Niamh Bhalla

III Visual Arts

At the core of the biblical narratives is the fluctuating relationship of "the people of God" – variously conceived over time – with God, and with other peoples of the earth. In both Jewish and Christian art, visual responses to scriptural narratives related to the idea of people groups have often relied on received pictorial conventions, not necessarily related to ethnographic realities. At times representations of such groups have been conceived as a close illustration of biblical stories, while at other times they appear in imagery that goes beyond the information conveyed in the related scriptural account, reflecting more so the context in which the image was created. Even in close illustrations of narrative accounts, however, the representation of people groups responded to a certain extent to the sociopolitical environment in which the imagery was made. Overall, it can be said that the complexity of such imagery increased over time, and that both the stories and their representations pivoted on ideas of self and other, expressed according to how those boundaries were perceived by those making the images.

In the HB/OT, "the people of Israel" referred at one and the same time to descent from Jacob and to covenantal peoplehood (see "Israel, People of"). Early narratives in the book of Genesis attempt retrospectively to account for the origin of God's chosen people and for the diversity evident among earth's people groups. The earliest visualization of people groups in relation to these scriptural accounts survive from late antiquity and the representation of difference was influenced by Greco-Roman conventions. An early 5th-century floor mosaic in the Huqoq synagogue, recently excavated in Lower Eastern Galilee, for example, exemplifies the reception in Jewish art of Greco-Roman traditions related to the representation of diversity. The representation of the tower of Babel, an illustration of Gen 11:1–9, in the central nave shows workers of different skin colors building this towering embodiment of hubris: they quarry, transport, and lift stones in their attempt to reach the heavens. Fights occur, between these workers of differing skin colors, presaging the ensuing division of humankind into different linguistic groups scattered all over the earth – God's response to their audacious feat.

Earlier accounts in the book of Genesis account for the origins of earth's people from Noah's descendants who settled the known world after the flood (Gen 10). By the 12th century, five groups representing the division of Noah's descendants into different people groups were found in Eastern Christian images. Here again epidermal differentiation was used to express the idea

of diverse people groups. Byzantine Octateuchs (illuminated volumes of the eight OT books from Genesis to Ruth) from the 11th and 12th centuries, for example, incorporated dark-skinned peoples in illustrations of the descendants of Noah. Black people were seldom represented in medieval Jewish and Christian art. When they were, their portrayal as generic "Ethiopians" – dark skinned peoples understood to have received greater sun exposure – was influenced by Greco-Roman conventions. The second group in the illustration in the Seraglio Octateuch (ca. 1150, Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayi Library, cod. G.I.8, fol. 64v), for example, comprises dark-skinned people exclusively. They wear only loincloths and hold weapons as co-signifiers of their "otherness" (see "Other, Otherness VII. Visual Arts"). The image does not accurately illustrate the scriptural lists or known ethnographical features but refers rather generally to the idea that Noah's sons and their descendants occupied the various regions of the known world, conveying the concept of difference through established types.

The Israelites were most often represented as generic, classically attired persons. In Christian art they were sometimes framed as a typological foreshadowing of the church as the new people of God in representations like the crossing of the Red Sea, often understood as a prophetic type for baptism. In a 9th-century illuminated manuscript of the *Homilies* of Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, the image, which includes classically draped Israelites, directly prefaces his sermon "On Baptism" (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS gr. 510, fol. 264v). Jaś Elsner discusses further typological uses of this image in early Christian art, demonstrating how the appropriation of Roman military and civilian attire for the Egyptians and Israelites respectively, along with the use of Roman iconographic formulae pertaining to the family and *pietas* in the representation of this Jewish theme, found prominently on late-4th-century Christian sarcophagi, heralded the triumph of the newly imperial Christian religion over pagan oppression. The Israelite families escaping from the Egyptians dressed in Roman military gear formed a carefully considered typological analogy for the release of Christians from the persecution of pagan Rome.

