

John Skillen
Putting Art in its Place

(Part 3) The Place of Narrative

Chapter 11: Parallel Stories, or Typology

I have used the phrase “parallel stories” a number of times in this book in reference to occasions when striking similarities are spotted or drawn by thinkers, writers, and artists of the medieval-Renaissance period between events that occur in different times or places to different people. Saint Francis “was like Moses in drawing water from the rock,” observes Bonaventure. In Gregory’s *Life of Benedict*, young Peter’s ‘ah ha!’ moment occurs when he suddenly apprehends a distinct set of parallels between Benedict and various scriptural characters:

“This whole account is really amazing. The water streaming from the rock reminds me of Moses, and the iron blade that rose from the bottom of the lake, of Elisha. The walking on the water recalls St. Peter; the obedience of the raven, Elijah; and the grief at the death of an enemy, David. This man must have been filled with the spirit of all the just.” [chap 8; pp. 25-26 in booklet translation; list the scripture references]

The story of the Virgin Mary’s birth to her barren and elderly parents Joachim and Anna places her birth in the sequence of miraculous births to old childless couples that mark God’s design in history: Abraham and Sarah, Samuel’s parents, John the Baptist’s parents. Parallels between the descents of Orpheus and Christ into the underworld to retrieve their beloved are spotted in the early centuries of Christianity, as are parallels between the poet-singer-harpists Orpheus and David who can calm the forces of nature – which makes them like Jesus who calmed the storm with his word, “Peace, be still.” In his *Oration in praise of Constantine* [chap 14, paragraph 5] Eusebius (ca. 260-340) compares the singers:

Thus, I say, did our common Saviour prove himself the benefactor and preserver of all, displaying his wisdom through the instrumentality of his human nature, even as a musician uses the lyre to evince his skill. The Grecian myth tells us that Orpheus had power to charm ferocious beasts, and tame their savage spirit, by striking the chords of his instrument with a master hand: and this story is celebrated by the Greeks, and generally believed, that an unconscious instrument could subdue the untamed brute, and draw the trees from their places, in obedience to its melodious power. But he who is the author of perfect harmony, the all-wise Word of God, desiring to apply every remedy to the manifold diseases of the souls of men, employed that human nature which is the workmanship of his own wisdom, as an instrument by the melodious strains of which he soothed, not indeed the brute creation, but savages endued with reason; healing each furious temper, each fierce and angry passion of the soul, both in civilized and barbarous nations, by the remedial power of his Divine doctrine. Like a physician of perfect skill, he met the diseases of their souls who sought for God in nature and in bodies, by a fitting and kindred remedy, and showed them God in human form. [from translation available on-line]

In the first chapter, I highlighted the painters’ strategy of organizing visual space to highlight parallels (sometimes inverse parallels) between episodes. The Queen of Sheba and Empress Helena both kneel in worship before the wood of the Cross on opposite sides of the chapel frescoed by Piero della Francesca; the stories of the rulers Theophilus and Nero unfold in three-part parallels on opposite sides of the Brancacci Chapel. In the second chapter, I highlighted

how the Lectionary is purposefully designed to draw out such bi-focaled perception between readings from Old and New Testaments.

In fact, a particular attentiveness to parallel relations between actions or characters in different stories was one of the habits of mind and imagination and perception that define the culture of medieval and Renaissance Christendom – one of the fundamental “categories of the period eye,” to use Baxandall’s phrase.

This lens was fostered and exercised by a way of interpreting the Scriptures that kept a keen eye out for parallels – or types – between the Old and New Testaments. This play of mind that became commonly labeled as *typology*, and involves seeing an Old Testament event or person or object as a foreshadowing of the New, as a “type.” A type is not an analogy that our poetic mind creatively invents and imposes on the facts, but rather is something understood to have been intended in the divine orchestration of history that an attuned mind and eye *discovers*.

The authority for seeking and recognizing parallels between events was understood to be Christ himself, who speaks in this manner on several occasions recorded in the Gospels. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says: “And *just as* Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15, NSRV).

[footnote: The reference is to Numbers 21: 7-9: “The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

Matthew recounts the encounter between Jesus and “some of the scribes and Pharisees” who asked for a sign that he was the Messiah:

But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. *For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.* The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because *they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!* The Queen of the south [Sheba] will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!” (12: 38-42).

In John chapter 6, Jesus draws the parallel between the manna given to the Israelites in the Exodus and the “true bread” of his own flesh, when the crowd follows him across the Lake to Capernaum after having been fed by the few loaves and fishes, asking Jesus:

“What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? ... Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ... I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it

and not die ... and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (6: 30-32, 48-51)

The authorization for this *hermeneutic* (as the theologians might call it) – this mode of biblical interpretation that keeps an eye out for parallel stories – comes from Christ. However, we might just as well note the relative infrequency of the times when Jesus draws an explicit analogy between himself and an Old Testament event or person, in proportion to the manners of speaking (telling parables, for instance) that mark his discourse as a whole.

The epistle writers of the New Testament amplified (rather than setting aside) Jesus’s own ‘principle of exegesis’. Perhaps we can imagine the disciples, their “minds opened to understand the Scriptures” (as Luke recounts Jesus’s action on the Road to Emmaus 24:45), as able and excited to see more clearly and fully in hindsight the multifold ways in which the life and work of Christ was the climax not of a brand new plot but of a narrative that God had been ‘writing’ episode by episode throughout history. “When ‘the plot’ in a story is told to us,” as Margaret Visser observes, we expect “not just a jumble of facts, but a string or connecting line to join them, disclosing causes, consequences, even form.”

In his first epistle, Peter explains:

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison [*this phrase is one of the passages understood to support the descent of Christ into Hell between his death and resurrection*], who in former times did not obey when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, *which this prefigured*, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. (1 Peter 3:18-22)

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul develops the reverse parallel between the first and second Adam: “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15: 21-22).

The epistle most fully informed by a sense of Old Testament events and people and objects as “shadows” and “types” of their fulfillment in Christ and the New Covenant is (not surprisingly) the letter to the Hebrew believers – whose heritage could be expected to have trained their eye for such parallels.

