial film of the 1980s.

For these reasons and more, in a thorough study of the Catholic imagination among twentieth-century American filmmakers, Scorsese earned top billing.<sup>80</sup> One contributor to the scholarly collection *Scorsese on Religion* (2019) interprets the movies *Mean Streets* (1973), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Silence* (2016) as a kind of religious trilogy, encompassing his whole career of situating the Catholic imagination amid its surrounding

cultures.<sup>81</sup> Scorsese also interacted with the other artists of the Catholic imagination whom we have met in this chapter. One scholar has interpreted Scorsese's entire oeuvre in the framework of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.<sup>82</sup> And the story goes that when Scorsese was once swapping Catholic influences with musician Bruce Springsteen, he introduced Springsteen for the first time to Flannery O'Connor's fiction. O'Connor would go on to become Springsteen's favorite author, who profoundly influenced his worldview. One film critic asks: "Despite a body of work marked by sex, drugs and blood, will we view Scorsese in the same vein as a Flannery O'Connor—an artist and storyteller so haunted by Christ that he can't help but show it all throughout his work?"<sup>83</sup> Perhaps, over time, Scorsese will indeed be understood as the Dante or Flannery O'Connor of film.

According to recent revelations from Scorsese himself, we may not have to wait very long to assess his legacy as a Catholic screenwriter and director. In 2023, Scorsese traveled to Italy to attend a conference titled "The Global Aesthetics of the Catholic Imagination." At the conference, Pope Francis exhorted the distinguished artists in attendance and also met privately with Scorsese. "I have responded to the pope's appeal to artists in the only way I know how," he later said, "by imagining and writing a screenplay for a film about Jesus."<sup>84</sup> According to a 2024 interview about the process, Scorsese's life of Jesus will be "set mostly in the present day," though he "doesn't want to be locked into a certain period, because he wants the film to feel timeless." The film will focus on "Jesus' core teachings in a way that explores the principles but doesn't proselytize." Seventy years after his first childhood storyboard about the life of Jesus, and forty years after his midlife setting of Jesus' temptations, the eighty-one-year-old filmmaking master might have his most powerful biblical movie still yet to come.

### *Daredevil on the Small Screen*

Catholics have often been accused of focusing too much on suffering, hell, and the devil. While that stereotype is not entirely true, one must admit that the mass-market television show most infused with Catholic biblical imagination was, in fact, a dark drama set in Hell's Kitchen about a suffering hero with "devil" in his name. The show *Daredevil*, based on the classic Marvel comic-book character, ran for thirty-nine episodes over three seasons (2015–18) and has been one of the most popular series of the streaming era. During its run, it was the third most popular show on Netflix and fifth most popular overall, while also garnering eye-popping,

stratospheric ratings from film critics. Season 1 earned 99% positive reviews and season 3 earned 96% positive reviews, numbers which are virtually unheard of in the industry (because critics exist to criticize).<sup>85</sup>

The main character, Matt Murdock, was blinded and orphaned as a child, then raised by nuns in an orphanage, but through an accident he develops hypersensitive perceptions. He can “see” in a way difficult to explain or imagine—a kind of fiery, mystical vision that supplements his superhero senses of hearing and spatial orientation. On fire for justice, too, Murdock is a lawyer by day for the oppressed; and by night, he dons a costume and uses his perceptive powers to identify crime in his beloved neighborhood, defend the victims, and punish the wicked. The Catholic identity of Murdock was introduced through the comic books in the 1970s, but it has never been so emphasized as in the television version. The show’s opening scene occurs in a confessional with his spiritual mentor, a Catholic priest, and the final season occurs primarily in a church.

The robust Catholicism of the television version stems from its creator, a successful director named Drew Goddard, and the showrunner for season 3, Erik Oleson. Goddard was raised Catholic in Los Alamos, New Mexico, a company town for a large nuclear facility.<sup>86</sup> His formation in faith juxtaposed with the ultimate power to destroy led him to create characters who struggle with heaven and hell, as when he produced the critically-acclaimed television show *The Good Place* (2016–20), and those who inhabit an apocalyptic new world, as when he adapted *The Martian* (2015) into a re-imagined creation and salvation epic on Mars. His Catholic emphasis has lasted beyond *Daredevil* and into his film *Bad Times at the El Royale* (2018). After taking over for the final season, Erik Oleson continued Goddard’s ethos. “Of course, the core essence of Matt [Murdock] is his Catholicism and the strong moral compass that it provides to him,” Oleson said. “He has so many inherent contradictions. He is an attorney at law who at night is a vigilante. On the other side, he is a practicing Catholic who believes in God and yet goes out and plays God, delivering what he believes is God’s justice.”<sup>87</sup>

Even the marketing of the show drew from the Catholic imagination. Several of the promotional posters for season 2 were imitations of Catholic paintings: the female lead, Karen, works at her legal desk while a skull rests on her open books, mimicking Caravaggio’s *Saint Jerome Writing*; the anti-hero The Punisher holds his weapon in one hand and the mask of Daredevil in the other, posing exactly as Caravaggio’s *David with the Head*

of *Goliath*; and a third poster casts Daredevil himself at the center of a cloud of heroes and villains, like the second coming of Christ in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel.<sup>88</sup>

The *biblical* aspects of *Daredevil* really came to the fore in season 3, beginning with its highly unusual marketing campaign. It first came to my attention on September 19, 2018, when a student told me *Daredevil* was tweeting out Bible verses. I pulled out my phone and saw one of the many Bible references being used to generate interest for the show. The text of the tweet simply read "Job 30:26."<sup>89</sup> It included an image of a cross topped with Daredevil's mask like a crown, set against a blood-red streetscape of a New York City church. And a biblical mash-up of Genesis and Job overlaid the image: "Job 30:26" was paired with "Let there be darkness." Even better, when a fan responded to the tweet with the question, "Release date?," the *Daredevil* Twitter account responded only with this: "James 5:8."<sup>90</sup> The fan would have to search a Bible to find, "You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand." Searching through the show's Twitter account soon revealed that it replied in this way with *different* Bible references to hundreds of questions from fans. For almost every question—about the show's timing, plot, character, suffering, vengeance—it offered nothing but a unique and appropriate Bible chapter and verse in reply.

Nothing like this had ever been done: the *entirety* of the months-long marketing rollout for season 3 of this show was conducted with Bible references, effectively forcing millions of eager fans to read and interpret the Bible. Social media was abuzz with people saying they had never read the Bible more in their lives than when they were trying to figure out the meanings of *Daredevil's* teasers. One Irish Catholic fan tweeted, "Safe to say Daredevil has made me read more of the Bible in the last few weeks than the other 29 years of my life combined."<sup>91</sup> Soon, journalists covering the entertainment industry were writing stories to help untangle the web of references. An estimated twenty-five million fans needed to know: "What do *Daredevil's* Cryptic Bible Verse Teases Tell Us About Season 3?"<sup>92</sup>

There were several primary biblical references, not counting the replies to questions: John 12:40; Romans 12:21; Isaiah 1:17; Job 12:22; Job 30:26; Deuteronomy 30:15; Daniel 9:5; Romans 2:8; Acts 2:20; Lamentations 3:1–2. The texts cover blindness, hardness of heart, the challenge of conversion, the battle of good and evil, justice for orphans and widows, the choices between life and death, and apocalyptic visions. The biblical references were



not just a marketing gimmick; Goddard and the other writers infused the show's characters and narrative arc with explicitly biblical themes. In the end, much of the third and final season occurs in the basement of a church. Murdock has detailed discussions with his priest and Sister Maggie (a nun who is later revealed to be his biological mother) about the nature of God, the interpretation of the character of Job, and the tension between mercy and justice.<sup>93</sup>

The fundamental moral quandary of mercy and justice recalls a poignant scene from earlier in the show, when the show's villain, Wilson Fisk, reflects with his captors about the interpretation of Jesus' most famous parable. He wonders aloud: where do I read myself into the story of the Good Samaritan? Previously, Murdock and his *pro bono* legal partner Foggy Nelson were taking bleeding-heart cases for clients who could not pay. Their friend Karen had asked them, Were *they* just Good Samaritans? Now, at the season's conclusion, their nemesis, Fisk, ponders the same biblical character. On the way to prison, Fisk slowly and methodically tells the entire parable to his armed guards, and then he concludes: "I always thought *I* was the Samaritan in that story. It's funny, isn't it? How even the best of men can be deceived by their true nature. . . . I am *not* the Samaritan. I'm not the priest, or the Levite. I am *the ill intent* who set upon the traveler on a road that he should not have been on."<sup>94</sup> Thus even the show's villain uses a biblical story to situate himself in the world, doing a kind of *lectio divina*, imagining that he himself is the roadside bandit between the lines of the story.

One could go on with the many biblical resonances of this remarkable series. To recap: the main character of *Daredevil* wanders a place called Hell's Kitchen, on a spiritual and moral quest, in dialogue with the Bible and the Catholic tradition, trying to get out of an inferno, to purge his own sins and those of others, as if in purgatory. When one thinks of the plot in this way, it sounds a lot like how this chapter began, with Dante's *Divine Comedy* from centuries ago. Through richly imagined worlds of Catholic culture, artistic creators continue to re-imagine the Bible and its characters.

## Bible Study and Scholarship

BY NOW, A FEW READERS may be ready to protest the structure of this book. *Sometimes*, you might be thinking, *Catholics really do sit down with the Bible to study it!* Especially in the last half century, individual Bible reading has modestly increased among Catholics, usually linked with prayer. At homes and farms across Latin America, groups of spiritual renewal called “Base Communities” have formed to read and discuss the impact of the Bible in modern life. On some Catholic college campuses, students gather in “Small Christian Communities” to study the biblical readings for each week’s Mass. More recently, a few Catholic podcasts have become extremely popular through their emphases on the Bible. But such acts of “Bible study” and interpretation—the spiritual lifeblood of many Protestants—still comprise a relatively small share of Catholic biblical engagement. By delaying the topic until now, this book aims to treat that type of interpretation proportionally to the rest of Catholic life.

Some Catholic encounters with the Bible occur in response to doctrinal or ethical quandaries—the times when someone asks, “What does the Bible say about that?” On certain pressing issues, the Bible can become a resource, even a kind of reference manual, for doctrine or ethics. Catholics investigate the Bible for answers about the edges of life and death, about obligations to the poor and the migrant, or about religious differences from their neighbors. If the number of individual Catholic Bible readers is small, the number of those readers who read the Bible in dialogue with either academic biblical scholarship or official Catholic doctrine about

biblical interpretation is miniscule. It is frankly uncommon for *Catholic biblical scholars themselves* to have incorporated official Vatican documents about how to interpret the Bible into their scholarship. Nonetheless, the results of academic biblical scholarship have trickled down to have a small influence in parishes and pews. Thus it is worthwhile to chart the sweeping changes in official Catholic attitudes toward biblical scholarship over the past hundred years. For Catholics overall, reading the printed Bible as part of a “Bible study” or through academic “biblical studies” has increased only slightly since the reforms of Vatican II—but with some real effects on devotions and doctrines.

### Bible Reading by Individuals and Small Groups

#### *Lectio Divina and Devotional Reading*

The Roman Catholic Church loves to have Latin terms for everything. Even after Vatican II opened the doors to let in the fresh air of modern languages, some objects and religious practices retain their Latin names. Such is the case with *lectio divina* (“sacred reading”), which is a term for reading the Bible with prayerful attention. The Pontifical Biblical Commission defines it as “a reading, on an individual or communal level, of a more or less lengthy passage of Scripture, received as the Word of God and leading, at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer, and contemplation.”<sup>1</sup> That definition is vague enough to include almost any spiritual reading of the Bible. More specifically, the great Jesuit teachers Daniel Harrington and James Martin break down the process into four steps.<sup>2</sup> The first step, reading (*lectio*), focuses on the literal sense of the text, its vocabulary, style, story, or other literary form. The second step of meditation (*meditatio*) considers what God might be trying to communicate to this specific reader through this specific text. One might use their visualization or imagination between the lines of the text; one might plumb the depths of one’s emotions regarding the content; one might reflect on a moral message and connect it to one’s current challenges. Reading and meditation should lead one to prayer (*oratio*): at this point, what does one want to say to God about this text? The final step “may take the form of *contemplatio* (relishing the spiritual experience and praising God for it) or *actio* (discerning some course of action).”<sup>3</sup>

These steps make *lectio divina* accessible to any reader, so that the Latin name doesn’t mystify the process, as Fr. Martin had feared when he was

younger. When he first learned about *lectio divina*, he “imagined elderly monks sequestered in noiseless rooms, silently turning the parchment pages of medieval manuscripts, as sunlight streamed through a stained-glass window, illuminating the words they were reading.”<sup>4</sup> True, *lectio divina* does not *have* to look like that, but its medieval monastic roots are worth noting.

Twelfth-century cloistered monks had relatively few stimuli to their senses, and so they expanded the texts of scripture into vivid reading experiences, biblical worlds within words. One of their popular works of spiritual guidance, *The Ladder of Monks*, presented the four-step process of *lectio divina* as rungs of a ladder that ascend to God. There the four steps are also taught by analogy to nourishment, as four stages of mindful eating: “*lectio* puts food whole into the mouth, *meditatio* chews it and breaks it up, *oratio* extracts its flavor, *contemplatio* gives us delight in the sweetness which we have found.”<sup>5</sup> Hugh of St. Victor depicts *lectio divina* as a slow walk through a grove of fruit trees, where the reader considers each tree carefully, picking and chewing its fruits.<sup>6</sup> One might conclude that *actio* which results from the reading is like the energy provided by the food for good works. The Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux emphasizes the role of imagination and affect (emotion) in the process of *lectio divina*, which exists “not so much to explain words as to move hearts.”<sup>7</sup> Bernard also reassures monastic readers that multiple valid meanings can be found for each biblical text, which both avoids contentious disputes over scripture and also gives monks reasons to return over and over to the same texts. Overall, the monastic style of *lectio divina* was distinguished from the formal philosophical disputation about scripture that concerned medieval scholastic readers (e.g., Thomas Aquinas). The goal was not merely to seek information—far less was it to win an argument. Beyond the learning of *information*, this style of Bible reading modeled the *formation* of a person in a pattern of prayer and morality, while aspiring toward spiritual *transformation* and ascent to the divine.<sup>8</sup>

In our century, we might capture the spirit of monastic *lectio divina* by the phrase “devotional reading” or “daily devotions.” Devotional books have been popular among Catholics since before the printing press; the medieval “Book of Hours” was more widely distributed than the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Among the various modern formats, we can note *The New Testament with Lectio Divina* (2020), which offers specific four-step *lectio divina* prompts to accompany every chapter of the New Testament.<sup>10</sup> The reader

is encouraged to read slowly, one chapter at a time, and pray along with the guiding questions. The printed layout mimics that of Protestant “life application” Bibles, which provide frequent sidebars and inset boxes as mini-sermons about how certain passages might apply today. But the Catholic *lectio divina* version adheres to the steps laid out from the medieval era—“read,” “reflect,” and “pray”—while preferring “action” more than “contemplation” for the final step.