Specific identifying signifiers were sometimes included in representations of the Israelites, however. Numbers 15:37–41 concerns clothing requirements given to Moses for God's people, namely garments with fringes (*tsitsit*) on their corners to be worn for prayer by males. Attempts to represent the Israelites by means of this garment were found in late antique and medieval art, such as the 3rd-century painting of Moses receiving the Law in the Dura-Europos Synagogue. In later Christian art, this often-striped prayer shawl (*tallit*) manifested as an attribute for the Jews – the remnant from the tribe of Judah that survived the Babylonian exile, increasingly understood

as Israel from the Second Temple period. Striped garments cover the heads of the Jerusalemites in the mosaic of the entry into Jerusalem in the Dormition Church in Daphni Monastery near Athens, ca. 1100. Exodus 13:16 and Deut 6:4–9; 11:18 describe the tefillin – small boxes containing scriptural passages – to be worn on the forehead and left arm except for Sabbaths and festivals. Individual Jews, particularly priests, rather than groups, were sometimes differentiated by this signifier in Orthodox Christian art.

Tension between the ethnic and elected dimension of belonging to the people of Israel grew within the Christian tradition from the time of the NT, particularly as non-Jews were admitted to the faith and the church increasingly identified as the new people of God. Some of the most intriguing representations of people groups in relation to scripture pertained to Pentecost (Acts 2:5–12) – when Jesus's disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and the church was born. The iconography, established by the 6th century, evolved in the 9th century to represent the "Jews from every nation" who were present and converted to Christianity that day in Jerusalem, symbolizing the new and emerging ethnic diversity of God's people which would only increase as gentiles were admitted thereafter. There were two different modes of representing these "nations" in Byzantine art. A pared-down metonymic type comprised two people – one black and one of a lighter skin tone – underneath the seated disciples, perpetuating the use of skin color to convey ideas of difference. The pair embodied the imminent shift in the boundaries between self and other – the evolving demography of "Israel" – and the new reach of the apostolic mission (e.g., ca. 1059, Mount Athos, Greece, Dionysiou Monastery, Codex 587, fol. 212v). The more developed version reached its apogee in the greatly restored 12th-century mosaic in the western dome of San Marco, Venice, where the twelve seated apostles receiving the Holy Spirit represent the new Israel which would supplant, and eventually sit to judge, the original twelve tribes (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:28–30). Here the nations appear as pairs of older and younger men in the sixteen interstices between the windows of the drum according to those listed in Acts. The 9th century onwards witnessed greater interest in differentiating between self and other by means of dress and physiognomy, but the detailed variations in appearance here amongst the nations still lacked observational veracity, amounting to what Otto Demus (154) has termed a "pseudo-realism." Those labelled "ARABE" wear white toga-like garments and dark turbans with no ethnographic basis: their appearance attests more so to the perceived otherness of Arabs in contemporary Venice.

A pivotal Christian iconography for the representation of people groups came with Byzantine images of the last judgment. This complex iconography was based on a plethora of scriptural passages from the Old and New Testaments, with the inhabitants of heaven and hell determined by social realities, rather than scripture. The framing parable – the separation of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31–46) – left ample scope for an imaginative figural interpretation. The identities of the archetypal sinners in the lake of fire to Christ's left in 11th- and 12th-century images were revealed primarily through their headdress. These figures also lacked ethnographical accuracy: they represented broad categories considered transgressive, communicating more about those creating the image than those represented. The late-11th-century mosaic on the western wall of the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta on the island of Torcello assigned people groups to their proper place at the final judgment with turbaned figures representing Muslims and those in white tasselled turbans probably representing Jews, reflecting the atmosphere in Europe around the First Crusade.