In chapter 3, the writer takes up Jesus’s own comparison of himself with Moses:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also “was faithful in all God’s house” [see Numbers 12: 7]. Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, *just as* the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (Hebrews 3: 1-3)

And in chapter 5, the writer parallels the priesthood of Christ with that other Old Testament figure whose priesthood was unique, outside the Levitical order, namely Melchizedek:

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” [Psalm 2: 7]; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” [Psalm 110: 4]. (Hebrews 5: 5-6, 10)

This parallel between Melchizedek and Christ occupies the entirety of chapter 7, concluding in chapter 8 with the very terms of “shadows” and types applied to the priests of the old covenant who served (who performed their liturgy) “at a sanctuary that is a *copy and shadow* of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the *pattern* shown you on the mountain’.” (8:5).

The theologians and commentators of the age of the church fathers took the ball and ran with it, as we might say, finding and exploring typological parallels in Old Testament stories beyond the few explicitly drawn by Christ and the epistle writers.

[FN: Refer to Lubac and Foutz for examples from Tertullian, Augustine, Irenaeus, Origen]

It took only a few centuries for the theologians and commentators to schematize – and for the clergy and laity to digest – three dimensions in which an historical episode at the *literal* level might prefigure or foreshadow later events, or signify other and deeper levels of meaning. (1) The *allegorical* meaning of the story concerns its foreshadowing of events in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. [Fn: This is the technical meaning of the term used in contexts of typology. The word, from the Greek *allegorein* for ‘otherspeak’ or figurative or veiled language, has a long and complex history, including its use by Paul in Galatians describing his comparison of Sarah and Hagar, “these things are said *allegorically*”] (2) A second dimension of the type-episode, labeled as its *tropological* meaning, draws out those moral or spiritual lessons applicable to our own life. (3) Finally, the *anagogical* significance of the episode raises the stakes, prefiguring the final fulfillment of the story in a promised and hoped for but not yet accomplished heavenly kingdom. (We might otherwise call this the *eschatological* interpretation of the earlier or historically-literal event.)

My own metaphor for this multivalent way of viewing the Scriptures is as wearing a pair of glasses with trifocal bands under the main lens through which we see the real events unfolding before us. Tip the head back a bit, and what is brought into focus is how the passage points us to Christ; tip a bit more and allow the passage to reveal its implications for our own lives; tip back a bit more to peer far into the distance and consider the culmination and fulfillment when God inaugurates the eternal reign of the Lamb.

[FN: quote some of the clear passages from prominent medieval theologians, such as Augustine on anagogy in the *Ad genesi ad litteram*: “In all the holy books those things are to be looked for which are indicated as having to do with eternity” [qtd Auerbach, p. 42]

What scholars now call the “figural interpretation” of the Scriptures according to the four levels of meaning remained an active *hermeneutic* for a thousand years. Its summary in a simple rhyme indicates its ubiquity across all social strata:

Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,

Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.

The letter teaches what happened, allegory what you should believe, Morality teaches what you should do, anagogy what mark you should be aiming for (or, where you are going).

[(attributed to the Dominican friar Augustine of Daci, around 1260) cited, among several places, by Lubac on Vol1,p. 1; who cites another version on p. 272:

Dicitur *historicus* quem verba ipsa resignant,
Et *allegoricus* priscis qui ludit in umbris;
Moralis per quem vivendi norma tenetur,
Quid vero speres *anagogicus* altius offert.

St. Thomas Aquinas provides an authoritative summary in the *Summa Theologiae* [1a, q. 1, art. 10]:

For, as St. Paul says, “The Old Law is the figure of the New,” and the New Law itself, as Dionysius says, “is the figure of the glory to come.” Then again, under the New Law the deeds wrought by our Head are signs of what we ourselves ought to do. Well then, the *allegorical sense* is brought into play when the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law; the *moral sense* when the things done in Christ and in those who prefigured him are signs of what we should carry out; and the *anagogical sense* when the things that lie ahead in eternal glory are signified.

[Latin in footnote:

Sicut enim dicit Apostolus ad hebr. “Lex vetus figura est novae legis,” et ipsa nova lex, ut Dionysius dicit, est figura future gloriae.” In nova etiam lege et quae in capite sunt gesta sunt signa eorum quae nos agree debemus.

*Secundum ergo quod ea quae sunt veteris legis significant ea quae sunt novae legis est **sensus allegoricus**; secundum vero quod ea quae in Christo sunt facta vel in his quae Christum significant sunt signa eorum quae nos agree debemus est **sensus moralis**; prout vero significant ea quae sunt in aeterna Gloria est **sensus anagogicus**.*

[cited in Giuseppe Mazzotta’s *Dante: Poet of the Desert* (Princeton, 1979, pp. 240-41, footnoting the translation found in the Blackfriars edition (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1964)]

As my endnotes indicate, the magisterial history and analysis of the “four senses of Scripture” is that of Henri de Lubac in his lengthy study of *Medieval Exegesis*, to which my discussion, as all recent scholarship about typology, is indebted. Modern *literary* scholarship is indebted to Erich Auerbach, whose essays offered a necessary corrective to a quite different modern understanding of “allegory” whereby a symbol or allegory no longer has any “literal” relevance once it has done its job of pointing the reader’s or viewer’s attention to the concept or idea it stands in for.

In the earlier view, actions in the past are not thereby any less real or “historical” because they are fulfilled in later events. [Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” p. 29] But they are understood not to enter into the fullness of their own meaning until a later event both confirms their place as episodes in a larger unfolding narrative but also supersedes them. Their status is modified from being climactic episodes in their own narrative to being preliminary episodes foreshadowing the true climax to come.

Take, for example, the bronze serpent set up on a pole by Moses, which brought healing from the plague to those Israelites who looked up at it. This pole was not a symbol drained of

relevance once Jesus was lifted up on the Cross to bring healing to those who believe. Moses's action, and the action of the bronze serpent, really happened; it really marked God's patient care for his often-recalcitrant people in leading them from Egypt to the Promised Land. The long series of such carings are brought to their true climax, not to their erasure, in the actions of God's only begotten Son Jesus.

In a sense, the ability to see the changing status of an event as the trajectory of a plot becomes clear is the stuff of all *narrative capacity*. It is exercised, for example, in the genre of detective mysteries as we try to sort out the clues that are relevant from those irrelevant as the writer doles these clues out. The "penny doesn't drop" until the event occurs that reveals the "plot," retroactively confirming earlier episodes as relevant (or not).