Daily devotional books with Bible excerpts remain much more common among Protestants than any other Christians. But Catholics who read English, Spanish, French, German, Polish, Lithuanian, or Slovenian have at least one prominent devotional periodical: *Magnificat*. Founded in 1992 in France and quickly expanding in the United States, the monthly pocket-sized book includes daily readings from the Bible, prayers from the Liturgy of the Hours and the Mass, brief reflections on spiritual topics, short lives of past saints, and occasional commentaries on masterpieces of Catholic art. It tends conservative in the sense of traditional, but it maintains a broad appeal by avoiding moralistic topics or judgmental tones. Reading through its issues and website, there is not much about the Bible as a book, nor about historical or literary contexts of the biblical passages. But by making parts of the Liturgy of the Hours and the readings for daily Mass readily accessible to laypeople, it opens a treasury of biblical passages into Catholic prayer life. Opening up *Magnificat* to the date on which I am writing this paragraph, the entry includes the entirety of Psalms 16, 93, and 144, along with excerpts from Exodus, Isaiah, Matthew, Luke, Acts, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, and Revelation. You would be hard-pressed to find any Catholic layperson reading more of the Bible than that every day.

The subscription roll of *Magnificat* has held strong at around 250,000 subscribers, not counting about 50,000 subscribers to the version for children (*MagnifiKid!*). If you are not familiar with the collapse of periodical subscriptions in the internet era, let me put this in perspective. As of press time for this book, *Magnificat* has eclipsed the *combined* circulation of five of the leading Catholic periodicals in the United States (*Our Sunday Visitor*, *U.S. Catholic*, *America*, *First Things*, and *Commonweal*). To be clear, the readership numbers for *Magnificat* barely register on the scale of Evangelical biblical devotional books, from the classic *My Utmost for His Highest* (never out of print since 1924) to the recent classic *Jesus Calling* (over 35,000,000 copies sold since 2004). Nor does *Magnificat* cover the whole Bible, as do the many Protestant “one year Bibles” that

ambitiously cover the entire Protestant canon each year through a rigorous daily regimen. But credit should be given to *Magnificat* for having brought a far greater quantity and diversity of scripture readings into the hands of Catholics than provided by the lectionary alone.

As for the rest of Catholics who still don't feel like individual Bible readers, they might have interest in being individual Bible *listeners*. And indeed, their clicks and downloads are proving it, as with the stunning growth of the podcast "The Bible in a Year" by Fr. Mike Schmitz. A Catholic priest and director of young adult ministry in Minnesota, Fr. Mike caught lightning in a bottle when he started his show during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Launching on January 1, 2021, with episodes of twenty-five to thirty minutes, he reads passages from the Bible and offers historical, literary, and theological interpretations. The tone is measured and friendly; the content is centrist and intellectually satisfying, without being pedantic. The result has been breathtaking: it is one of the most downloaded podcasts in the United States on both Apple and Spotify. During some periods of its short existence, it has actually been the number 1 podcast on Apple's platform, with well over 100,000,000 downloads in 2021. To be sure, these are global numbers and not all of the listeners are Catholics, as Christians from other traditions have lavished praise on the podcast's approach and content. It is not attached to the Catholic liturgical year like the Liturgy of the Hours or *Magnificat*, and so Christians on different calendars (or none at all) can tune in just the same. When you see people on the bus or sidewalk with earbuds in, realize that tens of millions of them are listening not to music or news, but the Bible.

The success does demonstrate yet another example of how the Catholic Bible is proclaimed and heard as a story more than read as an object of study. Catholics remain more a people of the story than a people of the book. The structure of the podcast's biblical tour plays to that strength, both emphasizing the most gripping stories within the Bible and crafting the Bible overall as one coherent story. Fr. Mike doesn't read every word of the Bible aloud, but reads excerpts from a Bible timeline of stories curated by professor Jeff Cavins (the "Great Adventure Bible"). Listeners have the timeline and charts downloaded for their private reading at home (if they so choose to attempt the full "Bible in a year" program). The principles of selection for what makes the podcast are explicit: their timeline "simplifies the Bible by focusing on fourteen narrative books that tell the story of scripture from beginning to end. It divides the Story into twelve



time periods, like chapters in Salvation History.”<sup>11</sup> The rest of the Bible is then used to supplement the storyline of the fourteen narrative books they have chosen as the backbone. Cavins and Fr. Mike have effectively created their own story-based lectionary for private listening and devotion.

At the beginning of this book, I claimed that Catholics are people of story, imagination, and sacrament. Here we see that the most popular ways to encounter individual Bible reading for Catholics today, even five hundred years after the printing press, are through stories heard on a podcast or a periodical shaped by the liturgical calendar and adorned with classics of art.

*“Bible Study” in Small Groups: Base Communities and Beyond*

In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI delivered the exhortation *Verbum Domini*, which summarized the results of the 2008 synod of Catholic bishops on “the Word of God.” One section of his long decree recommends *lectio divina*, the private, prayerful reading of scripture, as “a fundamental element in the spiritual life of every believer.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the recommendation is immediately qualified by reminding Catholics that private reading is not the “privileged place” for biblical encounter. “One must *avoid the risk of an individualistic approach*, and remember that God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion. . . . While it is a word addressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community, which builds the Church.”<sup>13</sup> What Pope Benedict meant by “community” was a formal worshipping community, gathered around the Eucharist, reading primarily the prescribed biblical texts for Mass and studying them with officially approved catechists. But he also acknowledged what the bishops from around the world—especially the Global South—had been telling him at the synod: “it is good that pastoral activity also favor the growth of *small communities*, formed by families or based in parishes or linked to the different ecclesial movements and new communities, which can help to promote formation, prayer and knowledge of the Bible in accordance with the Church’s faith.”<sup>14</sup>

This may be only one, rather vague sentence about “small communities” of Bible-reading Catholics, but it honors a significant movement of Bible study in what are usually called “base communities,” “basic ecclesial communities,” or “small Christian communities.” Pope Francis, the first pope from Latin America, understands these communities deeply. “Frequently they bring a new evangelizing fervor,” he wrote in 2013,

“and a new capacity for dialogue with the world, whereby the church is renewed.”<sup>15</sup> Most members of these small groups know them by their Spanish or Portuguese name, *comunidad eclesial de base* (CEB), and their story takes us back to Latin America in the 1960s.

One of the most famous base communities was founded in 1966 by Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan priest, and William Agudelo, a Colombian poet, who created a self-sustaining commune at Solentiname, a remote archipelago on the enormous Lake Nicaragua. Over time, they would grow to about one thousand strong, becoming renowned for their cooperative lifestyle and school for the arts. Not only that, they innovated a distinctive style of biblical interpretation.

Every Sunday in Solentiname, instead of a sermon we held a dialogue on the gospel reading. The *campesinos*’ (peasants’) discussions were often more profound than those of many theologians. . . . That is not surprising. The *gospel*, or good news (good news to the poor), was written for them, by people like them. . . . Many of the discussions took place at the church, at the Sunday mass. Others, in a thatched hut we had built across from the church for meetings and shared meals after the mass. . . . One of the best readers (usually a boy or girl) would read aloud the whole passage that we were going to discuss. Then we talked about it, verse by verse.<sup>16</sup>

Cardenal eventually began to make audio recordings of these sermon dialogues on the Gospels, which were later compiled and translated in a multi-volume work of over six hundred pages—resulting in a rare dialogical, peasant biblical commentary of compelling insights and occasional drama. Occurring as they did during the Anastasio Somoza dictatorship, many of the biblical interpretations attended to matters of economic justice and earthly power. The book was banned by the dictatorship, and some of the community joined in armed resistance.

The political context makes the chapter on the Garden of Gethsemane (“In the Olive Grove,” Matt 26:36–56) perhaps the most compelling dialogue of all. The temptations of Jesus’ disciples to retaliate violently against his betrayer (Judas) and those who would unjustly imprison him (Roman imperial soldiers) were deeply felt by the Nicaraguans considering revolution. When Jesus rebukes his disciple with the words “all who fight with the sword will die by the sword” (Matt 26:52), a young man named Felipe retorts sharply: “How are we going to bring down Somoza except

with swords?"<sup>17</sup> A vigorous debate ensues about the possibility of righteous violence: was Jesus commanding total pacifism? Or was this a tactical decision? Was he trying to prevent martyrdom, or bring it about? The group even considers erasing this teaching of Jesus from the Gospels. Then a young writer named Sergio Ramirez quips, "Christ forbade the sword, but not the machine gun." Ramirez would go on to become a key figure in the 1979 revolution and serve as vice president from 1985 to 1990. When the government changed hands later, he was exiled and stripped of his nationality. As for Felipe, he became "a martyr for the revolution, before the triumph," tragically fulfilling the teaching of Jesus that he wanted to erase.<sup>18</sup> Felipe was last seen being chased by government soldiers, while carrying an injured person to safety.

Not every base community has had such a revolutionary spirit, but almost all of them enact what came to be called liberation theology. This is a form of theology that emphasizes resistance to unjust social and economic structures as a requirement of Christian faith and a foretaste of salvation. Linked inextricably to the growth of base communities in Latin America, liberation theology is a profound and thoroughgoing biblical theology. Biblical stories and prophetic exhortations permeate the classics of academic liberation theology, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, which has over four hundred (!) biblical citations.<sup>19</sup> The role of the Bible in base communities and liberation theology has been analyzed well in Brazil and perhaps most of all in Gutiérrez's home country of Peru.<sup>20</sup> While the communities vary from place to place, some common features include: the leadership of laypeople and especially women, democratic organization, the struggle for justice, "the Bible in the hands of the people," and centering the poor as teachers.<sup>21</sup> Based on these features, one might translate *comunidad eclesial de base* into English as "grassroots church community" to express that here ordinary people constitute the church.

Some ethnographic studies of base communities have focused on the role of the Bible, such as *The Call of God: Women Doing Theology in Peru*. Through interviews and observations of women's groups in the *Servicios Educativos El Agustino* (SEA), Jesuit Tom Powers vividly presents the how and why of their Bible reading. The SEA was founded in 1978 to promote justice and community development in the El Agustino district of the city of Lima. Ostensibly a community service organization, it is animated underneath by women's Bible study groups.<sup>22</sup> The women founded these themselves; while approved by their parish priests, these

groups are not managed by priests.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, they come to their Bible reading with their own questions and experiences, which are not the same as those they hear from the pulpit on Sunday.<sup>24</sup> As for many indigenous and colonized peoples, the Bible is double-edged—a source of both domination and liberation. “Their courage permits them to explore texts that are often overlooked in the missionary legacy of their country. In this way the Bible becomes a ‘dangerous’ resource—dangerous in the sense of the recovery and activation of that which many in the church and society would prefer to remain fallow.”<sup>25</sup> The women’s encounter with the biblical (non-prostitute) Mary Magdalene, for example, was especially poignant. Modesta Centano Salazar and Celia Sánchez Rojas discussed how the “distortion of Mary Magdalene’s story had reduced her to a sexual being and diminished the power of a woman’s witness. . . . They related some of the barriers they face simply because they are women. Without bitterness, the women explored the implications of a woman who was going against societal norms and experiencing the diminution of her work and dedication.”<sup>26</sup> Centano Salazar later reflected on the reason the women “spend so much time reflecting on the Bible”: because what goes on in their daily lives “is so frightening that we only have God’s grace to depend on.”<sup>27</sup>

For her part, participant Carmen Fernández connects most closely with the struggles of the Jewish people in the Old Testament. “We come to understand that the presence of God was often experienced most intensely when people, for example the Jews, were having the most trouble. With this idea, we then begin to discuss how this might be possible for us in El Agustino. Ultimately we realize that the poverty in which we live actually allows us to see God more clearly.”<sup>28</sup> Another ethnographer of base communities agrees that “the poor have a sort of sixth sense which enables them to grasp the message of the Bible.”<sup>29</sup> Powers thus concludes his analysis of scripture in the theology of the SEA: “In relating their own experiences to the stories of the Bible, they pursue our oldest means of understanding God—living stories of beginnings filled with hope, tales of failure and setback, narratives filled with faith and joy, as well as suffering and persecution.”<sup>30</sup>

The style of base communities has transferred to other places around the world, even in contexts not faced with such daunting socio-economic struggles. The dialogical reading practices of Latin American base communities are imitated in “Small Christian Communities” (SCCs) or “Christian Life Communities” (CLCs), such as those on North American college campuses.<sup>31</sup> According to a 2021 study of Catholic SCCs in the

United States, 70% of respondents said that their meetings include “reading and discussing Scripture,” and “Bible study” was the most likely reason given for choosing to join an SCC.<sup>32</sup> It is crucial to clarify, though, that most of what Catholics mean by “Bible study” in such North American SCCs is reading and discussing the *lectionary excerpts for the coming Sunday Mass* (see chapters 1–2). “We study the coming Sunday’s scriptures on Monday morning,” said one respondent, “and that gives me a whole week to contemplate them and put them into action before I go to Mass on Sunday.”<sup>33</sup> Yet when asked the open-ended question, “In what ways do you practice your Catholic faith with others outside of the parish or attending Mass?,” only 6% answered something having to do with the Bible. When asked the same regarding their faith practices during the pandemic—when most events of the parish community were paused—the answer was not statistically different (7%). Bible reading in the sense that Protestants mean it remains very rare among Catholics, even among devout Catholics in SCCs.

Wherever group Bible study is practiced, it takes on distinctive features of the cultural and religious context. The recent influence of Pentecostal evangelism in some parts of Latin America has led, for example, to more reading of Paul’s epistles—especially 1 Corinthians and Romans—than occurs in other Catholic communities.<sup>34</sup> There are fascinating contrasts in the pace and goal of the meetings, too. Sociologists have found that Catholic groups of White European heritage have shorter Bible study meetings, which are purpose-driven to get through an agenda. Groups of Latin American heritage have more of an accompaniment or relationship-building model. As one leader who is deeply immersed in “the Hispanic Latino community” recalls, “If we don’t even get to the Bible study that we’re meant to talk about, so be it. We learned about each other.”<sup>35</sup>

In Africa, where SCCs have grown rapidly in recent decades, they seem to be following more of a Latin American model of interaction, while inculturating the Bible in their own ways, too. The Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela saw these communities as “critical to the post-colonial African mission to ‘find the gospel in their own reality,’ rather than just reproduce Western models. [They have] thrived because they integrated biblical study with members’ daily life rhythms and brought African Christians together to celebrate life events such as birth, marriage, sickness, and funerals.”<sup>36</sup> In the Democratic Republic of Congo, base communities have helped Catholicism “to become an indigenous rather than foreign reality.”<sup>37</sup> Whether called base communities, SCCs, or something else, their global reach and “marginal life” on the edges of the Catholic Church “may

well be the pioneer territory where a more biblical Catholic identity is being tried on for size.”<sup>38</sup>

### Biblical Issues in Catholic Doctrine and Ethics

In many important ways, the past fifty years have witnessed historic amicability between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews with regard to the Bible. Scholars of different religious backgrounds—along with those of none at all—often sit around the same tables and debate the best interpretations of ancient texts. There remain, however, a few distinctive Catholic doctrines with which other Christians (and some Catholics) do not agree, and a kind of biblical stalemate has set in. In each of these cases, Catholics have sought guidance from the Bible to settle doctrinal controversies, illuminate ethical gray areas, and inspire the faithful to action. Though the coherence of Catholic biblical methods across these various topics is questionable, modes of reading the Bible for apologetic “prooftexts” must be reckoned with as significant factors for modern Catholic interpretation.