Greater complexity and attempts at ethnographical accuracy emerged in post-Byzantine last judgments. The Byzantine iconography continued after the Ottoman conquests in the Balkans, but there was a distinct shift in Orthodox countries north of the Danube towards greater specificity and verisimilitude in the representation of those to Christ's left. 15th-century icons from Grand Lithuania, Ukraine, and Muscovite Russia, and Moldavian murals from the 16th century, attempted greater accuracy through headdress, hairstyle, inscription, and increasingly attire because there were now full-length groupings outside the lake who face Christ, seemingly awaiting judgment. A 16th-century Russian icon (tempera on wood, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Sweden) comprises eight groups identified by Slavonic inscription in two registers, including Jews (inscription effaced), an unidentified group, Turks, Orthodox Russians, Poles, the brave Lithuanians, and Germans. Whereas earlier images represented the enemies of Christ/social others within a given context, many later images presented a neutral representation of "the nations" that Matt 25:32 says will be brought before Christ for judgment, explaining why this icon included Russia and its allies on the "hellish" side of the image. However, the inclusion of the ethnic groups most pertinent to those making the image, whether through conflict or merely exposure, is still evident. The Jews still feature prominently in these early modern images, often as the first group, due to their eschatological significance. Such images continued until the 18th century and increasingly reflected direct exposure to included groups such as in the

Church of the Saviour in Rostov the Great, ca. 1675, where Latin sinners wear high fashionable hats accurately reflecting contemporary styles.

In medieval art in Western Europe, the three sons of Noah – Japheth, Shem, and Ham – came to be understood as the settlers of Europe, Asia, and Africa, respectively, after their dispersion to different regions following the flood. This understanding of the "table of nations" (Gen 10) was sometimes represented visually by means of tripartite T-O style "maps" (*mappae mundi*) based on the no-longer-extant drawings by Christian bishop Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636) in his *De natura rerum* (612–15) and *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX* (622–33). These Isidorian schematic diagrams were still in circulation with his encyclopedia at the advent of print (see the woodcut copy of his *Etymologiarum* by Günther Zainer, 1472, first page of chapter 14, London, British Library, IB. 5441; see fig. 23). These biblical persons, represented only by means of their names on this map (here Sem, Lafeth, and Cham), became representatives of the known world's people groups in this way, though they were rarely represented in ethnographic terms even in later art.

The largest preserved medieval map, the Hereford World Map (ca. 1300, now in the treasury of Hereford Cathedral, Hereford, UK), did incorporate figural representation in its enigmatic and highly symbolic rendering of the known world. This "map" of the ecumene, also based on a circle divided into a tripartite plan encompassing the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, was originally painted in bright colors and gold on white vellum. The three areas of the map are populated with Latin and Anglo-Norman inscriptions and a plethora of neatly delineated drawings, including architectural structures and peoples and animals – biblical, historical, and imaginary. The whole is imbued with religious significance through the inclusion of defining events of the Christian faith; most notably the last judgment at the top of the map which frames the mapping of the world below as determined by a teleological Christian history that would culminate at the eschaton. Marcia Kupfer has reinterpreted the reversal of the names of AFFRICA and EUROPA in the lower left and right quadrants of the map, respectively, according to a reversed T-O schema (with Asia occupying the upper half), not as an erroneous deviation but as the imposition of the subjectivity and perspective of Christ upon the known world which places the viewer within Christ's purview and a "sustained meditation on the reciprocity of human and divine speculation" (Kupfer: 123).

In this way, the map was less concerned with the communication of geographical knowledge for its own sake and more so with commentary on the intersection between the divine and the world. Similarly to the last judgment, there were attempts within it to place those represented in terms of God's chosen people and the other, perhaps most strikingly in relation to the Jews in the Exodus imagery therein. The image of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf (Exod 32) in the upper right quadrant of the map shows a small group of kneeling figures dressed not as the usual classically attired Israelites that predominate in most Christian art in Western Europe but as quasi-monastic figures with a noticeably hooked nose and bulging eye that are clearly caricatured and defined as negative signifiers by means of the idolatrous activity that they participate in. A small ugly demonic idol defecates on the altar – potentially creating an early visual association of the Jews with host desecration and just punishment. Debra Higgs Strickland identifies the long blank scroll between the idol and the Israelites as symbolic of their fallacious understanding of their own scriptures (Strickland: 432).