[Fn?] Coherent narration of our personal life follows the same pattern. One of my earliest memories (and likewise of Susan Johnson) was the traumatic event on Thanksgiving day in 1958 when the middle daughter of the visiting Johnson family and I went out back after the big dinner to play catch – and to look after Susie's little sister. We set Nancy to retrieving the balls that we missed – which she did diligently, even the one that rolled into the slimy slippery goldfish pond at the back of the yard. We screamed; someone ran to fish her out of the drink; her brand new pink winter coat was ruined; Nancy was carried upstairs to the bathroom by the mothers for a hot bath; and we received a memorable scolding. A big little event at the time, likely to be forgotten as the years passed – if our mothers had not maintained faithful friendship through letter-writing as the families moved variously around the country. Instead, it became not the tragi-comic climax of Thanksgiving Day, but the earliest episode in my now oft-repeated plot-summary of four decades of marriage: "so began a lifetime of getting in trouble together."

In fact, the set of typologically-interpreted stories referred to in the New Testament and expanded by the early church fathers did not remain a closed collection. Why not accept the possibility of much of the Old Testament being "typological"?

Although not mentioned as such in the New Testament, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac readily invites interpretation as a "type" of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and from two angles of vision. Abraham is asked to sacrifice his only begotten son, but is granted a reprieve. The Heavenly Father allows Himself no reprieve in sacrificing His only Son. The substitutional ram in the Abraham story prefigures the atoning Lamb of God sacrificed on the altar of the cross. From one angle of vision, Isaac prefigures Christ. From another angle, the ram caught in the thicket is the type of Christ as the Lamb of God sacrificed in our place; Isaac prefigures *us*.

Views among theologians and commentators varied on the question of how much, exactly, of the historical-literal events and personages of the Old Testament scriptures were available to be looked at with the trifocals of allegory, tropology, and anagogy – even if the parallels between stories might not be obvious at first sight. One enormously significant example is the long and strong tradition in Catholic tradition of finding types of Mary – of the virgin who opened herself to God and opened her womb to the Holy Spirit yet remained a virgin – in the imagery of the Song of Solomon: "A *garden enclosed* is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (4:12 KJV).

A further expansion of the idea could follow from Paul's statement in Romans 1:20: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead." Why should not the "Book of God's World" as well as the "Book of God's Word" contain types and shadows?

That is, if God designed the unfolding of historical human time (sprinkling human history with signposts and signals), why couldn't he do the same with the created world of "nature"? An affirmative answer to this question underlies the long and popular medieval tradition of the Bestiaries, which highlight even among the birds and beasts behaviors that parallel the actions of God. If there's no food for her young, the pelican was thought to pierce her breast with her sharp bill, giving up her own lifeblood for the sake of her beloved children. This example explains a feature often confusing to my students when they see a bird's nest atop the cross in depictions of the Crucifixion with blood spurting from a big bird's breast into the waiting beaks of the young. It's the pelican, piercing her breast. Such an image of the pelican is found in the painted border above Fra Angelico's frescoed Crucifixion in the Chapter House of the Dominican Monastery San Marco in Florence. Across town in refectory of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, the pelican has built her nest on top of the Cross itself. The same image is found in the border above the Crucifixion in the Sacristy. And in the border immediately below the cross?: a small image of the Sacrifice of Isaac. [fn: This tradition of allegorizing the animals can be found as early as the second century in the *Physiologus*, a treatise of by an anonymous Christian author in Alexandria, Egypt.]

But then, extrapolating further from Paul's argument in Romans chapter 1 that "God's invisible qualities" have been "understood from what has been made, *so that people are without excuse,*" why might we not expect to find "types" and foreshadowings of Christ even in the myths and literature of valued cultures such as that of ancient Greece and Rome, even if they were without the revealed light of Christ?

The question was lively and controversial from the church fathers on. Tertullian (ca 200) gave the negative hard-line: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? The Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?" (Nothing) [fn: Prescriptions against Heretics; see, eg, Wolterstorff's fine article] Clement and the Cappodocian fathers and Augustine took a softer or more nuanced line, recognizing worthwhile truths in the classical writers. In *On Christian Doctrine* (chapter 40, Whatever has been rightly said by the heathen, we must appropriate to our uses), St. Augustine develops his famous metaphor of the 'Egyptian gold' that God instructed the Israelites to take with them on the Exodus to be used in building the tabernacle.

[Fn: "Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said anything that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God, the Egyptians themselves, in their ignorance, providing them with things which they themselves were not making a good use of; *in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them.* Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils. These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel. Their garments, also—that is, human institutions such as are adapted to that intercourse with men which is indispensable in this life—we must take and turn to a Christian use."]]

Myths and classical legendary heroes considered as such types have included figures such as Orpheus and Hercules. The plot of Virgil's Aeneid, with Aeneas's journey to found Rome,

offered parallels with God's call to Abraham to journey to a yet unknown but true homeland, and of Moses's journey with the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, with its prophecy of a virgin whose offspring will restore the Golden Age, was often cited as a sort of parallel type of Isaiah's prophecy of a Virgin who "shall conceive, and bear a son, whose name shall be called Emmanuel," and as a sign that Virgil was responding to the best of his lights to what God in his providence had given all peoples to work with.

In the *Purgatorio*, Dante daringly imagines the first-century Roman poet Statius, author of the epic poem the *Thebaid*, as having been set on the path of conversion to Christian faith by none other than his literary hero Virgil. Statius says to Virgil:

... "It was you who first
set me toward Parnassus to drink in its grottoes,
and you who first lit my way toward God.

You were as one who goes by night, carrying
the light behind him—it is no help to him,
but instructs all those who follow—

when you said [referring to the 4th Eclogue]: 'The centuries turn new again.
Justice returns with the first age of man,
and new progeny descends from heaven.'

Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian." (canto 22: lines 64-73; Hollander trans)

Statius then explains how Virgil's words "did so accord with the new preachers" – the apostles in Rome – that he began to visit them, and became a believer, although lacking courage to reveal his new-found faith:

More and more they seemed to me so holy
that when Domitian started with his persecutions
their weeping did not lack my tears.