Catholics attempt to find biblical justifications for doctrines about the Virgin Mary, the afterlife, the sacraments, and the authority of priests and the pope. Many of these attempts take the form of apologetics, a term derived from the Greek word for “speaking in defense” of a person or idea. The book *Catholic for a Reason*, edited by Scott Hahn, exemplifies the genre, offering biblical justifications for Catholic doctrines that might be questioned by Protestants or others.<sup>39</sup> (Formerly a Protestant, Hahn converted to Catholicism and became a prominent author and public speaker in apologetics.) Each chapter takes up a criticism made by Protestants and answers it with scriptural citations and interpretations. Can one be saved “by faith alone” (*sola fide*)? Is it permissible to baptize children? Is Jesus *really* present in the Eucharist? Where does the Bible promote a Catholic view of Mary? Why would one call a priest “father,” or even have a priest at all? Why confess sins to him? And finally, can one really defend “the burning truth about purgatory” by using the Bible? On that last one, there is a big catch—the best scriptural defense of purgatory comes from a biblical book *not* in the Protestant canon (2 Macc 12:42–46). Yet *Catholic for a Reason* still makes an impressive effort to explain purgatory through a patchwork of texts about purifying fire, such as 1 Cor 3:10–15 (a “person will be saved, but only as through fire”). Overall, books such as this offer shortcuts to provide the feeling that all Catholic doctrines are biblical



doctrines. But like most shortcuts, they sometimes lead to dead-ends and always miss a lot of the surrounding landscape.

Catholics have had their largest modern challenge in biblical apologetics regarding all-male leadership. While Catholic doctrines rarely change quickly, they do change: consider the shifts on slavery, lending money at interest (usury), political freedom of religion, and the stance toward Judaism.<sup>40</sup> But any notion that gender hierarchies would shift after Vatican II was quashed by Pope Paul VI, who commissioned *Inter Insigniores* (1976) “on the question of admission of women to the ministerial priesthood.”<sup>41</sup> He had previously rejected the recommendations of lay experts on the subject of birth control (*Humanae Vitae*, 1968), and here he doubled down on the all-male priesthood. While the commission makes several valid biblical arguments, it conveniently avoids the foundational fact that there are exactly *zero* followers of Jesus called “priest” in the New Testament. The term and concept at the time meant “one who presides at a sacrifice,” not “one who leads a community.” It would take at least two hundred more years for the concept of “priest” to be regularly applied to a Christian leader. While the commission does acknowledge the women of Paul’s ministry as important co-workers, it conveniently avoids that Priscilla and Lydia were hosts of house-churches (Acts 16:15, 40; Rom 16:5) and that Phoebe was called a “deacon” (*diakonos*, Rom 16:1). While it acknowledges the “surpassing dignity” of Mary, it conveniently avoids mentioning Mary Magdalene at all, the one person who persevered in faith at the cross and the tomb (while Peter was hiding)—and was then sent by the risen Jesus himself as an “apostle to the apostles” (*apostola apostolorum*, in the traditional phrase). While it champions the title “apostle” for the twelve men designated by Jesus as leaders, it avoids Paul’s greeting of Junia, a woman’s name, as “prominent among the apostles” in first-century Rome (Rom 16:7). In short, the apologetic rhetoric of *Inter Insigniores* not only takes biblical shortcuts, but wears blinders, too.

Recent years have seen powerful new engagements with biblical narratives to shape contemporary ethics: Catholic officials have emphasized the dignity of labor and economic justice, the sanctity of human life, the rights of migrants in Catholic borderlands, and creation care for the earth.<sup>42</sup> In 1986, the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued *Economic Justice for All*, a book-length assessment of how Catholic social teaching might better shape the U.S. economy. About 10% of the document is direct biblical interpretation, and those ideas bubble under the surface of its

entirety. At its core, the Bible “castigates not only the worship of idols” per se, but also “manifestations of idolatry, such as the quest for unrestrained power and the desire for great wealth (Isa 40:12–20; 44:1–20; Wis 13:1–14:31; Col 3:5).”<sup>43</sup> Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), on the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death, is one of the most biblically structured texts to ever emerge from the Vatican. Each of its thirty-two sections is introduced by a biblical quotation, and hundreds more are interlaced throughout the argument. While relying heavily on traditional Catholic emphases (the Gospels and Psalms), it also draws substantially from Genesis, Exodus, and Revelation.

The borderlands of the Americas are largely populated by Catholics, and in 2003, the joint bishops’ conferences of the United States and Mexico issued *Strangers No Longer* concerning migration. The document begins from a biblical starting point: the migrating patriarchs and matriarchs of the Old Testament, the founding narrative of the Exodus, the flight of Jesus’ family back to Egypt as refugees from violence, and the later teaching about “the mysterious presence of Jesus in the migrants who frequently lack food and drink and are detained in prison” (Matt 25:35–36).<sup>44</sup> The central role of the Bible is reflected by migrants themselves, as they frequently carry a small copy of the New Testament or the Psalms with them during the harrowing journey through jungle and desert. One mother of five who fled domestic abuse to come to the United States, when asked in 2022 what got her through, simply said: “In prayer, we have a little Bible that we pray as a family.” Then she hastened to add gratitude as well to the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>45</sup>

Pope Francis has continually connected the biblical “cry of the poor” and the migrant to the “cry of the earth”—the “groaning in travail” of all creation (Rom 8:22).<sup>46</sup> In his encyclical *Laudato Si’* and subsequent preaching, he uses the call to stewardship from Genesis 2 as a primary scriptural resource for the development of Catholic social thought, just as John Paul II used Genesis 4 (Cain and Abel) as the cornerstone of *Evangelium Vitae*. When Francis speaks frequently about the “economy that kills” the “integral ecology” of “our common home,” this is not political theory but biblical revelation. “The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world (Gen 2:15). ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving.”<sup>47</sup> In the words of his confidant, the Ghanaian Cardinal Peter

Turkson, “humanity may now have *tilled* too much and *kept* too little, that our relationship with the Creator, with our neighbor, especially the poor, and with the environment has become fundamentally ‘*un-kept*.’”<sup>48</sup> Francis and Turkson go on to recommend radical interventions into our global political and economic order, all rooted in the interpretation of scripture. “Clearly,” Pope Francis concludes, “the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus Catholic engagements with the Bible on matters of doctrine and ethics cannot neatly be labeled as conservative or liberal, literal or spiritual, historicizing or not. They display a variety of interpretive methods. And on all but the question of gender hierarchies in leadership, these official documents of the past fifty years have been respectably honest—and more pastoral than apologetic—in their approaches to biblical interpretation.

### Catholic Biblical Scholarship

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a form of Bible reading emerged in Europe that was distinct from devotional Bible study—and, in some ways, opposed to it. Scholars in central and northern Europe began to read the Bible not in the service of prayer or spirituality, but rather to investigate it with methods attuned to a modern research university. What would it look like to subject the Bible to historical criticism, as one might do with other ancient documents? What might be learned from a literary analysis of these texts, undertaken without regard for their truth claims about the nature of God and human salvation? Would one believe the miraculous tales of crossing the Red Sea or the Resurrection, if one read these accounts in a source other than the Bible? Thus was born the “biblical scholar,” a mostly Protestant category until the mid-twentieth century, when Catholics began to enter the scene. Nowadays there are thousands of biblical scholars around the world, trained in ancient languages and modern interpretive methods, who parse the meaning of obscure Hebrew words in the Old Testament or pore over the complicated Greek papyrus fragments of the New Testament.

Since most biblical scholars are committed to reading the Bible as they would any other ancient source, the results of their investigations do not always please those in the Church. Biblical scholarship does not necessarily build up the spiritual lives of those few who read it. Regarding this peculiar world of modern, university-based biblical scholarship, many Catholics

would likely agree with the grim assessment of twentieth-century monk and intellectual Thomas Merton:

All of us—scholars, simple believers or mere interested readers—stand in immense debt to the specialists who have done so much to really open the Bible to us. Nevertheless, in all the thousands of pages of Biblical scholarship that have been printed in the last hundred years, we must admit, and anyone well-read in the field must agree, that a high proportion of it is an arid, exhausting desert of futile detail which wearies the mind by distracting it from the meaning of the Bible and goes wandering aimlessly through a wilderness of technicalities where all interest withers and expires.<sup>50</sup>

The results of our scholarly labors are an *exhausting desert* which *wearies*, *distracts*, and causes all reader interest to *wither* and *expire*. It is a harsh feeling when one of my favorite spiritual authors excoriates my chosen career. Harsh, but fair.

For his part, professor Stephen Moore chose a different metaphor to describe his experience of training to become a biblical scholar: “By the end of my first year I had learned to use a knife, although not a table knife. I had learned not to devour the book, nor even the Word, to internalize them, to become one with them. Instead I had learned to dissect the book and the Word.”<sup>51</sup> A scholar dissects the Word with a scalpel in a library carrel. Why does one dissect? One does so to learn about the inner workings of something, to analyze it for the sake of knowledge. Of course, the dissection metaphor presumes that the object itself is already dead—desiccated and expired. On the contrary, a Small Christian Community gathers around a table at home to devour the Word, to be nourished by a story or a psalm. What use do they have for the scalpel?

Such criticisms are well-taken. And yet, biblical scholarship has had a modest role to play in Catholic life. In the Bible used by that Small Christian Community, there are likely introductions to the texts, footnotes about obscure words, or some other reading guides—mostly written by Catholic biblical scholars and those trained by them. There might be commentary excerpts from Catholic devotional magazines, whose editors have drawn from the fruits of scholarly labor. There might be a parishioner volunteering to prepare teenagers for Confirmation, who has borrowed historical works from the pastor’s library to aid her teaching. Biblical

scholarship rarely appears in the foreground of the Catholic picture, but it has sometimes subtly offered a foundation or frame for the whole scene.

Now, finally, we will cover what some readers of this book—seeing it appear with a university press by an author from academia—might have assumed the entire book is about. When Catholics *do* actually read the text of the Bible in a *studious manner*, how do they proceed and how should they interpret? A brief historical narrative will chart Catholic translations of the Bible and shifting Catholic attitudes toward scholarly approaches to the Bible, those methods first developed by Protestant readers and only grudgingly adopted by Catholic officials. Special attention will be given to the twentieth century, when a pope officially endorsed the modern discipline of “biblical studies,” leading to other magisterial pronouncements which adjudicate between various methods of biblical interpretation. Yet despite such endorsements from on high, it is difficult to assess whether official teachings about the Bible have been “received” by the Catholic church at large—whether the *sensus fidelium* (the sense of the faithful) aligns with the *magisterium* (the official doctrines of the church).

### *Translation as Biblical Scholarship*

Biblical scholarship begins with translation. In that sense, there have been biblical scholars for over two thousand years, since the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. The first biblical scholar confidently claimed by the Catholic tradition is Jerome, the fourth-century man of letters from northern Italy who studied in Rome, migrated to Bethlehem, mastered both Hebrew and Greek, compiled multiple divergent manuscripts of biblical texts, and—after decades of meticulous work—produced translations into the regular Latin language of the western parts of the Roman Empire. Called the Vulgate (for the “popular” or “common” language), Jerome’s translation would dominate Western Europe for a thousand years. Catholics consider Jerome the patron saint of translators and biblical scholarship.

On the eve of the Reformation, the Dutch polymath and humanist Erasmus made a sizable crack in the Vulgate’s foundation. Following the Renaissance’s spirit of *ad fontes* (a return “to the sources” of knowledge), Erasmus did his own analysis of available biblical manuscripts and in 1516 published a new translation of the New Testament into updated Latin. Though undoubtedly an intrepid intellectual and free-thinker, the Catholic Erasmus was not intending to fan the flames of church reform and indeed had dedicated his translation to the pope. But his fellow monk

and scholar, Martin Luther, used Erasmus' new Latin translation as the basis for Luther's own translation of the Bible into German. Just one year after Erasmus cracked the foundation, Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the church door.

The proliferation of Bible translations tracks with the fracturing stories of the Reformation and eventually with the colonial exploits of Catholics and Protestants beyond Europe.<sup>52</sup> An English version of the Catholic Bible soon followed, called the Douay-Rheims (1582–1610), completed around the same time as the King James Version (Protestant England's "Authorized Version," 1604–11). Some arguments over such biblical translations have relevance for Christian doctrinal disputes: Is a Christian gathering called a church, an assembly, a congregation, a community? Are its leaders presbyters, priests, elders? Did Paul call Phoebe a deacon, a minister, a servant? Was Mary full of grace or highly favored? Did she conceive as a virgin or as a young woman? Occasionally such metaphorical Bible conflicts even sparked real ones, as in the "Bible riots" of the mid-1800s. Anti-Catholic sentiment had spread among Protestants in the United States, based on the influx of immigrants from Ireland and the sudden appearance of nuns and priests seemingly everywhere. Catholic schools were being founded all over the eastern seaboard and midwestern states. Rumors about deviance behind cloistered walls led to the mob burning of a convent in Massachusetts, a state where just fifty years earlier John Adams had said a Catholic was as rare of a sighting as "a comet or an earthquake."<sup>53</sup> Catholics were not totally innocent: a priest in upstate New York burned the copies of the King James Bible that had been distributed to Catholics by newfangled Protestant "Bible societies."<sup>54</sup>

Among these conflicts, Philadelphia's "Bible Riots" in 1844 proved especially incendiary. Over twenty people were killed and hundreds injured in clashes about Catholic schoolchildren being required to read from (Protestant) Bibles. Ethnic conflict amid a massive wave of immigration is, of course, the deepest cause of the riots.<sup>55</sup> But "sources at the time pointed to a two year-long controversy over the use of Bibles in public schools as the catalyst for the riots in Philadelphia."<sup>56</sup> The Catholic bishop had simply requested that Catholic students be permitted to read from the Douay-Rheims translation or be excused from Bible reading. But different beliefs about the texts and translations of the Bible—and about who are its authorized interpreters—led to the expression of nativism through this particular fight. Protestant faith that came by scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) needed



to be kept pure from Catholic influence. And Catholics did not want their children forced to read a different tradition's Bible in public school. The resulting riots were the "first large-scale urban unrest in American history" and foreshadowed near-constant conflict about the role of religion in U.S. public schools.<sup>57</sup>

Modern Catholics finally emerged as Bible scholars in their own right in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (about which see later in this chapter), which led to the two major Catholic translations of the Bible into English that replaced Douay-Rheims and are still in use today. A French team based at *L'École Biblique* in Jerusalem produced *La Bible de Jérusalem* (1956), which was translated into English (1966) and became a standard Catholic Bible in most English-speaking countries. (J. R. R. Tolkien was part of that translation team, just after he had finished *The Lord of the Rings*.) In the United States, the Catholic Biblical Association of America published the *New American Bible* (1970), which has been used in U.S. Catholic liturgy ever since.

Catholic biblical scholars remain involved in criticizing and updating translations (while trying to avoid riots). These days, Catholics have assisted on translations of the Protestant *New Revised Standard Version*, while prominent Protestant scholars collaborated on the *New American Bible*.<sup>58</sup> Why do we continue to translate and re-translate? Occasionally our knowledge advances about the meaning of an ancient word or phrase. A few years ago I was a member of the revision team for the New Testament of the *New American Bible*. In one instance, based on my published research in textual and artistic history, I vigorously argued for the re-translation of the Greek word *lampas* from "lamp" to "torch" in one of Jesus' parables (Matt 25:1–13). We had many meetings about such minutiae but some decisions of substance, too. The question of gendered nouns and pronouns frequently divides translators. Many inclusive-language versions have been produced regarding the human side of the line—"brothers and sisters"—but the appropriateness of masculine language for the divine has not been settled. Sometimes changes in the target language require new translations. Despite the beauty of "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" in Psalm 23, the word "want" in English no longer normally means what it meant in 1611 (to lack). References to "king" and "kingdom" are also interrogated, as to whether they have positive connotations in modern English—and if so, for which audiences? On a more mundane level, my very first comment to the revision team was that the noun "thong"—at least in contemporary

U.S. English—no longer means “strap” (Mark 1:7). If you don’t know what it means now, ask someone younger than you or—if you dare—search for it online.