Where the Israelites were normally portrayed classically, as in earlier art, as the original people of God, in this map they were represented pejoratively as contemporary Jews, confirmed by the bright red inscription above their heads which renders the idolators as "Judei." Strickland has related their treatment on the map to the expulsion of Jews from medieval England in 1290 under the persecutions of King Edward I (1239–1307). Placing representations of negatively glossed Exodus narratives within a purportedly complete cartographic context provided justification for contemporary events by demonstrating why the Jews were no longer the chosen people of God, according to a polarised supercessionist history that placed the Christian "gens Anglorum" as the new guardians of sacred history (Strickland: 430). The mapping exercise was less about cartography so much as a Christian interpretation of the ecumene.

Elsewhere, representations that had elicited attempts to convey ethnographic difference in Byzantine art were generally portrayed as a mirror of European societies in terms of physiognomy and dress. The tower of Babel demonstrated more so an interest in the formidable architecture of the structure itself, often reflecting Western European built traditions, such as in the painted miniature of the building of the tower of Babel in the Bedford Hours (ca. 1420–30, London, British Museum, Add. Ms. 18850, fol. 19v). The tower is based loosely on a Western castle and Noah's descendants, who are in the process of building it, are white laborers in European dress, bringing the meaning of the story and its warning concerning pride and hubris to its immediate context. The famous paintings by Pieter Bruegel (ca. 1525/30–1569) became

the most widely emulated version of the theme in Western Europe. The building, modelled after the Roman Colosseum but inflected by Romanesque forms, became the focus of the scene, but the inclusion of a tiny Flemish port and diminutive European figures made clear that the warning remained pertinent for the present (oil on wood panel, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Different people types sometimes made an appearance in last judgment images, such as the black figure with a head covering in the mass of entwined figures in the lower left quadrant of Michelangelo's famous iteration in the Sistine Chapel (fresco, 1536–41, Vatican City), but there were no neatly systematic attempts to represent the idea of "the nations" in Western versions beyond occasional individuals within a general throng of resurrected bodies.

Interest in representing different people types in relation to biblical narratives evolved from around 1400, particularly as trade with western and sub-Saharan Africa increased as a result of exploration and exploitation, primarily led by the Iberian peninsula. At that point representations of the adoration of the magi (the Epiphany) – the three magi who came from the East to worship the Christ child (Matt 2:1–12) – began to be associated with the three continents. Thus, Balthasar was included as a youthful black magus to the extent that the appearance of one of the magi was even "corrected" retrospectively in manuscripts (Kaplan: esp. 100–101). This image became one of the most poignant demonstrations of increased exposure and interest in difference, such as Jan Gossaert's *The Adoration of the Kings* (oil on oak, 1510–15, National Gallery, London; *see* → plate 15). It conveyed a similar concept to Eastern images of Pentecost – that Christ had opened salvation to all. But there was an implied hierarchy of some sort because these images consistently placed Balthasar in the furthest position from Jesus with no geographical rationale based on distance traveled to meet the Christ child, only lesser proximity to those who had created the image. The representation of the magi in this way also greatly exceeded the information concerning them in the passage devoted to them in Matthew's gospel, demonstrating once again the reflection and projection of current realities concerning self and other onto biblical imagery. Balthasar continued to appear in this way in later periods such as in the tapestry cartoon for the *Adoration of the Magi* after Edward Burne-Jones (photographic paper heightened with bodycolor and watercolor, 1888, Victoria & Albert Museum, London). The magi, one of the earliest narrative scenes represented from the Gospels, held an enduring appeal not least because of the potential to represent peoples of the world submitting to Christ, and those people, as in other biblical scenes, very often reflected contemporary realities.

As Christianity increasingly intersected with Asian visual traditions as a result of European trade and conquest there also, 17th-century images of the Virgin and Child themselves were modelled at times on the figure of Guanyin, the Chinese female deity (based on the Indian male bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara), known as the "giver of children" when represented with an infant, such as the *Virgin and Child* from Dehua, China (porcelain, 1690–1710, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapur). By the same token, already in the 16th century, Jesuit missionaries in China had been surprised to see Buddhists bow before the statue of the Virgin Mary and Child, not initially recognizing that these Buddhists perceived it as a statue of Guanyin in female form, comforting a child (see "Guanyin"). Artists in Dehua in the Fujian province adapted known models to express the message of Christ's incarnation, often for export to Catholic Portuguese markets.