While I remained on earth,
I gave them comfort. Their upright ways
made me despise all other sects.

I was baptized before, in my verses,
I had led the Greeks to the rivers of Thebes,
but, from fear, I stayed a secret Christian,

long pretending I was still a pagan." (lines 82-91)

This possibility of the compatibility of some of the teachings of the 'virtuous pagans' of the classical world with Christian doctrine and ethics was taken up with gusto by the Christian humanists of the 15th century. Influential Florentine humanists such as the Christian-Platonist Marsilio Ficino and the poet Angelo Poliziano, for instance, enjoyed the patronage of the Medici

family. Poliziano appears as the tutor of Lorenzo de Medici's children in the frescoes of the Sassetti Chapel, and Ficino (along with translating Plato into Latin) was tutor for the children of a cousin-branch of the family. In all likelihood, Botticelli's famous paintings of the Birth of Venus and Primavera were commissioned by this Medici cousin as bedroom decoration for his teenage son so that, through the boy's tutelage under Ficino, the boy might be led from the pleasures of worldly beauty to the higher spiritual beauty of divine things. E. H. Gombrich cites a letter from Ficino to young Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco (with a sort of cover letter to the boy's tutors) in which Ficino 'allegorizes' Venus and her Three Graces in various Trinitarian categories. Venus, Ficino writes in one passage, "is the mother of Grace, of Beauty, and of Faith. ... Beauty is nothing but Grace, that is of three things which descend ... from three celestial powers ... [one of which,] the Grace of intelligence and eloquence turns contemplation mainly towards himself and kindles it with the love of divine contemplation and Beauty." [fn, p. 59; cite Gombrich's essay "Botticelli's Mythologies" in *Symbolic Images*, especially pp. 41-62. Gombrich cites the passage [p.59] in a letter by Ficino in which he writes: "Just as the Christian theologians find four senses in the sacred word, the literal, the moral, the allegorical and anagogical, ... so have the Platonists four modes of multiplying the Gods and spirits and apply a different mode of multiplication in different places as it is fitting." Pico della Mirandola includes among his 900 theses the statement that one may understand the "unity of Venus in the trinity of the Graces" [p. 56]; and the humanist poet Christoforo Landino writes in his commentary on Dante's Divine Comedy that the trio of Mary, Lucy and Beatrice are three aspects of heavenly Grace, then citing St. Paul and David in support of the meanings of the three graces [p. 57].

Seeking such parallels between scriptural stories and characters and those of the classical world certainly provides the general context for the extensive depiction of classical writers surrounded by scenes from their works in the lower decorative zone in the San Brizio Chapel in the Orvieto Duomo. The question is whether Luca Signorelli's classical figures are intended more as counter-examples to the actions occurring on the main stage above them, or as foreshadowing pointers.

This question of just how far typological parallels can be found has evoked differing responses in every epoch of the church. At what point can such parallel stories be seen as arbitrary impositions with no reliable grounding in the literal-historical story? That is, how can we discriminate between reading meanings *into* a story through overly-imaginative *eisegesis* from apprehending through careful *exegesis* significances divinely intended? [fn in this case, the distinction between the terms in an essay in Wikipedia is helpful: **Eisegesis** ([/ˈaɪsəˈdʒiːsəs/](#); from the [Greek](#) preposition εἰς "into" and the ending from the English word [exegesis](#), Greek ἐξήγησις, which in turn is derived from ἐξηγεῖσθαι "to lead out")^[1] is the process of interpreting a text or portion of text in such a way that the process introduces one's own presuppositions, agendas, or biases into and onto the text. This is commonly referred to as *reading into* the text.]

Setting aside the "book of the world" or the books of the pagans, how far are we authorized to extend this principle of finding types and shadows of the things of Christ even in Old Testament personages and events? The unfettered search for a type in every verse was a bone of contention with the Protestant Reformers and their strong hermeneutic of *sola scriptura* and of the importance of the historical events themselves as set forth in the Old Testament. But these same concerns go back to the church fathers. Even Origen, for instance, states forcefully: "One should not suspect us of thinking that the Scripture does not contain real history, or that the precepts of the Law were not to be fulfilled in the letter, or that what has been written about the Savior has not sensibly taken place. ... *The truly historical passages are many more numerous than those that are to be taken in a purely spiritual sense.*" [cited in Lubac, vol. 2, p. 15; Lubac's discussion of the issue occupies the first section of vol 2; see vol 1, p. 9]

Finally, what limiting criterion would stop us from considering the possibility that even contemporary writers can write "typological" stories that include figures and actions that offer types and shadows, prefiguring (or should we say "post-figuring") the person and actions of

Christ? Plenty of people in the circles of evangelical Christianity in which I was raised see the Narnia Chronicles of C. S. Lewis operating in this mode, with Aslan the lion as a type of Christ, willingly allowing himself to be sacrificed on the White Witch's stone table in accordance with an old law, but who rises again through the power of an even deeper law.

Indeed, one of the most oft-cited explanations of the fourfold levels of meaning in Scripture is given by Dante himself in the public letter addressed to his patron, "Can Grande della Scala, Vicar General of the Principate of the Holy Roman Emperor in the town of Verona," to whom Dante dedicated the *Paradiso*. There Dante explains that his own *Divine Comedy* should be understood as written according to the same pattern.

And to make this matter of treatment clearer [writes Dante], it may be studied in the verse: 'When Israel came out of Egypt and the House of Jacob from among a strange people, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion.' [Psalm 114:1-2] For if we regard the *letter* alone, what is set before us is the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt in the days of Moses; if the *allegory*, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the *moral* sense, we are shown the conversion of the soul from the grief and wretchedness of sin to the state of *grace*; if the *anagogical*, we are shown the departure of the holy soul from the thralldom of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory. [Cited from the Penguin edition of the *Divine Comedy*, translated by Dorothy Sayers, pp. 14-15. Scholars such as John Freccero (Poetics of Conversion) and Giuseppe Mazzetti (Poet in Desert) show how typology is simply the stuff of Dante's imagination.] [Indeed, Psalm "in exitu de Egypto" is what the saved souls sing all together as soon as they've arrived on the shore of Mount Purgatory to complete the work of sanctification of their own character before ascending to join the church triumphant: all three of the dimensions of allegory, tropology and anagogy are keenly relevant to them at that moment.]