In the Catholic tradition, the scholars rarely get the final say. Our team of translators was ecclesiastically vetted by U.S. Catholic bishops and included many priests and nuns, but the revisions we proposed remain under review by the bishops’ conference (because the *New American Bible* is used in U.S. Catholic liturgy). Even today, with the Vulgate receding to the distant past and Catholic scholars excelling in every branch of biblical studies, official Catholic attitudes toward biblical scholarship have been slow to warm up to our contributions. It seems that, as historian of biblical manuscripts Christopher de Hamel has cleverly noted, a biblical translation is never more popular than when it has become archaic and is about to be replaced. By the time of the late Middle Ages, the period when the Vulgate’s supporters “defended it most fanatically,” its Latin version had become “obsolete.”<sup>59</sup>

### *Popes and Professors in the Pivotal Twentieth Century*

Many Catholic biblical scholars currently take their guidance from secular styles of academic inquiry or from interpretive methods honed originally by Protestant scholars. Yet for those interested, there are several substantive documents issued by various Vatican offices about how to interpret the Bible.<sup>60</sup> The first official Catholic teaching of the magisterium to respond to modern biblical scholarship was *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), an encyclical of Pope Leo XIII.<sup>61</sup> An encyclical is a letter intended to be “circulated” among a large group of recipients—in this case, the bishops and the church at large. (In the New Testament, 1 Peter is a kind of encyclical.) During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the combination of rationalist biblical criticism by Protestants (e.g., did Israelites really cross the Red Sea?) and scientific discoveries about the natural world (e.g., evolution) had challenged the authority of scripture. The central topics that animated *Providentissimus Deus* were inerrancy, inspiration, and advancements in the sciences and history.

The Catholic understanding of scripture at the time considered divine inspiration of inerrant doctrines to take the form of propositional truth claims. There was not yet sensitivity to different literary genres within the Bible, much less to their historical contexts. The encyclical rejected Protestant-style biblical scholarship as “an inept method, dignified by the

name of ‘higher criticism,’” though the pope did promote the teaching of “ancient Oriental languages” to supplement the “genuine” version of the Vulgate. Relying on Augustine and Aquinas, Pope Leo denied in principle “any real discrepancy between the theologian and the physicist.” Yet since the entire Bible was written “at the dictation of the Holy Spirit,” he also claimed “nothing can be proved either by physical science or archaeology which can really contradict the Scriptures.”

The overall argument of the encyclical is less about the *how* of biblical interpretation and more about the *who*. Biblical truth “can nowhere be found incorrupt outside” of the Catholic Church. Others merely “gnaw at the bark of the Sacred Scripture and never attain its pith.” The tone is defensive and polemical, using metaphors of warfare and accusations of heresy. Rationalists were placed in a lineage with Protestants, Gnostics, and other past heretics. Nonetheless, this proposed defense of the Catholic approach to scripture required better equipped scholars and teachers, and so the study of scripture was encouraged anew at seminaries and other Catholic academic institutions. *Providentissimus Deus* was thus an important catalyst for modern biblical criticism in the Roman Catholic Church, even if primarily for the purpose of apologetics.

At the exact same time as this encyclical was warning Catholics about modern biblical scholarship, a pioneering Dominican priest named Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855–1938) was setting the course for its future. Leaving his homeland of France for Jerusalem, Lagrange there founded *L'École Biblique* in 1890 (the first Catholic “Biblical School”) and its scholarly journal, the *Révue Biblique*, in 1892. Both the school and the publication became international leaders in biblical studies, and not only for Catholics. Thus there were different currents at work during Catholicism’s “modernist crisis.” Though Lagrange was occasionally marginalized for his open-minded, scientific stance (including a temporary shutdown of the *École* and the *Révue* in 1912), his Catholic fidelity was ultimately vindicated by Vatican officials. The *École* he established—still today the best library for biblical studies in Jerusalem—created more openness for biblical scholarship in the Catholic ranks. Fifty years later, with the papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), the door would be opened much wider.

Once as a graduate student I had the chance to meet Jaroslav Pelikan (1923–2006), the esteemed church historian, over lunch. When he found out that I was both Catholic and a biblical scholar—a very rare combination for someone of his generation—he asked me what I had hanging

over the desk where I worked. I didn't know what he was getting at, but I described the various items on my wall. "Well that's fine," he retorted, "but what you *should* have is a framed copy of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*! It's your Magna Carta!" It makes sense that the document seemed so relevant still to him, as a "Magna Carta" declaring the freedom of the Catholic to engage in professional biblical studies. Prof. Pelikan had come of age at a time when Catholic biblical scholars were almost non-existent in the United States, and he was a seminary student when the 1943 encyclical was issued. His long career had corresponded exactly to the growth of biblical scholarship in the Catholic Church.

*Divino Afflante Spiritu* was pitched to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the previous biblical encyclical, but the content and tone were markedly different. Pope Pius XII exhorts Catholic scholars to use historical, archaeological, philological, and literary methods to interpret the Bible. While matters of theology and doctrine remain paramount, there is nothing to fear from modes of secular inquiry. A key passage, the kind that Prof. Pelikan might have had in mind, states: "Let the interpreter then, with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research, endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed."<sup>62</sup> This single sentence confirms the validity of the three main methods of biblical studies at the time: source criticism, which attempts to deduce strata of oral and written sources behind a biblical text; historical criticism, which attempts to establish the historical contexts of biblical authors and audiences; and literary criticism, which analyzes the function of distinct genres of narrative, poetry, law, wisdom literature, and so on. Other parts of the encyclical even recommend textual criticism, which evaluates the credibility of different biblical manuscripts, many of which had been only recently discovered in the sands of Egypt or monastery libraries of the Mediterranean world. To decide whether such new discoveries should influence the published texts of scripture is a "great and praiseworthy" science.<sup>63</sup>

To be clear, the pope was not granting full freedom for Catholic scholars to follow their research wherever it goes; there were still explicitly stated directives about the role of prayer and the boundaries of Catholic doctrine. But for those "biblical scholars"—a term even used once by the encyclical—who are "devoted" to the Church, the pope offers "congratulations that they have been chosen and called to so sublime an office."<sup>64</sup> This is a seismic

shift in tone from the “crisis” of fifty years prior. With the freedom to pursue such a sublime office, waves of Catholic biblical scholars rose in the following decades, swelled by the ranks of Catholic scholar priests in the 1950s–60s (and the ranks of scholar ex-priests in the 1970s–80s), and eventually Catholic sisters and laypeople.

Amid the twentieth-century growth in biblical studies, the most definitive statement on the Bible in the Catholic tradition came during Vatican II (1962–65). Having been issued by the convened council of bishops, the document *Dei Verbum* effectively summarized Catholic doctrine on the “Word of God” and is the only magisterial document about the Bible carrying more authority than the biblical encyclicals. On the whole, the relatively short text is more of a framing endorsement of attitudes toward the Bible than a program of interpretation. But in a mid-century Catholic context largely devoid of Bible reading, *any* decree about the Bible was a significant outcome of the council. The document supports many of the principles of modern biblical scholarship: for example, it acknowledges that oral traditions circulated prior to the written texts; and it concurs that translation from Hebrew and Greek is best, even as the Latin Vulgate and diverse Middle Eastern versions remain honored. *Dei Verbum*’s biggest difference with mainstream biblical scholarship was its perspective on the Old Testament, which it described as “provisional,” “planning,” “preparing,” and “designed above all to prepare.”<sup>65</sup> The books of the Old Testament are indeed regarded as very positive, revealing “a vivid sense of God” and “sound wisdom on human life, as well as a wonderful treasury of prayers.” But they are still presented primarily as preparatory and typological (a tone that will shift in Vatican documents from later decades).

The council ratified a key methodological principle of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*: that a scholar should seek the authorial intentions of the Bible’s various human authors.

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to “literary forms.” For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. . . . For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.<sup>66</sup>

This statement sounds self-evident to modern ears, but it had taken a very long time for the Catholic Church to admit the full humanity of the writers of biblical texts. Scripture had often been treated as a set of proclaimed oracles, disembodied, with emphasis on inspiration by the Holy Spirit. These new endorsements of historical and literary criticism—even the “everyday” context of the original authors—cohered with some aspects of secular biblical studies. However, *Dei Verbum* is also clear about the supervisory role of the Church: “sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others.”<sup>67</sup> Thus the terms had been set for dialogue about the Bible with Protestants and Jews, but the council was not wishy-washy about the source of ultimate interpretive authority. Overall, *Dei Verbum* continues the exhortations of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, desiring fuller accessibility of the scriptures and interpretive methods for all Catholics, from the bishops to the laity, while signaling some openness to scholarly conversations with non-Catholics.

There’s an old saying that the Catholic Church “thinks in centuries.” With respect to official documents on biblical interpretation, it’s precisely true. One hundred years after *Providentissimus Deus*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC)—a Vatican-appointed international committee of biblical scholars—issued *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. While *Dei Verbum* may be the most authoritative document, this 1993 PBC document is the most detailed and programmatic. But before summarizing its content, let us note how Catholics had really come into their own as biblical scholars during the years since their Magna Carta.<sup>68</sup> In the United States, the Catholic Biblical Association had been editing *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* alongside its well-respected *New American Bible* translation (1970). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968) and its updated edition (1990) distilled scholarship into short articles for Catholic preachers and students. The excavation and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the most significant twentieth-century archaeological discovery relating to the Bible, was led by Roland de Vaux, a Catholic priest and the director of *L’École Biblique*. Fr. Raymond Brown, among the first to use the freedom afforded by *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, authored impressive biblical commentaries used widely by Protestants and earned a tenured professorship of biblical studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York, a historically Protestant institution. Other publications such as *The Catholic*



*Study Bible* (1990), a landmark of scholarship for students and lay readers, were on par with the best study Bibles available in English.<sup>69</sup> And the flagship scholarly conference, the Society of Biblical Literature, which had only one Catholic president during its first one hundred years, suddenly elected four Catholics as president between 1977 and 1987, including the first female president of the society, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

Into this vibrant context, the PBC issued its centenary guide for Catholic biblical interpretation. Introduced by both Pope John Paul II and future Pope Benedict XVI, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* had magisterial heft to accompany its authoritative title. At some thirty thousand words, it is really a short book of Catholic biblical hermeneutics. Intended for a global audience, the text encourages the renewed “actualization” of biblical meaning for each new generation and the “inculturation” of interpretation in diverse places. With respect to university-based biblical scholarship, it first presents and largely endorses the mainstream methods of Protestant and secular biblical studies, extending the arguments of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. It soberly catalogs the benefits and limitations of approaches borrowed from the social sciences of sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology. It stops short of full support for liberation theology or feminist criticism, after naming their many positive contributions. Regarding the former, the commission was concerned with the materialist commitments of some Marxist readers who deny the spiritual core of the biblical witness. On the latter, the authors do applaud how feminist readers “help to unmask and correct certain commonly accepted interpretations which were tendentious and sought to justify the male domination of women.”<sup>70</sup> Yet they also question the emphasis on power relationships in the name of feminist resistance. They reiterate that the proper form of power exerted by a Christian is neither domination nor resistance, but service to others. On this last point, the published text fascinatingly gives the reader a tiny glimpse of dissent behind its multi-authored format: a footnote records that the final paragraph critical of feminism received only eleven votes out of nineteen members of the commission. As the number of feminist Catholic scholars (both women and men) had been growing ever stronger at that time, consensus on the role of feminist hermeneutics was out of reach.

There was full-throated and total consensus, however, on the “-ism” that receives the harshest treatment by far: fundamentalist interpretation is forbidden and highlighted as uniquely dangerous. By “fundamentalist,”

they mean “a naively literalist” approach that avoids historical context, denies development over time, and “rejects all questioning” and research.<sup>71</sup> Fundamentalist readers tend “to ignore or deny the problems presented by the biblical text in its original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek form” and fail “to take the necessary account of the possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning.” Moreover, fundamentalism rejects advances in scientific understanding of the cosmos and often reinforces prejudices like racism. It is “a form of private interpretation” that splits off “the Bible from the Tradition,” and is thus “anti-Church.” There is virtually nothing positive in the whole diatribe against fundamentalism, which also ends with a bang:

The fundamentalist approach is dangerous, for it is attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problems of life. It can deceive these people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to each and every problem. Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations.<sup>72</sup>

One can't really find stronger terms by which to denounce a method of Bible reading: dangerous, illusory, false, and suicidal for one's intellect. In one century, official church documents had come a long way beyond the fears of the modernist crisis.

Aside from the features mentioned thus far, arguably the biggest change in Catholic biblical interpretation during the twentieth century was its attitude toward Judaism.<sup>73</sup> The Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (1965) effectively reset the relationship between Catholics and Jews, stating that “God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues” (relying on the language of Rom 11:29).<sup>74</sup> The conciliar document rejects the centuries-old “teaching of contempt” for Judaism and “decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” Corresponding to this, Catholic liturgy also changed negative language about Judaism, especially during the annual prayer “for the Jewish people” on Good Friday.

In subsequent decades, Catholic biblical scholars began regularly referring to Jesus as a Jew, along with all of his followers. The integration of Jewish scholars and Jewish studies into Catholic theology departments at the end of the twentieth century, especially in North America, deepened the changes of attitude. The long pontificate of John Paul II, who was profoundly affected by the attempted extermination of the Jewish people in his native Poland, meant that the seeds planted during Vatican II had time to germinate. In 2000, he became the first pope to visit the Holy Land on a pilgrimage, and his moving prayer at the Western Wall—the most sacred site for the Jewish people—ratified how much the Catholic perspective had changed. “God of our fathers,” he said, “you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.”<sup>75</sup> Expressing fraternal unity, he also asked for forgiveness for Catholic anti-Semitism in the past and referred to the Jewish covenant as a living tradition, in the present tense.

The very next year, a new document by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), expanded Catholic reflection on Judaism as a living tradition that shares fundamental theological themes with Christianity.

Regarding the relationship of the two testaments, the document states: “the early Christians were conscious of being in profound continuity with the covenant plan manifested and realized by the God of Israel in the Old Testament. Israel continues to be in a covenant relationship with God, because the covenant-promise is definitive and cannot be abolished.”<sup>76</sup> Such openness to the living Jewish covenant requires a modified understanding of prophecy and fulfillment, a version of Christian doctrine which re-emphasizes its *unfulfilled* aspect—the *not yet* in tension with the *already*. Here the change from *Dei Verbum* is most clear. The Old Testament is not only preparatory or predictive. The texts of the Jewish Bible, “including those which later were read as messianic prophecies, already had an immediate import and meaning for their contemporaries before attaining a fuller meaning for future hearers.”<sup>77</sup> Thus was confirmed one of the biggest changes in the long history of Catholic theology: the restored relationship between Catholics and Jews mirrored the restored continuities of two biblical testaments. “Testament,” after all, is another word for “covenant.”