The representation of peoples in ways that reflected the context of the image more often than not exceeded the accidental slippage of familiar visual conventions into the creation of Christian art, despite the sustained use of convention over ethnographically accurate renderings. In every period and place the scriptural message has been willfully imagined in familiar terms to convey its theological and social relevance in that present context. In the 20th century, as the growth of Christianity burgeoned in the "Global South," these same biblical stories were reimagined in innovative ways that reflected their context, oftentimes inflected by the aesthetic conventions of modern and contemporary art more generally. Pulidindi Solomon Raj's (1921–2019) *Pentecost* (batik, 1980s, current location unknown) is an abstracted but powerful and expressive rendering of the birth of the church. The physiognomies of the disciples, bathed in the fire of the Holy Spirit, reflected the image's Indian context, connecting contemporary viewers to the biblical message concerning the spread of the gospel to every nation and people. Solomon Raj, who was a Lutheran theologian and artist from a Dalit background, used widely available and largely inexpensive materials – primarily woodcut, linocut, and batik. Although he did not dwell on his background in his writings, many of his biblical works critiqued and challenged the caste-based treatment of people groups in the present based on Jesus's challenge of comparable systems and boundaries related to people groups in the Gospels; repeated themes in his works such as the woman at the well based on the scriptural narrative of Jesus taking a drink of water from a Samaritan woman, breaking gender and sociocultural/religious prohibitions, commented indirectly but powerfully on the caste system in South Indian villages where Dalits were not permitted to take water from the wells of those from

a higher caste (Löwner: 468). Solomon Raj represented this theme many times during his artistic career in etchings, batik, paintings, linoleum and wood cuts, such as his woodcut entitled “The Living Water” in his 2010 book of woodcuts, *St. John’s Gospel: A Gallery of Hieratic Art* (Raj: 7). Given that high proportions of Christians in India come from Dalit backgrounds, the very act of populating Gospel scenes with Indian people becomes an embodiment of liberation theology; a visual challenge to the prevailing socioeconomic and religious context.

Since the earliest visual responses to scriptural stories implicating people groups, images inevitably responded to ideas of difference and those considered self and other in each context. Israel as a concept was consistently at the heart of this in relation to Jewish and Christian art. What these visual responses held in common was that they reveal more about those making the image than those represented.

Bibliography

Bhalla, N., *Experiencing the Last Judgement* (London 2021). [Esp. 142–53]

Brubaker, L., *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-century Byzantium* (Cambridge 1999). [Esp. 217–20]

Demus, O., *The Mosaics of San Marco in Venice*, vol. 1.1 (Chicago, IL/London 1984). [Esp. 148–59]r

Elsner, J., “‘Pharaoh’s Army Got Drownded’: Some Reflections on Jewish and Roman Genealogies in Early Christian Art,” in *Judaism and Christian Art: Aesthetic Anxieties from the Catacombs to Colonialism* (ed. H. L. Kessler/D. Nirenberg; Philadelphia, PA 2011) 10–44.

Garidis, M., “La représentation des ‘Nations’ dans la peinture post-Byzantine,” *Byzantion* 39 (1969) 86–103.

Grabar, A., “La représentation des ‘Peuples’ dans les images du jugement dernier, en Europe Orientale,” *Byzantion* 50.1 (1980) 186–97.

Kaplan, P. H. D., *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor, MI 1985).

Kupfer, M., *Art and Optics in the Hereford Map: An English Mappa Mundi* (Ann Arbor, MI 2016).

Löwner, G., "Christian Art and Architecture in Asia," in *Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (ed. F. Wilfred; Oxford 2014) 458–74.

Magness, J. et al., "Inside the Huqoq Synagogue," *BAR* 45.3 (2019) 24–38.

Raj, P. S., *St. John's Gospel: A Gallery of Hieratic Art* (Vijayawada 2010).

Strickland, D. H., "Edward I, Exodus, and England on the Hereford World Map," *Spec* 93.2 (2018) 420–69.Search in Google Scholar

Weitzmann, K./M. Bernabò, *The Byzantine Octateuchs*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ 1999).Search in Google Scholar