Dante, that is, is teaching Can Grande *how to read with typological lenses*, and to do so not only when reading scripture but when reading literature such as his own epic.

We saw this same lesson dramatized in Gregory's Life of Benedict – and made visually 'legible' in Sodoma's fresco cycle at Monte Oliveto – when Peter, the young *discipulus* to whom Gregory narrates the life of the saint, suddenly bursts out at the moment of recognition of typological parallels. But we should note Gregory's teacherly adjustment to young Peter's apprehension of similarities between Benedict and these scriptural heroes: "Actually, Peter, blessed Benedict possessed the Spirit of only one Person, the savior who fills the hearts of all the faithful by granting them the fruits of His Redemption." Gregory's comment emphasizes that the first step in wearing typological eyeglasses is to see types of *Christ* in figures of the Old Testament such as Moses and Elijah and Elisha and David; this is the lens of allegory. And then one can see and understand the parallels between the saints and Christ as the product of their Christ-likeness.

Moses foreshadows Christ. Saints, as we might say, post-shadow Christ. What is added when the lives of the saints enter the picture are the multi-faceted parallels between the saint and both the Old Testament type and Christ. Just as the biblical characters themselves bear tropological lessons for the present-day believer, so do the lives of the saints, who themselves can serve as an inspirational model for imitation.

A saint's life is a saintly life because it is more clearly composed of the string of episodes that marks the narrative of Christ, or of the great figures of Scripture. The saints are precisely those whose lives more fully embody an "imitation of Christ." Moses-like, Saints Benedict and Francis are vessels through which God provides water from a rock for thirsty people, the literal "rock"

signifying Christ as the source of living water. They, in imitation of Christ, cast out demons and heal the sick in His name. St. Francis's Stigmata and Death can be paralleled with Christ's Crucifixion and Death. Some (especially from Protestant traditions) have understood such parallels between a saint and Christ as detracting from Christ's preeminence, allowing the saint to become as a substitution for Christ. Rather, the parallels, the imitations, are signs of a person increasingly dead to self and alive to Christ, of Christ's indwelling in a way that increases imitation; being like Christ.

Typology and Visual Narrative

My purpose has been to show that this hermeneutic of typology became a deeply habituated category of the period mind and eye, not just of the scholars but across all social classes, supported by preaching and teaching on the cycle of the lectionary, built into liberal arts and theological education, referred to by literary writers. [fn Lubac Vol2 on Hugh of St. Victor etc; and 2nd Shepherds Play] It was the pervasive approach of commentary on the Scriptural narrative and on the lives of the saints, as well as a means of seeking parallels between one's own life and the events and episodes and characters of sacred history.

Was this principle at work in *visual 'commentary'* on scripture and sacred literature? Would artists, their advisors, and their viewing publics have continued to wear their *typological eyeglasses* when they were designing and looking at works of art? The answer is, Surely so.

A question entirely relevant for many places in which the decoration was created in various times by various artists is whether we can see artists intentionally designing artworks so that these evoke typological connections with other visual narratives in close proximity. Or, whether viewers might be exercising their typological habits beyond what was expected by the designers and decorators of the space.

To take the example of the upper Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, very few modern art historians, let alone guidebooks written for amateur viewers, describe Giotto's fresco cycle about Saint Francis with any reference to the series of scenes from the Old and New Testament frescoed earlier on the walls above Giotto's. The tightly focused eyes of formalism, of attention to the great artistic heroes of stylistic change, keep blinders on the eyes that block out everything but the work of the history-changing Giotto. [fn Levin Place of Narrative]

But it is difficult to imagine people so trained to wear the *typological lenses* of the pre-modern period, *not* turning an eye to possible typological relationships between the scenes from the life of St. Francis presented on the main level and the scenes immediately above. Especially so, since a central theme of Bonaventure's Life of Francis – the source text for Giotto's visualized "life" – is precisely that the saint became so fully like Christ through his imitation of Christ, as to become a mirror of Christ, an *alter Christus*. As Bonaventure writes (chapter 13),

just as [Francis] had imitated Christ in the actions of his life, so he should be conformed to him in the affliction and sorrow of his passion, before he would pass out of this world ... he was to be totally transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, not by the martyrdom of his flesh, but by the fire of his love consuming his soul. ... When true love of Christ had transformed his lover into his image ... Francis came down from the

mountain bearing with him the image of the Crucified, which was depicted not on tablets of stone or on panels of wood by the hands of a craftsman, but engraved in the members of his body by the finger of the living God.” [pp. 304-307]

Hence it is hard to imagine a visiting pilgrim in the 14th century, let alone a Franciscan friar totally familiar with Bonaventure’s life of Francis, looking up from the consecutive scenes of Francis receiving the Stigmata and then of his closest friends gathered around his deathbed, without noticing the parallel scenes from Christ’s life, in reverse order, directly above. Seeking the fullest possible union with Christ, Francis was given the gift of experiencing in his body the wounds of Christ. And Giotto’s design of the scene of the prostrate Francis – parallel to the picture plane, head to the left, feet to the right, with one of the brothers weeping at his feet – perfectly mirrors the design of the mourners gathered around the body of the dead Christ, just lowered from the cross. Mere coincidence? Unlikely. The very reversed sequence, with Francis’s life moving up the wall towards the altar and Jesus’s life painted from the altar backwards, seems to emphasize the effect. The paired scenes create an X-pattern, a visual *chiasmus*. (*Chiasmus* is the rhetorical term, taught in every rhetoric course from Aristotle and Cicero on, for a parallel reversal of elements in a sequence, from the Greek word for marking with an X or cross.)

No definitive conclusion can be drawn about such juxtapositions without written testimony from local contemporary sources. But most instances of *visual typology* are unambiguous. The distinctions between allegory, tropology, and anagogy were equally operative in the visual arts.