### Scholarship as Cornerstone

In the twenty-first century, building upon a strong twentieth-century foundation, Catholic biblical scholarship has been thriving. Modern biblical studies has continued to make a scholarly impact at many Catholic research universities, such as KU Leuven (Belgium), Notre Dame (United States), the Pontifical Biblical Institute (Italy), and many Jesuit institutions (e.g., Pontifical Gregorian, Fordham, Boston College). Catholics have occupied prominent positions in the non-sectarian Society of Biblical Literature, with the presidency having been held this century by John J. Collins, Harold Attridge, John Dominic Crossan, and Carolyn Osiek.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, Adela Yarbro Collins, Hans-Josef Klauck, Sean Freyne, and Margaret Mitchell have been president of *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, a distinguished European scholarly society, while academic biblical studies from the Catholic universities of South America has recently been finding its voice on other continents. From top positions at Catholic theology departments or seminaries, Daniel Harrington, Pheme Perkins, John P. Meier, and many others have had a global influence. A more surprising shift has occurred in traditionally Protestant seminaries in the United States that hired Catholics as professors of Bible, such as Luke Timothy Johnson (Emory), Carolyn Osiek (Brite), and several at Yale Divinity School (including Attridge as dean). Catholic biblical scholars have also attained globally distinguished professorships (e.g., Candida Moss as the Cadbury Chair at Birmingham and elected member of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences) and have had leading editorial responsibilities for bestselling study Bibles (e.g., Attridge for the *HarperCollins Study Bible*) or commentary series (e.g., Barbara Reid for the *Wisdom* commentary series). Finally, in 2023, when the Society of Biblical Literature launched its revised edition of the *HarperCollins Study Bible* as *The SBL Study Bible*, the contributor list for its commentaries and introductions is full of Catholic scholars—with no sense of that being unusual. The current state of Catholic biblical scholarship is as strong as Luke Timothy Johnson and William Kurz had hoped when they authored *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship* at the turn of the century.<sup>79</sup> The century-old Catholic “crisis” of biblical studies has vanished.

Even with so many Catholic biblical scholars at the forefront of the field, much of the content of this chapter about Catholic hermeneutics remains in the background. I’ll conclude by offering my own confession of ignorance. While I was working on this book, I was contacted to write

an encyclopedia entry about *Providentissimus Deus*, that 1893 papal encyclical about biblical studies. I agreed to write the short entry, but I will be honest: at the time of the invitation, I could not remember the last time I had read the actual document. That experience reminded me of the widely circulated story about Al Smith, who in 1932 was the first Catholic to have a major party nomination for president in the United States. Some with anti-Catholic bias were concerned that he, because a Catholic, would take orders from the Vatican. So on one occasion he was asked what he thought about the pope's latest encyclical. According to reports, he was genuinely confused by the question and replied, "What's an encyclical?"

I recount this story not to say that magisterial guidance is unimportant, but to emphasize that the second half of this chapter is important in a very particular way and, if we're honest, only to a small number of people. Biblical scholarship and official Vatican documents about how Catholics should read the Bible may be foundational, but they are rarely inspected—like a cornerstone of a large cathedral. To be sure, it's a fundamental stone, dedicated and inscribed with meaningful words by church officials. But hardly anyone looks at it. The vast majority of people just walk through the church door, where the Bible is present through proclamation, art, and prayer.

## Conclusion

### The Annunciation as Catholic Biblical Encounter

THERE IS A STORY THAT appears in only one of the Gospels and requires not much more than one minute to read aloud. It recounts a private experience of a frightened young woman in a rural village considered irrelevant in its own day.

A one-woman, one-minute story told only in one biblical source.

Yet a Catholic cannot go to Mass without hearing it every year. The rosary is nothing without it. You cannot visit a major art museum without seeing it. For many centuries, one could not walk through a European town without hearing bells that summoned prayers drawn from its words. From the papal balcony at the Vatican to a peasant hut in Nicaragua, the story has been told and retold in search of its meaning. It is by far the most famous scene of the most famous woman from the world's largest religion. It has influenced the very form of femininity itself.

*The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God*



*will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” And the angel said to her in reply, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.*

*Luke 1:26–38*

Since the Bible is the most influential book in history and the Catholic Church is the largest and most diverse human organization, any attempt to summarize “how Catholics encounter the Bible” is a difficult assignment. (Hopefully not a fool’s errand!) And it would certainly be foolish in this brief conclusion to try to summarize the summary. Instead, let us recapitulate the chapters of this book by giving them flesh—an incarnation, if you will—through the life of one potent story. I chose the Annunciation because it is the most overrepresented biblical story in Catholic history and imagination, with an outsized influence on rituals, beliefs, and ethics. It embodies how Catholic traditions can use a few verses to refract, like a prism, manifold meanings in prayer, imagination, and doctrine. When we look at the many afterlives of this short story, we see that the Catholic tradition is indeed full of the Bible.

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This book began with the contexts of worship and prayer, and there the Annunciation resounds strongly as a Catholic biblical encounter. It is among the small number of stories that Catholics attending Mass on Sundays and major holy days hear every single year, as part of the canon (annual proclamation) within the canon (of the three-year lectionary) within the canon (of the Bible). Besides its appearance on a Sunday of Advent, it is also prescribed for the feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8, a holy day of obligation), the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12, a major holiday for hundreds of millions of Catholics), and its own solemnity of the Annunciation (March 25).<sup>1</sup> Extending the story a few verses to include Mary’s Visitation to Elizabeth and Mary’s song of prayer, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), would bring in three more annual occurrences

during Mass and also the prayer of the Magnificat at daily Vespers (evening prayer), for those who participate.

The Annunciation echoes many stories of angelic visitors and miraculous pregnancies from ancient Israel, and thus it exemplifies the typological interpretation of the Old Testament through the Gospel. Divine callings visit women such as Hagar and Samson's mother, in addition to Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.<sup>2</sup> Surprising fertility delights Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah. The prayer that Hannah sings in response to bearing her son Samuel (1 Sam 2:1–10) was undeniably a template for Mary's Magnificat. When I have had the privilege of doing interreligious study of biblical texts in Jewish-Christian dialogue, I have noted how much the opening of Luke appeals to Jewish readers of the New Testament. Essentially "a prophetic vocation story of a Jewish girl and her God, set within the traditions of her people struggling for freedom," the Annunciation scenes portray the continuity of God's interactions with humanity through the Old and New Testaments.<sup>3</sup>

Outside of the proclamations and interpretations at Mass, the Annunciation gets even more airtime through popular prayers and devotions. The Catholic prayer *par excellence*, the rosary, takes its first line from Gabriel's greeting to Mary ("Hail Mary . . .") and the second line from Elizabeth's response to Mary (during the subsequent Visitation). The Annunciation is also the first mystery of the rosary, and so anyone who even begins to pray the rosary encounters the story through biblical visualization and meditative recitation. The prayer of the Angelus, signaled by the ringing of bells to rouse awareness, is also more than a reference to the story of the Annunciation. By interrupting people in whatever task they're doing to invite them into a divine encounter, the Angelus prayer actually manifests what it describes: the bells interrupt to spur people to pray with a text about a divine interruption.

The Latin American tradition of *Las Posadas* celebrates the Annunciation along with the Nativity. Occurring over the nine days leading up to Christmas—around the same time as the story is included in the lectionary near the end of Advent—the house-to-house liturgical drama ritually enacts Mary's search for a temporary dwelling to give birth, just as the Word of God sought a temporary dwelling on earth. It is a "festival of acceptance," in which the willingness of Mary to accept the unexpected pregnancy is imitated by the willingness of each night's *posada* to welcome unexpected visitors.<sup>4</sup> Many of the *villancicos* (seasonal songs for *Las Posadas*, like

Christmas carols) put the biblical story on the lips of the participants, even though they are not carrying Bibles or any printed text at all. Some of the earliest attested Spanish *villancicos* in New Spain (modern Mexico) express devotional theology through the Annunciation. One sixteenth-century song imagines Mary typologically as the New Eve: "The first married woman, she and her husband have brought in God to a poor inn (*pobre posada*) because they had eaten the forbidden fruit."<sup>5</sup> Thus the medieval trope of disobedient *Eva* reversed by Mary's obedience to the "*Ave*," captured so well by the musical chant *Ave Maris Stella*, was brought to Latin America and expressed through new rituals of the Annunciation. Yet prayer with the Annunciation does not need to mean obedience or submissiveness. Devotees of Our Lady of Guadalupe, for instance, also find inspiration in the story "to move beyond the limits of their socially constructed images of themselves . . . as a force that moves women to transgress subjugation."<sup>6</sup>

Through the visual arts, even non-Catholics have encountered the biblical Annunciation. If all the examples from around the world were collated, representations of this one scene would outnumber all other images of Mary combined.<sup>7</sup> Yet no one form of the scene predominates. The text does not describe a setting besides "Nazareth," and so visual artists since late antiquity have used their creativity formed by biblical knowledge and surrounding cultures.<sup>8</sup> Was she at home? At the Jerusalem Temple? In a cave? Somewhere else? Often Gabriel surprises her while drawing water from a well; other examples find her weaving. Both activities of quotidian work get spun out through centuries of allegories and homilies. Each way of imagining Mary's activity (or passivity) had a profound, centuries-long impact on viewers' interpretation of her and, in turn, of archetypes of femininity. By the late medieval period, she is usually indoors, perhaps reading a book, as if searching for prophetic origins of her mystical experience. Painters began to emphasize the distance between Gabriel and Mary: in between them might stand an open door or a glass window.<sup>9</sup> Other times they inhabit opposite margins of a biblical manuscript's page, the Word of God hovering between them in two senses. The chasm between the eternal and the present, the transcendent and the immanent, must be crossed. The artistic space also implies a temporal pause—her acceptance was not immediate. The visual space gives time for her contemplation, her decision, her *fiat*.<sup>10</sup>

From late antiquity to the present, Catholic pilgrims have prayed the Annunciation with their feet and knees in Nazareth. Included in the *locus sanctus* cycle of holy places from at least the sixth century, the Annunciation appears artistically on all manner of pilgrimage artifacts: flasks, rings, censers,

reliquaries, and more. Nazareth is populated today by mostly Christians and Muslims, and they share the story of the Annunciation—it is one of the only biblical stories to be recounted in the Qur'an.<sup>11</sup> The current pilgrimage church, the Basilica of the Annunciation, is built over a traditional pilgrimage site (though there were competing sites already in late antiquity). The basilica's grotto cave marks the spot for Catholics to venerate, and a Latin inscription invokes the Incarnation of John alongside the Annunciation of Luke, just as the Angelus prayer has done for centuries.<sup>12</sup> *Verbum caro hic factum est*, it says, adding a word to John's famous line. "The Word was made flesh *here*."

A world away in the *Musée d'Orsay* of cosmopolitan Paris, the impressionist museum exhibits another kind of *here*, where the Annunciation and Incarnation meet in prayer. The painting *L'Angélus* by Jean-François Millet depicts two French peasant farmers, slightly bowed in prayer, at the end of their day's work (Figure 9.1). A meager basket of harvested potatoes rests at their feet. The end of their day is marked not only by the sunset on the



FIGURE 9.1 Jean-François Millet, *L'Angélus*, oil on canvas, 1857–59, France. Musée d'Orsay RF1877, Paris. Photograph by Samuel Austin. Wikimedia Commons.

western horizon, but also by the tolling bells one can hear from the distant church tower. The great distance between the praying woman in the foreground and the heavenly spire of the background recalls the lineage of Annunciation artists who bridge the heavenly and the earthly through Mary. The painter, though not devoutly religious himself, transmitted the Catholic biblical tradition of the Annunciation through an imagination reminiscent of his childhood. "I remembered that my grandmother," Millet recounted, "hearing the church bell ringing while we were working in the fields, always made us stop work to say the Angelus prayer."<sup>13</sup> Apparently such memories were not unique to him, as the painting became widely reproduced in twentieth-century France, iconic perhaps of nostalgia for a fading French Catholic culture—or a remaining glimmer of faith.

The worlds of Catholic fiction and song are likewise replete with the Annunciation. Dante's rewritten scripture fashions this scene at the first "terrace" of purgation of the soul, as a symbol of the ultimate virtue of humility which overturns the foundational sin of pride. Passing through the gates of Purgatory, he beholds a marble wall of relief sculptures on the terrace of pride. Gabriel was "so truly graven there in a gracious attitude that it did not seem a silent image. One would have sworn he said: '*Ave*,' for she was imaged there who turned the key to open the supreme love. And in her bearing she had this word imprinted: '*Ecce ancilla Dei*,' as clearly as a figure is stamped in wax."<sup>14</sup> Dante portrays the essential words of their dialogue as he had seen them on countless examples from the visual arts. Just as the Annunciation is the first mystery of the rosary, it was Dante's first step up the mountain of Purgatory.

The protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" had a long way to go up that mountain. Full of self-righteousness, ignorant of her pride, she had not even entered the gates of penitence until she met a young woman named "Mary Grace." When one is caught up in their own trifles, the shock of unexpected divine revelation hits hard. Mary of the Annunciation is often pictured reading a large book at the moment of revelation; here Mary Grace throws the book right at a soul in need of a prophetic word. But will the recipient be humble enough to accept the message? O'Connor clears plenty of space for the contemplation, the ruminating, the decision. The protagonist's acceptance would not be immediate—if it will come at all. Like one of Jesus' parables, O'Connor invites the reader into the same existential choice.

As for the musical traditions of Catholicism, there are innumerable settings of the divine bond between Mary and Jesus, from ancient chants to modern rock. Anyone raised on the rosary, like Bruce Springsteen, thinks little of Joseph's parental role; but singing of Jesus as Mary's son comes naturally. Throughout the tradition, the Annunciation has been central to many influential Gregorian chants, such as *Ave Maris Stella*, *Ave Regina Caelorum*, and *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. Like many works of Annunciation art, *Alma Redemptoris Mater* expresses the imagery of a "door" or "gate" connecting heaven and earth (*caeli porta*). The poem centers the paradoxical mystery of Mary as "mother of God," the one who "bore your holy Creator, while nature marveled," remaining a virgin "both before and after the *Ave*." In Latin America, as early as the sixteenth century, new Marian hymns inspired by the Annunciation were composed in indigenous languages of Mexico and Peru.<sup>15</sup> In our own day, settings of the "Ave Maria" by Franz Schubert and Charles Gounod are world-famous, while one of the most popular *a cappella* choral works is Franz Biebl's double-choir masterpiece. More precisely, Biebl's composition is the Angelus prayer, interlacing those texts with three repetitions of "Hail Mary," like the thrice-daily bell.

Finally, the Annunciation has had a profound influence on Catholic biblical studies—and the gender norms which result from those studies. It was featured at the very beginnings of modern biblical scholarship during the Renaissance and Reformation, when Erasmus made his new translation of the scene from Greek manuscripts. Instead of the Vulgate's *gratia plena* ("full of grace"), Erasmus translated the Greek as *gratiosa* ("favored"). "This may seem like hair-splitting to us, five hundred years later and accustomed to a variety of Bible translations," quips Christopher de Hamel, "but half the theology of the late Middle Ages hinges on an exact understanding of God's relationship to the Virgin Mary at the moment of the Incarnation."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Martin Luther's translation of the Annunciation scene into German relied directly on Erasmus's new translation of the text.<sup>17</sup> Catholic interpretations of the Annunciation have generated doctrines about Mary's perpetual virginity and Immaculate Conception. These doctrines themselves carry forward ancient Catholic beliefs about "original sin" as sexually transmitted, which have led to concerns about puritanical, repressed, or misogynistic sexual ethics in the Western Catholic tradition. The Mary of the Annunciation has often stood for Catholic femininity itself—but what kind of ideal does a reader find in this story?