Allegory

First, it was common to place in purposeful proximity an Old Testament *type* with its New Testament fulfillment. In the previous chapter I referred to Fra Angelico’s decoration of the enormous *Armadio degli Argenti* in the church of the Santissima Annunziata with episodes from the life of Christ. At the bottom of each scene is the written reference to the relevant Gospel passage; and across the top is a reference to a prefiguring passage from the Old Testament. [Fn: the source is the *Lex Amoris* ... with every scene and caption included in Creighton Gilbert’s little book]

In the immensely popular and widely diffused *Biblia Pauperum* – which might strike us today as a medieval version of a “graphic novel” – each image of an episode from Christ’s life is flanked by images of foreshadowing scenes from the Old Testament. To cite just a couple of examples among the dozens in the book:

On the page given to the Burial of Christ, the central image is of the entombment. To its left is an image of Joseph cast into the well, with the caption: “We read in Gen. 37: 24, that when the brothers of Joseph wished to sell him to the Ishmaelites, they stripped him of his coat, and threw him into an old pit. This Joseph is a type of Christ, who was thrown into a pit--that is, the tomb--when His friends took Him from the cross and laid Him in it.” On the **left** is an image of Jonah cast into the sea to be swallowed by the fish, with the caption: “We read in the book of Jonah, chapter 2, that when Jonah himself took ship to go to a place called Tharys, a great storm arose on the sea, and those who were in the ship cast lots among themselves; and the lot fell upon Jonah, whom they seized and threw into the sea; and a mighty fish straightway swallowed him, in whose belly he was three days and three nights. Jonah typifies Christ, who was three days and three nights in the belly of the earth.”

The image for Epiphany of the three kings offering their gifts to the baby Jesus is flanked by images of Abner visiting David in Hebron and the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon, with the captions: “We read in the second book of Kings, chapter 3, that Abner, captain of the army of Saul, came to David in Jerusalem, that he might bring to him all the people of Israel, which were then following the house of Saul, which figured the coming to Christ of the magi, who worshiped Christ with mystic gifts” and “We read in the third book of Kings, chapter 10, that the Queen of Sheba, having heard the fame of Solomon, came to Jerusalem with great gifts to worship him. The queen was a gentile, which well figured the nations which came from afar to worship the Lord with gifts.” [fn: available on the internet; a labor of love is the complete version with scanned facsimiles and translated into English by Tamara Manning, at <http://amasis.com/biblia/index.html>]

I’ve referred to Annunciations with Expulsions in the corner. Humankind’s first disobedient Mother prefigures inversely the Church’s second Mother, Mary. An image of the Sacrifice of Isaac located near the depiction of the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross renders the prefiguration unmistakable. [fn: we see the same typological parallelism drawn out in the play cycle episode ...]

In fact, the placement of scenes from the Old Testament on the right side of the nave in the Basilica in Assisi, with New Testament scenes on the left side of the nave, continues a convention (notes Joachim Poeschke) that can be “traced back to the fifth century or, more precisely, to the reign of Pope Leo the Great (440-461), who renovated the basilica of San Paolo fuori le Mura ...,” as Joachim Poeschke explains in his essay on the Francis fresco cycle in Assisi.

[Fn Joachim Poeschke, Italian Frescoes: The Age of Giotto 1280-1400, p. 16. Poeschke, p. 9: “The earliest report of the fresco decoration of an entire church interior dates from the beginning of the fifth century and was written by Paulinus of Nola, who, after being elected bishop of Nola in 409, had the basilica of Saint Felix decorated with scenes from the Old and New Testaments.”]

A later example of clear and verifiable *allegorical* correlation between a series of Old Testament scenes running along one side of a nave and a parallel series of New Testament episodes on the other is seen, if often unnoticed, by millions of tourists every year.

The Sistine Chapel has become so associated with *Michelangelo’s* ceiling frescoes that those who enter almost immediately crane their necks to look up, giving short shrift to the paintings on the walls. In 1481, five established painters – Perugino, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Signorelli, Rosselli – were commissioned by the pope who had built the chapel – Sixtus IV – to decorate the walls of the chapel with scenes from the Life of Moses on the left (facing the altar) and scenes from the Life of Christ on the right. Two panels concerning the births of the two figures are – or were – on the altar wall (later destroyed to make way for Michelangelo’s monumental Last Judgment). Two paintings concerning the deaths of Moses and Jesus are on the back wall. Six scenes follow a mainly chronological sequence along each side wall.

A major restoration of these paintings in 1965 made legible again the set of phrases in the decorative band above the series that confirmed what was obvious enough. The paintings opposite one another operate as pairs exploring a common thematic aspect of the lives of Moses and Jesus. These captions are very likely the work of the Pope himself, since they turn up almost verbatim in a document prepared for a conclave of cardinals in 1513. [fn Roettgen, p. 90] But the topics of these so-called *tituli* are more complex than simply lining up particular events in Moses’s life that foreshadowed a parallel event in Jesus’s life (of the sort spoken by Jesus in John 3:15).

The typological pairing of the births of the two figures might have been conventional enough, although the caption has disappeared along with the paintings themselves. But the next scene on the Jesus side, his Baptism, is correlated unusually not with any scene concerning water but with several episodes narrating the young Moses's marriage to Jethro's daughter Zipporah and his departure to Egypt.

At the very center of the Moses-fresco is the scene from Exodus chapter 4 where he encounters an angel of Yahweh who rebukes Moses for not circumcising his second son Eliezer. Graphically depicted in the right foreground is the action described in Exodus 4:25-26: "But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me, she said'" (NIV). The captions direct us to the likely interpretation intended for this ambiguous text from Exodus. God expects Moses's *observatio* of the Old Covenant, just as the law is respected by Jesus even as it is superceded by Christ's *institutio* of the New Covenant in his blood.

The next pair of paintings comes under the rubric of *temptatio*. The scene of Christ's Temptation in the wilderness is not surprising. But the parallel scene on the Moses-side depicts multiple episodes not obviously related and not usually understood as a 'temptation'; plus they violate strict chronology since they occurred before the circumcision of Moses's son depicted in the previous panel. As Steffi Roettgen summarizes the complex arrangement of events:

In the dramatic episode on the right, Moses ... is killing an Egyptian who had struck a Hebrew. We next see him running away from us as he flees into the land of Midian, where the scene in the center of the picture is set. Moses is protecting the seven daughters of Jethro from the shepherds who try to prevent them from drawing water from the well. One of these daughters is Zipporah, whom Moses will marry soon afterward. In the background on the left the Lord appears in a burning thornbush as Moses watches Jethro's herds on Mount Horeb. Moses is next seen seated on the ground following God's command to take off his sandals for he is standing on holy ground. At the left edge of the picture Moses leads his family back from Egypt, carrying the staff God gave him as a symbol of his authority. [Roettgen, p. 91]

One could say that the *allegorical* parallel is not so much the action of being tempted as it is of being tested, of learning more precisely the calling given to each character, the hinge-point that marks a period of preparation before launching into the real work.