When asked how the popular periodical *Magnificat* got its name, the publisher (and father of twelve children) Marie Dumont had a ready answer: it expresses “Mary’s unreserved ‘Yes’ to God’s amazing invitation to bring Jesus into her life and into the world! Her ‘Yes’ is what I wanted to live out in my life, and I wanted this publication to model and facilitate that ‘Yes’ for Catholics around the world.”<sup>18</sup> Some emphasize her obedience through a vocal affirmation that accepts unplanned pregnancy, while others characterize her with a kind of holy silence. Pope Benedict XVI uses her example to promote silent reverence in worship: “tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the Word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the Word and, inseparably, woman of silence. Our liturgies must facilitate this attitude of authentic listening: *Verbo crescente, verba deficient*. [When the Word increases, words fail.]”<sup>19</sup>

In her book *Truly Our Sister*, theologian Sr. Elizabeth Johnson bluntly responds to such characterizations of Mary: “At its worst, the emphasis of some interpreters . . . has led to that ideal of woman as an obedient handmaid, passively receptive to male commands, which women today find so obnoxious.”<sup>20</sup> The base community of readers in Solentiname, Nicaragua, agreed that Mary is not passive, inspiring them to interpret her obedience differently. One member of their weekly dialogues on the Gospels remained in admiration of her obedience, but “this obedience is revolutionary, because it’s obedience to love. . . . It commands us to *disobey* everything else.”<sup>21</sup> A women’s Bible study group in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico, was similarly empowered by Mary’s example. Before their Bible study group, they felt “sorrowful, solitary, silent, and enclosed: this was our reality inside our homes in our daily lives—lives that we did not choose and that we thought we had no way to change.”<sup>22</sup> But questioning biblical traditions that had “reinforced their subservience to men” enabled them to “discover their own agency and new understandings of God.”<sup>23</sup> As Kathleen Norris notes, the one silent before God at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel is not Mary, mother of Jesus, but Zechariah, father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:19–20). It is the man who loses his voice, and the woman who finds hers.<sup>24</sup>

According to Brazilian theologians Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, that voice says not only “Yes,” but “No.” Mary’s *fiat* has been “used improperly” to connote “unconditional acceptance,” and it must be paired with the subsequent *Magnificat*.<sup>25</sup> No longer a “passive and silent mother,” she “valiantly takes on as her own” the “vigorous No” to injustice, to “any

kind of sin that impedes or blocks the Kingdom of justice and freedom from arriving.”<sup>26</sup> The Conference of Latin American Bishops, along with Pope John Paul II, echoed these ideas and endorsed some aspects of the scholarship coming from lay theologians.<sup>27</sup>

As a story of surprise pregnancy, the Annunciation has inevitably affected the ethics of procreation. Some critics, such as biblical scholar Turid Karlsen Seim, highlight how Mary’s receptivity to her role as “virgin mother” established an impossible aspirational model for women over the centuries.<sup>28</sup> Pope John Paul II, on the other hand, concludes his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (“The Gospel of Life,” which speaks forcefully against abortion) with a rhapsodic reflection on the Annunciation. Promulgated in 1995 on the Feast of the Annunciation, the text champions “Mary’s experience” of “consent” and “acceptance” as “the incomparable model of how life should be welcomed and cared for.”<sup>29</sup> Biblical scholars Candida Moss and Joel Baden instead interpret Mary’s pregnancy in the lineage of Israelite *infertility* stories, with which hers shares many literary motifs. She “plays the role of the surrogate,” they argue, and this “blurs the boundaries between fertile and infertile” in reflection on her motherhood.<sup>30</sup>

More recently, Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews have provided a sophisticated collection of the ways the Annunciation story has been used to support the essential quality of female consent—of choice—in procreation.<sup>31</sup> Theologians Cristina Traina and Tina Beattie offer honest (and thus complicated) treatments of pregnancy not as a momentary event, but a biological and cultural process.<sup>32</sup> Using the biblical witness, one can see “Mary’s *fiat* not as an instantaneous acceptance of motherhood but as the culmination of a process that included perplexity (1:29), questioning (Gabriel), seeking advice (from Elizabeth), and continuing to ponder (2:19).”<sup>33</sup> Like prophets and heroes from the Old Testament, the Mary of the Annunciation “is not a monolithic character; she remains ambivalent, not fully fashioned as either subject or object.”<sup>34</sup> Many of these scholarly arguments can be summed up in the words of Elizabeth Johnson: Mary “is portrayed in terms of her own relationship to God independent of men’s control, a stance that in itself undermines patriarchal ideology,” so that throughout history, “women who make their own decisions before God claim her into their circle.”<sup>35</sup>

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The Annunciation embodies Catholic biblical reflection on divinity and humanity, on suffering and grace, on Jesus and Mary. All of this is borne

through a limitless imagination, energized by a biblical story that's just over a minute long. That's what happens when billions of Catholics for almost two thousand years have encountered the same angelic "Hail Mary," have heard it repeatedly proclaimed from the pulpit, argued about its ethical implications, prayed with it over beads and books, made pilgrimage to its site, visualized its meaning in mystical meditation and visual arts, all while accompanied by melodies of chant and rhythms of bells that jolt the mind to awareness. Story, imagination, and sacrament have illuminated the meanings of these biblical lines—and revealed the infinite worlds between them.

## NOTES

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### Introduction

1. Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 95–6.
2. John Dominic Crossan, *A Long Way from Tipperary: A Memoir* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 130. Italics original.
3. Robert C. Broderick, ed., *Concise Catholic Dictionary* (St. Paul, MN: Catechetical Guild Educational Society, 1944), 130.
4. Daniel Harrington, *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Luke Timothy Johnson and William Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
5. Clive D. Field, “Is the Bible Becoming a Closed Book? British Opinion Poll Evidence,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29 (2014): 503–28, these data points at 506–7.
6. The Faith Matters Survey, a major study of American religiosity in 2006, showed Catholics ranking lower than Protestants in Bible reading, with over 70% responding “never” or “occasionally” and about 30% at least weekly. This is the inverse of Black Protestants, for whom 70% reported at least weekly Bible reading (and 38% at least *daily*). Data provided via email communication by David Campbell. A contemporaneous study of Latino Catholics found similar numbers, with 27% of “Hispanic Catholics” reporting weekly reading and 78% of “Hispanic Evangelicals.” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and Pew Hispanic Center, “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2007), 18.

7. Mark M. Gray and Paul Perl, "Faith Formation Needs of Likely Catholic Bible Study Participants" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2002).
8. CARA, "Typical Survey Format and Frequently Used Questions," 2014.
9. See various research reports of the Barna Group at barna.com.
10. Field, "Is the Bible Becoming a Closed Book?," 518.
11. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* §25. Official Vatican translation.
12. Indeed, if Catholic populations are measured not by numbers of people but by numbers of *weekly Mass-goers*, the story of global Catholicism shifts south and east. By Mass attendance, Catholicism is flourishing in the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Uganda. As of 2023, Pope Francis has made three trips to sub-Saharan Africa—and only one to North America. See John L. Allen, "Top Ten Practicing Catholic Countries: It's an African Story," *Crux*, January 31, 2023, <https://cruxnow.com/pope-in-south-sudan-congo/2023/01/top-ten-practicing-catholic-countries-its-an-african-story>.
13. I recommend John McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022).
14. A classic on the formation of the Christian biblical canon is John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997). As a material object and cultural artifact, see Christopher de Hamel, *The Book: A History of the Bible* (London: Phaidon, 2001).
15. Beyond Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text*, recent analyses include John J. Collins, Craig A. Evans, and Lee Martin McDonald, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Scriptures* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020); and Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
16. The term "Shared Testament" was coined in Philip A. Cunningham, *Sharing the Scriptures* (New York: Paulist, 2003). Tanakh is a vocalization of the acronym T-N-K, designating the three sections of the Jewish biblical canon: Torah (teaching, law); Nevi'im (prophets); Ketuvim (writings).
17. See also the Vatican's Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church," n. 1.
18. A sophisticated Catholic approach to interpreting the Bible as divine revelation is Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (rev. ed.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).
19. These and other challenges are analyzed well in Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
20. Kenneth Hagen, ed., *The Bible in the Churches: How Various Christians Interpret the Scriptures* (3rd rev. ed.; Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998).

21. See the excellent analysis in Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).
22. Recall that these are self-reported data, and people tend to over-estimate religious and other virtuous behavior in surveys. Thank you to David Campbell for providing this data via personal email communication on September 20, 2017.
23. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* §10. Official Vatican translation adapted on one word (“entrusted” instead of “committed” for the Latin *commisum*).

## Chapter 1

1. Daniel J. Harrington, *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), xi.
2. For an impressive online collection of lectionary information, see the website of Felix Just, a Jesuit and biblical scholar, at catholic-resources.org. For further analysis, see Regina A. Bosclair, *The Word of the Lord at Mass: Understanding the Lectionary* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2015); and Martin Connell, *Hear the Word of the Lord: The Lectionary in Catholic Ritual* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2015).
3. Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), xi.
4. For more on these differences, see Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), chapters 1–3.
5. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §16. Official Vatican translation.
6. John Reumann, “A History of Lectionaries: From the Synagogue at Nazareth to Post-Vatican II,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 116.
7. *Lectionary for Mass, Second Typical Edition, Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), §106.
8. Walter Sundberg, “Limitations of the Lectionary,” *Word & World* 10 (1990): 18. Here Sundberg was criticizing the Protestant lectionaries, but the representation of the Old Testament in the Catholic lectionary is markedly worse.
9. Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1970).
10. I tabulate the Old Testament readings from all Sundays where the Old Testament is used and all other Holy Days of Obligation, as observed in my home country (USA). Those are Christmas, Ascension, Corpus Christi, Mary Mother of God, Immaculate Conception, and Assumption. I have excluded special vigil readings (since most parishioners only go once each Holy Day) but have included the entire Easter Triduum (Holy Thursday through Easter). I have counted only one reading from the four Christmas options (all four are from Isaiah). For Masses whose reading is the same each year (e.g., Ash Wednesday), I have counted that reading all three times, since that is how the congregation experiences it. This chart and accompanying analysis first



appeared in my article, "Do We Share a Book? The Sunday Lectionary and Jewish-Christian Relations." *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 1 (2005–6): 89–102.

11. *Lectionary for Mass, Introduction*, §13.
12. *Ibid.*, §45.
13. See the various meeting minutes (*relationes*) from Study Group 11 (*Coetus a Studiis 11: De lectionibus in Missa*), consulted by the author at Hesburgh Library, Department of Special Collections, University of Notre Dame. Cited below as "Study Group 11," I retain the minutes' internal numbering system for references. The three- or four-year cycle was discussed often, for example, *Schemata* n.184, *De Missali* 26. See discussion in Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 36.
14. Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 38.
15. *Lectionary for Mass, Introduction*, §97. Discussion in Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 98–100.
16. Christopher de Hamel, *The Book: A History of the Bible* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 29.
17. *Ibid.*, 31.
18. For further analysis, see Charles Perrot, "The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Martin Jan Mulder; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 137–59.
19. Discussion preserved in the Talmud at *b. Megillah* 29b.
20. Study Group 11, *Schemata* n.127, *De Missali* 15, §2.
21. See Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), chapter 5, "The Uses of Early Christian Books"; and Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), chapter 3, "Word: Reading and Preaching."
22. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, §67.
23. See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
24. G. G. Willis, *St. Augustine's Lectionary* (London: SPCK, 1962).
25. Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 60.
26. *Ibid.*, 12.
27. *Ibid.*, 14.
28. Summary of Elmar Nübold, *Entstehung und Bewertung der neuen Perikopenordnung des Römischen Ritus für die Messfeier an Sonn- und Festtagen* (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifatius-Druckerei, 1986); partially covered in English in Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 22–29.
29. Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 52–55; and Horace T. Allen, Jr., "The Ecumenical Import of Lectionary Reform," in *Shaping English Liturgy* (eds. Peter Finn and James Schellman; Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1990), 361–84.
30. Harrington, *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?*, 13.

31. Bosclair, *Word of the Lord at Mass*, 98. See also her “Amnesia in the Catholic Sunday Lectionary: Women—Silenced from the Memories of Salvation History,” in *Women and Theology* (ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski; Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 40; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 109–35.
32. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983).
33. In addition to Bosclair’s scholarly mode, a pastoral Bible study approach has been offered in Kathleen MacInnis Kichline, *Never on Sunday: A Look at the Women NOT in the Lectionary* (self-pub., 2011). See sistersinscripture.com.
34. Some of the following is adapted from my article, “Household Names: Junia, Phoebe, and Prisca in Early Christian Rome,” *Commonweal*, June 1, 2018: 11–14.
35. Peppard, “Household Names,” 13; see also Antti Marjanen, “Phoebe, A Letter Courier,” in *Lux Humana, Lux Aeterna: Essays on Biblical and Related Themes in Honour of Lars Aejmelaes* (ed. Antti Mustakallio; Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2005), 495–508.
36. *Lectionary for Mass, Introduction*, §77.
37. Donald Senior, ed., *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 781.
38. Prov 31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31, paired with the Gospel reading of the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30). The rationale of such pairings between Old Testament and Gospel is the topic for the next chapter.
39. Pope Francis has heartily tried to re-invigorate Catholic preaching, and his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* offers wise guidelines for pastors (especially its chapter 3, “The Proclamation of the Gospel”).
40. See Felix Just, catholic-resources.org; and Peter M. J. Stravinskias, *The Catholic Church and the Bible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), chapter 4 on “Mass Prayers; Biblical Prayers.”

## Chapter 2

1. The metaphor of Jews and Christians as siblings has a long history in Jewish-Christian relations, with different applications of the idea. From the Jewish scholarly perspective, Daniel Boyarin offers critical analysis of the image in *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1–21. Pope John Paul II grew fond of using the term “elder brother” to refer to the Jewish tradition. For that Catholic shift in the twentieth century, see chapter 8, and John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–65* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
2. This chapter draws from my article, “Do We Share a Book? The Sunday Lectionary and Jewish-Christian Relations,” *SCJR* 1 (2005–6): 89–102.
3. *Lectionary for Mass, Second Typical Edition, Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), §66.