The next pair of scenes unfold under the caption *congregatio populi*. On the Moses-side the people of Israel have just passed through the Red Sea, a scene (as Roettgen notes) "often associated typologically with the Baptism of Christ. [p. 91] The correlated scene from Jesus's life is neither the Baptism nor, say, Jesus calming the Sea of Galilee or Peter walking across the water towards Jesus, but rather the Calling of the Disciples. Peter and Andrew kneel in the foreground before Jesus, about to be made fishers of men. The composition of the two pictures is similar, the two bodies of water running down the center, with Moses and Jesus standing to the left along the bank. The *titulus* draws our attention theologically to the parallel between the gathering of the two peoples into a community with a purpose under an appointed leader.

Ensuing pairs follow suit, revealing thought-worthy but not simplistic parallels. The next in the sequence is perhaps the most obvious: Moses and the Ten Commandments (but the

foregrounded scene is when he dashes the stone tablets to the ground as the people behind him worship the golden calf) is juxtaposed with Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount. The caption: the *promulgatio legis*, the dissemination of the law.

The next pair – labeled as *conturbatio* – has no typological tradition behind it, but its theme would have every relevance for demonstrating the God-appointed authority of the bishop of Rome. The episode on the Jesus-side depicts the scene from Matthew's Gospel (16:19) where Jesus gives the "keys of the kingdom" to Peter. The parallel on the Moses-side is the story (in Numbers chapter 16) of the rebellion of Korah against the authority of Moses and Aaron. Fire from the altar engulfs the rebels in the central scene; on the left they are being swallowed by the earth.

In sum, as Steffi Roettgen comments about the whole series, "The *tituli* reveal the essential thinking behind the concept, which is partially obscured by the somewhat puzzling parallels and not always apparent from the pictures themselves. These texts do not refer to the central event of a given picture, but rather provide a theological commentary on its various episodes" [p. 90]. In the terms of this chapter, we might say that the interpretation of Moses's life understood *allegorically* in the light of Jesus's life is less on the *plot* or *character* than on the *theme* evoked by the events.

Tropology

We have seen that painters and audiences of Renaissance artworks expected the image to have an instructive and inspirational influence on the communities performing their work under the gaze of the paintings around them. The exhortational purpose – applying lessons to one's own moral behavior – of paintings such as Lorenzetti's Allegory of Good and Bad Government in the town hall of Siena, surrounding the Council of Nine as they deliberate the welfare of the Comune, is overt. When lessons are drawn from the narratives of the Scriptures (and from the hagiographical lives of the saints), which the viewers are invited to apply to their own moral and spiritual lives, the term and concept of *tropology* kicks in.

The tropological intent of the small frescoes in each cell of the dormitory in Monastery San Marco, prompting and guiding the devotion of the occupant, is obvious enough. Be like the sisters Mary and Martha, eyes wide open and praying and studying the Scriptures, and not like the three disciples who fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane at their master's hour of need. Tropological devotion is highlighted even further by the regular inclusion of a Dominican monk meditating inside the scene itself as a sort of model for the monk in the cell. Consider the private suite in San Marco reserved for its generous patron Cosimo de Medici to use as a place of retreat. Frescoed on the wall of the inner room is the Adoration of the Magi, set in a simple rugged desert landscape – in stark contrast with the exotic countryside frescoed on the walls of the family chapel in their palazzo down the street, where the Magi, splendidly dressed and accompanied by an enormous entourage, process ceremonially around the walls. In the cell in San Marco, there's no escaping the lesson about the only true and lasting use of wealth: lay it at the feet of Jesus.

The spiritual intent is explicitly personalized in the small anteroom. The subject of the fresco is that last word of Jesus spoken to his mother Mary and the beloved disciple John from the cross, inscribed into the painting itself: "He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then He

said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' From that hour the disciple took her into his own household" (John 19:26-27). Except that the painter Fra Angelico has made a name-change in the gold halos. Instead of "John," the writing around the halo of the beloved disciple is "*Cosmas*," Cosimo. When you – Cosimo de Medici – enter this cell, reflect on whom your spiritual mother is and should be; take her into your own household. Place yourself in the scene of the Crucifixion and seek out the parallels with your own life.

This tropological intention is an essential ingredient in understanding why contemporary locations are so often integrated into the visual narratives from sacred literature and contemporary people are regularly included as participants in the narrative, at least as bystanders or as piously situated observers situated in pious demeanor just outside the picture plane, such as Mr. and Mrs. Sassetti frescoed on either side of the Adoration of the Shepherds on the altarpiece.

In the scene from the Legend of the Holy Cross where Empress Helena watches as the three crosses are dug up, the city depicted by Piero della Francesca in the background must be identified (in the story) as Jerusalem – but it clearly represents contemporary Arezzo. The cross may be "buried" outside our own city – that is, with its tropological implications avoided – and any community has the opportunity to dig it up and test out its life-giving power.

My students often zero in on historical inaccuracies in the depiction of scenes and people. (Jesus was born in a stable, not in the remnants of a decaying Roman edifice. Why the inconsistent and anachronistic mix of clothing styles, some in Bible-times robes and others in the fashions of the time?) But strict fidelity to the "literal" level of the text alone is seldom the principal purpose of the painter's work. Rather, just as in the verbal interpretation of sacred texts from the pulpit or in commentaries, the job of the artist is precisely to assist the viewers to place themselves in the scene and to discover the moral and spiritual implications for their own lives. "We were there when they crucified my Lord ..." "We were there at the Birth of the Virgin, or the Annunciation, or at the Last Supper, or when St. Peter raised Tabitha from the dead," and so on. Placing the scene in a contemporary context was a key element of tropology in visual narrative.