4. The main discussions of Vatican II's Study Group 11 on "harmony" are summarized in these *relationes*: *Schemata* n.148, *De Missali* 18; *Schemata* n.165, *De Missali* 21; and *Schemata* n.168, *De Missali* 22. Consulted by the author at Hesburgh Library, Department of Special Collections, University of Notre Dame. All translations of these meeting minutes are my own (mostly from Neo-Latin, with some other European languages interspersed).
5. *Lectionary for Mass, Introduction*, §67.
6. Sunday lections are noted by year and week: A-27 is the 27th week of Ordinary Time for Year A in the three-year cycle.
7. See brief discussion in Gail Ramshaw, "The First Testament in Christian Lectionaries," *Worship* 64 (1990): 505; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 143–53.
8. *Lectionary for Mass, Introduction*, §106.
9. Vatican II, Study Group 11, *Schemata* n.165, *De Missali* 21, §61.
10. Walter Sundberg, "Limitations of the Lectionary," *Word & World* 10 (1990): 15. Here Sundberg was telling a story from a Lutheran service, but the potential for Marcionite interpretation of the Old Testament in the Catholic lectionary is markedly worse.
11. For a historical assessment of Marcion, see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
12. The classic work on early forms of Christian replacement theology is Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel* (Paris: de Boccard, 1964), with many translations and re-editions to follow.
13. Jules Isaac, *L'Enseignement de Mépris* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1962); trans. as *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964). Isaac had a private audience about the "teaching of contempt" with Pope John XXIII in 1960, which was a crucial catalyst for getting the Jewish-Catholic relationship on the agenda of Vatican II.
14. Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* §4. Official Vatican translation.
15. A classic resource for this is John T. Pawlikowski and James A. Wilde, *When Catholics Speak About Jews* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1987). The best online repository of documents on Jewish-Christian relations is *Dialogika*, managed by the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations at [www.cccjr.us/dialogika-resources](http://www.cccjr.us/dialogika-resources).
16. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document *Nostra aetate* (n. 4)," §3.
17. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church," §5. Official Vatican translation.
18. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes," n. 1. Italics added.
19. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

20. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, §19. Official Vatican translation.
21. Pope John Paul II, "Address to Representatives of the Jewish Community in Mainz, West Germany," November 17, 1980. Official Vatican translation.
22. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, §21.
23. Vatican "Synod on the Word of God," Proposition 16. Italics added. Translation from Italian by John L. Allen, Jr. in the *National Catholic Reporter*, October 27, 2008.
24. Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §40–43.
25. Ibid., §57. Official Vatican translation. He did express concern about the lectionary's relationship to the Eastern Catholic churches, but that is a different issue.
26. Donald Senior, ed., *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 438.
27. Adapted from Laurence Hull Stookey, "Marcion, Typology, and Lectionary Preaching," *Worship* 66 (1992): 251–62.
28. The application of these categories to the lectionary is based on my own judgment. The meeting minutes of Study Group 11, as extensive as they are, do not report specific discussions of which kinds of typological relationships are presumed or implied for particular lectionary pairings. I designate several pairings as "ambiguous" regarding which kind of typological relationship is implied. Readers may quibble about a few of my decisions, but the general trends of this analysis should hold.
29. The peculiarities of this pairing were highlighted for me by Richard Nelson, "Reading Texts in Lectionary Pairs," *Dialog* 21 (1982): 95–101.
30. Gerald Sloyan endorses this also, from a Catholic perspective. He gives five reasons for a lectionary that emphasizes semicontinuous reading over typological correspondence: "the earliest tradition, the confusion caused by the brevity and apparent non-relevance of the present first readings, the seeming reduction of the entire Testament to a preparation for Jesus only, the making available to hearers of a fuller biblical heritage than now, and the possibility that the liturgical churches can be Bible churches." Gerald S. Sloyan, "Some Suggestions for a Biblical Three-Year Lectionary," *Worship* 63 (1989): 530–32.
31. This example was briefly discussed also in Stookey, "Marcion," 257–58.
32. These are an expansion on traditional categories, and I have classified the readings according to how they appear to the listener who has not yet heard the Gospel reading, as is the case in the context of liturgy.
33. Vatican II, Study Group 11, *Schemata* n.101, *De Missali* 12, §4 (*la prophète*; these particular meeting minutes were in French instead of Neo-Latin). Admittedly, this manner of speaking about the Old Testament goes back to ancient Christian practice.
34. Vatican II, Study Group 11, *Schemata* n.191, *De Missali* 29, §V.3.4 (*sub influxu libri Isaiae . . . sub lumine adimpletionis evangelicae*).

35. On the role of narrative in theology, see Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
36. James A. Sanders, "Canon and Calendar: an Alternative Lectionary Proposal," in *Social Themes of the Christian Year* (ed. Dieter Hiesel; Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983), 259.
37. Vatican II, Study Group 11, *Schemata* n.133, *De Missali* 16.
38. Vatican II, Study Group 11, *Schemata* n.191, *De Missali* 29, §V.3.2 (*breves et faciles*).
39. On this conundrum, see the excellent work of Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997). Without a narrative identity of God portrayed through the Old Testament, the lectionary tends to lean away from an image of God as Trinitarian. Worship guided by the Roman Catholic lectionary can generate a biblical view that falls prey to what H. Richard Niebuhr called the "unitarianism of the Son." See H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3 (1946): 371–84. Cf. brief discussion in Sundberg, "Limitations," 14–20.

### Chapter 3

1. According to the "Religious Landscape Study" (2014) from the Pew Research Center, approximately 52% of U.S. Catholic adults are married, which is almost the same as the marriage rate of the general population (data available at: <http://pewrsr.ch/2u8PzCP>). According to the General Social Survey from the same year, approximately 20% of Catholics go through divorce at some point in their lives, again at about the same rate as the general population (data available at: <https://gss.norc.org>).
2. References are drawn from both *The Roman Missal* (3rd typical ed.; Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011) and the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops ([usccb.org](http://usccb.org)).
3. Dan 3:77. The Catholic Bible has a longer version of the book of Daniel than the Protestant canon, since it includes the sections preserved in the Septuagint.
4. The site is [foryourmarriage.org](http://foryourmarriage.org).
5. <https://togetherforlifeonline.com/popular-wedding-readings>.
6. Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 7.2.
7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1520. Official Vatican translation.
8. From the USCCB guide for Anointing of the Sick: [www.usccb.org/prayers/order-blessing-sick](http://www.usccb.org/prayers/order-blessing-sick).
9. Translation from NRSV with Apocrypha. As far as I could determine, the earliest version of the Vulgate to include this appendix was the Vatican's "Sixto-Clementine edition" of 1592.
10. Abraham Coles, *Dies Irae in Thirteen Original Versions*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Houghton, 1859), vii.
11. Hugo H. Hoefer, ed., *The Saint Joseph Daily Missal* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1959/1961), 1243–45.

12. The final two stanzas, since they break the poetic pattern, are often thought to be later additions.
13. See the analysis in chapter 6 of the late-medieval Nativity Triptych of Rogier van der Weyden, where the Sibyl appears with Augustus (Figure 6.5).

## Chapter 4

1. James Martin, *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 9–10.
2. Michael Peppard, “Prayer Before Reading Scripture,” in *Prayers for Every Day. Celebrating 100 Years of Catholic Chaplaincy at Yale* (ed. Grace Carroll; New Haven, CT: Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center, 2023). Reprinted with permission of Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale University.
3. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches* (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 284–85.
4. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 75.
5. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 59.
6. For analysis of her style of biblical visualization in the *Scivias*, see Martin Santos Barcala and Paulo Augusto de Souza Nogueira, “Os caminhos do Caminho: O Scivias de Hildegard von Bingen e sua hermenêutica bíblica visionária,” *Estudos de Religião* 34 (2020): 463–87.
7. Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350)* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998), 270.
8. As recounted by James of Vitry, translated and quoted in McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 39.
9. McGinn, *Flowering of Mysticism*, 225.
10. Ibid., 222–44.
11. Ibid., 520. Italics original.
12. Ibid., 103.
13. Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life* 1–2; translation from *The Works of Bonaventure* (trans. José de Vinck; Paterson, NJ: Saint Anthony Guild Press, 1960), 97.
14. See the excerpts in Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Prayer: Selected Spiritual Writings* (ed. Kieran Kavanaugh; Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 108–9.
15. The commentary is usually called *The Dark Night of the Soul* to distinguish it from the poem (“The Dark Night”).
16. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (ed. George E. Ganss; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 167.
17. Wendy A. Stein, *How to Read Medieval Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 98.
18. Though the rosary became a Catholic prayer form *par excellence*, the combination of oral repetition of short prayers and mental meditation is also used by Protestants. Consider contemporary Protestant “praise and worship”



music, in which short phrases are repeated over and over by the worship team, while the congregation sings along in meditative prayer.

19. Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 15.
20. Ibid., summary chart on 74–5.
21. Ibid., 20.
22. Quotation adapted from Nathan D. Mitchell, *The Mystery of the Rosary: Marian Devotion and the Reinvention of Catholicism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 194.
23. There are now biblical commentaries to accompany those praying the mysteries of the rosary, such as Clifford M. Yeary, *Hail Mary, Holy Bible: Sacred Scripture and the Mysteries of the Rosary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).
24. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §55–59.
25. John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), §43.
26. From a 1995 survey of U.S. Catholics, summarized in William V. D’Antonio, et al., *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 59–62.
27. John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), §30. Italics original.
28. For discussion, see Mitchell, *Mystery of the Rosary*, 30–33.
29. Mitchell, *Mystery of the Rosary*, 80.
30. James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 143–45.
31. Mitchell, *Mystery of the Rosary*, 3.
32. Ibid., 4.
33. Recommended by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops here: <https://www.usccb.org/prayers/scriptural-stations-cross>.
34. On its origins, see John F. Baldovin, *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development, and Meaning of Stational Liturgy* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 228; Rome: Pontificum Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987).
35. Daniel Meloy, “Las Posadas: A Tradition with Biblical Roots,” *Archdiocese of Detroit*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.unleashthegospel.org/2020/01/las-posadas-a-tradition-with-biblical-roots-reflects-a-contemporary-history-for-detroits-mexican-american-community>.
36. This familiar saying is noted in the interview of Fr. Gilberto Cavazos-Gonzalez, “Catholics Honor Virgin of Guadalupe for Feast Day,” *NPR*, December 12, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/12/12/143579900/catholics-honor-virgin-of-guadalupe-for-feast-day>.
37. I summarize here the legendary story. Critical analyses from historical and art-historical perspectives are in subsequent notes.
38. Estimates of recent numbers come from Cheryl Losser, “Unprecedented 11 Million Catholics Flock to CDMX’s Guadalupe Basilica,” *Mexico News Daily*, December 12, 2022, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/unprecedented-11-million-catholics-flock-to-cdmxs-guadalupe-basilica>.

39. An excellent art-historical analysis is Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe: From Black Madonnas to Queen of the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
40. Antonio Mejías-Rentas, "East LA Remains Devoted to a 'Miraculous' Guadalupe on the Side of a Corner Store," *The Eastsider*, December 9, 2020, [https://www.theeastsiderla.com/neighborhoods/east\\_los\\_angeles/east-la-remains-devoted-to-a-miraculous-guadalupe-on-the-side-of-a-corner-store/article\\_4eec7340-39c7-11eb-aa59-af9961cc1479.html](https://www.theeastsiderla.com/neighborhoods/east_los_angeles/east-la-remains-devoted-to-a-miraculous-guadalupe-on-the-side-of-a-corner-store/article_4eec7340-39c7-11eb-aa59-af9961cc1479.html).
41. Cavazos-Gonzalez in "Catholics Honor Virgin of Guadalupe for Feast Day," *NPR*, December 12, 2011.
42. For the best primary sources, see Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (rev. ed.; Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), here 108.
43. Primary source from Sánchez, *Fundamento de la historia*, quoted in Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 108.
44. D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 367.
45. Timothy Matovina, *Theologies of Guadalupe: From the Era of Conquest to Pope Francis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chapter 4, 117-54.
46. *Ibid.*, 154.
47. Socorro Durán, "A Great Sign Appeared in the Sky," in *The Treasure of Guadalupe* (trans. Allen Figueroa Deck; ed. Virgilio Elizondo, Allan Figueroa Deck, and Timothy Matovina; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 98.
48. The post was later deleted, since the priest, Fr. Ambrose (Ohio, USA), routinely cleans out his very active Twitter feed. My transcription is from a screen shot at June 22, 2021, 9:17 AM.
49. The following summary is drawn from Harry Hagan, O.S.B., and Godfrey Mullen, O.S.B., "The Liturgy of the Hours: The Daily Prayer of the Church," in *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer* (ed. Christian Raab, O.S.B., and Harry Hagan, O.S.B.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 147-65. The major scholarly work on the Hours is Robert Taft, S.J., *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West* (2nd ed.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).
50. For detailed analysis of the history of the changes to the Divine Office at Vatican II, see Stanislaus Campbell, *From Breviary to Liturgy of the Hours: The Structural Reform of the Roman Office, 1964-1971* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), 1995.
51. Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 73-74.
52. *Ibid.*, 77.
53. Paul Quenon, *In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2018), 11.
54. *Ibid.*, 13.
55. Hagan and Mullen, "Liturgy of the Hours," 155.
56. Quenon, *In Praise of the Useless Life*, 14.

57. Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956), 44.
58. Quenon, *In Praise of the Useless Life*, 13.

## Chapter 5

1. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §167. Official Vatican translation. Italics added.
2. Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
3. Ibid., 1.
4. Ed Yong, *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us* (New York: Random House, 2022), 11.
5. Gregory the Great, *Letters* 9.105 and 11.13.
6. James A. Francis, "Visual and Verbal Representation: Image, Text, Person, and Power," in *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (ed. Philip Rousseau; London: John Wiley, 2009), 299–300.
7. Ibid., 301.
8. Thanks especially to Robin M. Jensen, Lee M. Jefferson, and Felicity Harley-McGowan.
9. "Jack-in-the-box" Noah is a term attributed to Robin Jensen, based on the similarity to the look of the children's toy, and is used frequently in scholarly discussion of early Christian art.
10. Roald Dijkstra, *The Apostles in Early Christian Art and Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 474.
11. In the understanding of the Roman writer Juvenal, the Jews worship "clouds and the *caeli numen*," meaning the "divine will of Caelus" or the "divine power of the sky" (*Satires* 14.97).
12. Lee M. Jefferson, "Miracles in Art," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* (ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison; London: Routledge, 2020), 318.
13. On the developing legends of Peter in Rome (and a critique of Petrine primacy in Rome), see George E. Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
14. Jutta Dresken-Weiland, "Christian Sarcophagi from Rome," in Jensen and Ellison, *Routledge Handbook*, 46.
15. Norbert Zimmerman, "Catacomb Painting and the Rise of Christian Iconography in Funerary Art," in Jensen and Ellison, *Routledge Handbook*, 25.
16. The story of provenance is reported in the catalog record of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the item is on permanent display. On the early Christian practice of funerary meals, see Robin M. Jensen, "Dining with the Dead: From the Mensa to the Altar in Christian Late Antiquity," in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context. Studies of Roman, Jewish, and Christian Burials* (ed. Laurie Brink, O.P., and Deborah Green; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 107–43.

17. A clear fourth-century example exists in the Catacomb of Marcus and Marcellianus.
18. Jefferson, "Miracles," 318–20.
19. Antonio Bosio, *Roma sotterranea* (Rome, 1632), 45.
20. The Greek loanword *neophyte* literally means "newly-planted," and already by the second century it had come to be used as a term for new initiates to Christianity. It was common enough that it was often borrowed into Latin.
21. The spandrels—gaps between the curves above the columns' arches and the straight lines demarcating the registers—also feature biblical scenes, but their identifications are debated due to poor preservation. On this and other matters of detail, see Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
22. I credit the research of my former student Ben Kindberg for emphasizing the political ideology of two consuls in the development of the *traditio legis* image.
23. See Beat Brenk, *The Apse, the Image, and the Icon: An Historical Perspective of the Apse as a Space for Images* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2010), especially chapter 2.
24. On this and related images, see Robin M. Jensen, *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), chapter 5.
25. Herbert Kessler, "Bright Gardens of Paradise," in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* (ed. Jeffrey Spier; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 131.
26. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Michael Peppard, "Was the Presence of Christ in Statues? The Challenge of Divine Media for a Jewish Roman God," in *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context* (ed. Lee M. Jefferson and Robin M. Jensen; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2015), 225–69. Some of the subsequent paragraphs have been adapted from this previous article.
27. Brenk, *The Apse, the Image and the Icon*, 58. This was also the *locus* for statues of divine emperor worship, cf. 38–40.
28. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 250.
29. The scholarly argument about and against the "emperor mystique" was generated by Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), and picked up by the essays in Jefferson and Jensen, *Art of Empire*.
30. Though mosaics were seen by some in later centuries to promote "idolatrous" behavior, the fact that they were frequently touched and trod upon somewhat limited the impact of mosaic iconoclasm (as compared with the destruction of statues).
31. For example, the use of *klasma* in Mark 6:43 and parallels, Mark 8:8 and parallels, and *Didache* 9.3–4.

32. English version in Ambrose of Milan, *Political Letters and Speeches* (trans. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz and Carole Hill; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).
33. Ambrose, *On the Death of Theodosius*, 48. Trans. adapted from Liebeschuetz and Hill, *Political Letters and Speeches*, 200.

## Chapter 6

1. Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).
2. See Bruce M. Metzger, "Names for the Nameless in the New Testament: A Study in the Growth of Christian Tradition," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten* (ed. Patrick Granfield and Josef A. Jungmann; Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), 79–99.
3. Robin M. Jensen, "Allusions to Imperial Rituals in Fourth-Century Christian Art," in *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context* (ed. Lee M. Jefferson and Robin M. Jensen; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 13–47.
4. On the historical development of the story of the magi and the integration of kingship, see Eric Vanden Eykel, *The Magi: Who They Were, How They've Been Remembered, and Why They Still Fascinate* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), especially 67–103.
5. Ps 72:1, 8, 10–12, 15.
6. Made 1195–1205 in Braine, France, now at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 14.47a–c.
7. Wendy A. Stein, *How to Read Medieval Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 50.
8. For further commentary on this and other Jesse trees, see Christopher de Hamel, *The Book: A History of the Bible* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 143–46.
9. There are less positive ramifications of the supposed inclusivity of the three skin tones. As Sarah Bond and Nyasha Junior have reported: "In Northern Europe today, some Epiphany or Three Kings' Day parades have stirred controversy for including blackface in their depictions of the king and other supporting characters. While supporters argue that this is a long-standing cultural tradition, others argue that having non-Black performers wearing makeup to paint their faces black and their lips red is offensive in that it serves to support dehumanizing stereotypes." Sarah Bond and Nyasha Junior, "The Story of the Black King among the Magi," *Hyperallergic*, January 6, 2020, [hyperallergic.com/535881/the-story-of-the-black-king-among-the-magi](https://hyperallergic.com/535881/the-story-of-the-black-king-among-the-magi).
10. For the full scene, see William Caxton, *The Golden Legend; or Lives of the Saints, as Englished by William Caxton* (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1900), Vol. 1, p. 27.
11. On the development of early images of the cross and crucifixion, see Robin M. Jensen, *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); and Felicity Harley-McGowan, "Picturing the Passion," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* (ed.

- Mark D. Ellison and Robin M. Jensen; London: Routledge, 2018), 290–307. One can also note the development of *nomina sacra* (“sacred names”) in early Christian biblical manuscripts, which was the practice of abbreviating certain holy words and labeling them with a superlinear stroke. Words such as God, Christ, Jesus, Mary, Spirit, Jerusalem, and Israel were often written this way. In some manuscripts the Greek word for cross (*stauros*) was abbreviated with the *tau* and the *rho* combined, such that the middle of the word resembled a stick-figure cross with a head on top. On such “staurograms,” see also Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 135–54.
12. First attested in Tertullian, *On Bapt.* 1.1 (third century).
  13. Jason A. Whitlark, “Funerary Anchors of Hope and Hebrews: A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Anchor Iconography in the Catacombs of Rome,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 48 (2021): 219–41, relying also on Emanuele Castelli, “The Symbols of Anchor and Fish in the Most Ancient Parts of the Catacomb of Priscilla: Evidence and Questions,” *Studia Patristica* 59 (2011): 13–14.
  14. Whitlark, “Funerary Anchors.”
  15. *Ibid.*, 228–31.
  16. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.11.59 (third century). Translation from Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator* (Fathers of the Church 23; trans. Simon P. Wood; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 246.
  17. For example, see the apotheosis scene on the Column of Antoninus Pius (second century), displayed in the Campus Martius in Rome.
  18. A detail pointed out in Jensen, *The Cross*, 69.
  19. Besides the description in Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, a detailed fourth-century version of the story is also told in Ambrose of Milan, *Funeral Oration for Theodosius*, 43–51; Ambrose of Milan, *Political Letters and Speeches* (trans. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz and Carole Hill; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).
  20. Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (rev. ed.; Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2010), 13.
  21. Vikan, *Pilgrimage Art*, 27.
  22. Aubrey Stewart, *Of the Holy Places Visited by Antoninus Martyr (Circ. 530 AD)* (London: Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society, 1884), 25.
  23. *Ibid.*, 15.
  24. André Grabar, *Les Ampoules de Terre Sainte* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1958).
  25. For analysis of what we can know about her identity and itinerary, see John Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971); and Anne McGowan, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).
  26. Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 28–29.
  27. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels*, 137.



28. In the “Sancta Sanctorum” case of the Vatican Museums, there are also two cross-shaped reliquaries from this era, one similarly enameled and another made of simple wood, with the interlocking Greek words *phōs* (light) and *zōē* (life) carved into the cross.
29. Catherine Sider Hamilton, “Egeria,” in *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters* (ed. Marion Ann Taylor; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 180. Italics added.
30. Vatican tourist tip: these “Sancta Sanctorum” items are currently on your left immediately after leaving the one-way route through the Sistine Chapel. Once leaving the Sistine Chapel, likely having waited in long lines to get in, virtually everyone moves quickly down the next long hallway. But you’ll know better! Don’t miss the wall case immediately to your left, which holds some of the most precious items in the entire building.
31. Vikar, *Pilgrimage Art*, 19–20.
32. Translation my own of stanza 13: *Fac me tecum pie flere, crucifixo condolere, donec ego vixero.*
33. Vera K. Ostoia, et al., *The Middle Ages: Treasures from the Cloisters and the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969), 236.
34. There is a cycle of Samson scenes in the recently excavated fifth-century synagogue at Huqoq in Galilee.
35. This is the interpretation of the Art Institute of Chicago’s catalog entry for Figure 6.15, [www.artic.edu/artworks/105719/man-of-sorrows](http://www.artic.edu/artworks/105719/man-of-sorrows).
36. There are many surveys of Mary in Roman Catholicism and art. A few excellent examples are: Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2005); and the relevant sections of Gertrud Schiller, *Iconographie der christlichen Kunst* (5 vols.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1966–1991); in English as Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (2 vols.; trans. Janet Seligman; London: Lund Humphries, 1971–72).
37. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §67.
38. Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 95–96.
39. On this Annunciation type, see Catherine Gines Taylor, *Late Antique Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).
40. For a recent edition of this text, see Lily C. Vuong, *The Protevangelium of James* (Early Christian Apocrypha 7; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019). On the artistic type of the Annunciation at the well, see Michael Peppard, *The World’s Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), chapter 5.
41. For an important methodological argument about how Marian stories blur the distinction between “Bible” and “Tradition,” see Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Between Scripture and Tradition: The Marian Apocrypha of Early Christianity,” in *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Montréal Colloquium in Honour of Charles*

- Kannengiesser, 11–13 October 2006* (ed. Lorenzo DiTommaso and Lucian Turcescu; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 491–510.
42. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 81.
  43. For further commentary on this painting, see its Highlights page at the National Gallery of Art: [www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/van-eyck-the-annunciation.html#jan-van-eyck-the-annunciation-c-1434-1436](http://www.nga.gov/collection/highlights/van-eyck-the-annunciation.html#jan-van-eyck-the-annunciation-c-1434-1436).
  44. Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*, 9.
  45. *Ibid.*, 104–5.
  46. Stephen Shoemaker has argued this throughout his career, across many publications, e.g., Shoemaker, *Mary*, chapter 2.
  47. For analysis of a striking artistic example from the Christian east, see the final section of Michael Peppard, “Apostolic Posture: Mary Magdalene as Witness to Death and Resurrection in Art,” in *Death and Rebirth in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honor of Robin M. Jensen* (ed. Lee M. Jefferson; Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 197–216.
  48. Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*, 55.
  49. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 32–33, relying on a quotation of Raymond Brown.
  50. My translation from Latin: *Ave, maris stella, Dei mater alma, atque semper virgo, felix caeli porta. Sumens illud Ave Gabrielis ore, funda nos in pace, mutans Evae nomen.*
  51. In the Christian tradition, Origen of Alexandria (third century) is most associated with the allegorical exposition of the Song of Songs, as he wrote a multi-volume commentary on it. He likely drew from his knowledge of Jewish interpretive traditions at the time.
  52. The thirteenth-century apse mosaic of Santa Maria Maggiore has a similar artistic program, though only Christ holds a textual message; and instead of embracing Mary, he sits with distance between them and crowns her.
  53. Many studies have been written on the Black Madonnas, e.g., Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (illustrated ed.; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).
  54. See Ella Rozett’s site, “Interfaith Mary,” <https://www.interfaithmary.net/black-madonna>.
  55. Elina Vuola, *The Virgin Mary Across Cultures: Devotion Among Costa Rican Catholic and Finnish Orthodox Women* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2019), chapters 2–3.
  56. *Ibid.*, 82.
  57. Augustine, *On Nature and Grace* 36 (42). Translated and analyzed in Augustine, *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings* (trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge; Fathers of the Church 86; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 53–54.
  58. For an unbiased eyewitness view, see M. Pierre de Tchihatcheff, “On the Recent Eruption of Vesuvius in December 1861,” *Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society* 18 (1862): 126–27.

59. Shoemaker, *Mary*, chapters 3–4.
60. Ally Kateusz, “Ascension of Christ or Ascension of Mary? Reconsidering a Popular Early Iconography,” *J ECS* 23 (2015): 273–303.
61. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 198–99, agrees with Kateusz’s argument on this particular point, though neither he nor I agree with all of the arguments in this article.
62. Thomas P. Campbell, “Liturgical Drama and Community Discourse,” in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church* (2nd ed.; ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter; Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), 566.
63. This summary relies on Campbell, “Liturgical Drama and Community Discourse,” 579–81.
64. *Ibid.*, 579.
65. *Ibid.*, 580.
66. Some of the following paragraphs are adapted from Peppard, “Apostolic Posture.”
67. Gregory the Great, *Homily 33* (on Luke 7), *PL* 76: 1239; and *Homily 25*, *PL* 75: 1189.
68. Magdalen Larow, “The Iconography of Mary Magdalen. The Evolution of a Western Tradition until 1300” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1982), xiii. Cf. Jane Dillenberger, “The Magdalene: Reflections on the Image of the Saint and the Sinner in Christian Art,” in *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 115–45.
69. The most influential collection of such tales is “The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene” in the medieval *Golden Legend*.
70. Larow, “Iconography of Mary Magdalen,” xiii.
71. BnF MS lat 1240, fol 30v, Paris. See Campbell, “Liturgical Drama and Community Discourse,” 568.
72. Larow, “Iconography of Mary Magdalen,” 115. For the primary sources, see Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933).
73. Larow, “Iconography of Mary Magdalen,” 118.
74. Her rehabilitation in these various categories has been uneven, to be sure. One example of an official religious change in reception, though, is that the Roman Catholic Church recently elevated her traditional “Memorial” day of July 22 to a “Feast” day, accompanied by a decree about the change (June 3, 2016). For this and other relevant resources, consult [reclaimmagdalene.org](http://reclaimmagdalene.org).
75. The artwork is currently installed at The Roman Catholic Church of the Ascension in New York City.

## Chapter 7

1. Peter Hawkins, *Dante’s Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 15.
2. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
3. *Ibid.*, 47.
4. *Ibid.*, 37.

5. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 75.
6. George Ferzoco, "Dante and the Context of Medieval Preaching," in *Reviewing Dante's Theology: Volume 2* (ed. Claire E. Honess and Matthew Treherne; Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 202.
7. Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 110–15, commenting on *Convivio* 2.1.
8. Ferzoco, "Medieval Preaching," 203; cf. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, 27.
9. Ferzoco, "Medieval Preaching," 199.
10. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, 40.
11. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, 47. Cf. V. Stanley Benfell, *The Biblical Dante* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), chapter 4.
12. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, 15.
13. All prose translations of this canto are from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (trans. John D. Sinclair; New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 1:383–89.
14. Sinclair, *Divine Comedy*, 1:393.
15. Some Old Latin manuscripts of Genesis label Nimrod as a giant; cf. Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 39; and Edward Moore, *Studies in Dante: Scripture and Classical Authors in Dante* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 73–74.
16. Augustine, *City of God* 16.4, interpreting two possible meanings of the Latin preposition used in Gen 10:9.
17. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.4.2; available in Latin translations throughout the medieval period.
18. Dronke, *Medieval Latin Traditions*, 46.
19. Sinclair, *Divine Comedy*, 1:392.
20. Dante Alighieri, *Dante: De Vulgari Eloquentia* (trans. Steven Botterill; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13, translating *De Vulgari Eloquentia* 1.6.
21. Sinclair, *Divine Comedy*, 3:379.
22. Benfell, *Biblical Dante*, 75.
23. Brenda Deen Schildgen, "Temporal Dispensations: Dante's 'tèodia' and John's 'alto preconio' in Canto 26, *Paradiso*," *Stanford Italian Review* 11 (1991): 182; cf. Benfell, *Biblical Dante*, 226.
24. Botterill, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, xxi. Dante's focus on the confusion of languages from people to people and town to town connects also to "the rampant factionalism that Dante saw as a basic evil of his own and other Italian cities." Ascoli, *Making of a Modern Author*, 173.
25. These biblical aspects of the Examination Cantos are interpreted in Benfell, *Biblical Dante*, 61–78, and Ascoli, *Making of a Modern Author*, 369–405.
26. Ascoli, *Making of a Modern Author*, 82.
27. *Ibid.*, 377.

28. *Paradiso* 24–25; Ascoli, *Making of a Modern Author*, 376–82; cf. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments*, chapter 3, for ample interpretation of the “John is with me” line.
29. Trans. Ascoli, *Making of a Modern Author*, 370. Italics added.
30. *Ibid.*, 400.
31. Benfell, *Biblical Dante*, 77.
32. Flannery O'Connor, *Good Things out of Nazareth: The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends* (ed. Benjamin B. Alexander; New York: Convergent, 2019), 169.
33. Among many, I note Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982); Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982); Richard Giannone, *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, *Flannery O'Connor: Fiction Fired by Faith* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).
34. Jordan Cofer, *The Gospel According to Flannery O'Connor: Examining the Role of the Bible in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
35. Feeley, *Voice of the Peacock*, 141–77.
36. Sallie McFague, “The Parabolic in Faulkner, O'Connor, and Percy,” *Notre Dame English Journal* 15 (1983): 49–66; and John R. May, *The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976). For more analyses of O'Connor's use of the Bible, see Giannone, *Mystery of Love*; and Cofer, *Gospel*.
37. May, *Pruning Word*, xxiv. I came to my own view of O'Connor's stories as parables through teaching both them and courses on Jesus' parables, but I find that my view aligns well with the older one of May's book.
38. David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions Across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 218–23.
39. Asals, *Imagination of Extremity*, 228, quoting also from the classic Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 7.
40. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 34, cited in McFague, “Parabolic,” 55.
41. McFague, “Parabolic,” 50, 57.
42. Cf. McFague, “Parabolic,” 49.
43. *Ibid.*, 49.
44. *Ibid.*, 57, quoting O'Connor herself.
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## Chapter 8

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## Conclusion

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