An effect of the *tropological habit* (and one relevant for our own age, it seems to me) is to invest our own mundane and seemingly-historically-insignificant lives with significance and substantial reality. If we can see episodes in our lives that parallel those of Abraham or Isaac or Sarah or the three Wise Men, or Francis and Clare – heroes and heroines of sacred history, yet chosen not because they were superhuman but because they were folk no different from us – then our own lives are drawn into God's work of salvation through human history. Stated conversely, our own lives are plot-less or narratively confused ("seen through a glass darkly") until they become informed by the paradigmatic narratives of scripture and sacred history.

To be sure, drawing self-serving identifications is always possible, then as now. We can puff ourselves up by manipulating parallels with scriptural characters to confirm our ego directions. We can spot a parallel that suggests we are doing just fine. I gave alms to the beggar on the street, just like Peter; I included my favorite charitable non-profit in my will, somewhat like the Three Kings. One can stage parallels to represent our lives as historically significant.

The possibility for mixed motives is relevant for the visual narratives. By what criteria, for example, could one determine whether it is an act of humility or of arrogance for the several Medici fathers and sons to play the role of the Three Kings in the splendid Epiphany Procession from Monastery San Marco to the Baptistery, passing in front of their palazzo? And then to develop the parallel in Gozzoli's fresco in the family's chapel in that palazzo? The parallel between the Wise Men of the East coming West to worship the baby Jesus, and the leaders of the Eastern Church and Byzantine Empire coming *west* to be rejoined with the Roman Catholic Church (hosted and bankrolled by the Magi-like Medici, even if the effort failed) has considerable convincing power. Nor is the parallel necessarily self-serving. The humanist scholars of Western Christendom were knowingly indebted to the Eastern scholars who brought with them knowledge of Greek that opened up vast lost tracts of the classical heritage. In short, was Gozzoli (clearly under advisement of the Medici commissioners) drawing parallels out of thin air by the magic of visual artistry and the lenses of *typology* when he evokes the association between the Journey of the Magi and the journey to Florence of the great church Council of the 1430's?

I earlier described the panel in the Brancacci family chapel in Florence in which the episodes of Peter's healing of the crippled beggar and his raising from the dead the cloth-maker Tabitha are set on opposite sides of a Florentine street scene. Holding center-stage in the panel, two elegant men, wealthy enough to be clothed in the most expensive and prestigious fashion of the day, stroll down the street looking at each other. How could one determine whether or not a moral critique is intended in Masaccio's depiction of these two men apparently oblivious to the two remarkable miracles occurring under their noses; one miracle, moreover, involving a woman in the cloth-making industry, just like the patrons who have funded the fresco cycle itself?

When a work of art was explicitly commissioned by a family for a place identified with the family, then the family would have been understood as the principal audience of the artwork. What if figures in a fresco cycle would be associated with the family, and yet the behavior of these figures seems to run counter to the moral lessons of the painting? How might such a situation be interpreted by those viewing the painting? Perhaps the patron was fully aware of the implications and accepted the decoration of the family chapel as a visual sermon that keeps the patron on the straight and narrow. ("Don't let your wealth insulate you from the needs of the poor around you.") In the chapel of the wealthy banking family Scrovegni in Padova, for instance, Enrico Scrovegni calls for Giotto to focus on the Virgin of Charity precisely because he and everyone else knows that Enrico's father had been such a bad example of usurious money-lending that Dante chose the father to embody that sin in hell. As another option, perhaps the patron wants self-adulation – make us look good – which the crafty painter gives, but with modes of irony that are apparent to the viewer who has eyes to see. Or perhaps the painting serves as a sort of moral litmus test for anyone looking at it. If you, too, are drawn to the *bella figura* cut by the fashionable gentlemen and pay little attention to the resurrecting of Tabitha, then you too are implicated. But if you follow the visual leads of the painting to turn your attention from the center to the edges, then the very action of viewing becomes a moment of moral conversion – of turning from the worldly-captivating to the spiritually nurturing.

My point is that when recognizable contemporary personages are included in a painting, the options of interpretation available to viewers at the time were not limited either to blunt flattery on the part of the painter or to masked sarcasm ("I'll show what I really think of the

hypocrisy of the Brancacci for those viewers who get the joke!”). Personalized lessons that activate the conscience, if one is ready and willing to take it in, lie within the shared repertory of what artworks are supposed to do. [Fn: JES: reminded of Milliner’s milliner’s letter to his new students 1.10.16 re InstArtChicago and Cindy Sherman’s topless woman on motorcycle]

The literature of the age is full of such moral criticism, subtle or not so subtle, of the very people or sorts of people who would be numbered among the audience. Figures in Dante’s *Inferno*, such as Francesca or Farinata or Ugolino (not to mention Ulysses), narrate their lives with a self-serving spin which, if the reader can read behind the spin-doctoring, prompts the moral critique. The descriptions in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* of the various pilgrims gathered at the Tabard Inn – descriptions put in the mouth of their genial fellow pilgrim Geoffrey – carry between the lines some serious moral critique on the part of the author Geoffrey Chaucer, apprehensible to those readers with ears to hear.

Why can’t or wouldn’t the same procedures have occurred in the visual art of the age? What are the instruments of *visual rhetoric* that would alert the viewer to look below the surface, to spot double meanings in the depiction?

When the scriptural narrative of the painting’s overt subject matter seems to stand in *typological* relation not to another scriptural episode but rather to an episode of contemporary history or politics, how do we determine which narrative is being given primacy? If the Medici family uses artworks to associate the Council of Florence with the Journey of the Magi, are they manipulating an authoritative scriptural narrative for the interests of personal propaganda, or are they making an effort to bring contemporary events under the evaluative light of scriptural norms? These may seem overly-sophisticated questions, but they lie within the training of any reasonably attentive viewer at the time.

No one could *not* have noticed the presence of Mr. Sassetti’s boss and patron, Lorenzo de Medici, standing at Sassetti’s side in the scene of the Approval of the Rule of Saint Francis in the Sassetti Chapel in the church of Santa Trinità, or, even more visually peculiar, the presence of the sons of Lorenzo ascending a staircase with their tutor Angelo Poliziano in the very foreground. The anti-intellectualism (as we might call it) of the gospel simplicity of Saint Francis’s Rule, available to every untutored peasant and suffering leper, stands in stark contrast to the sophisticated classical learning evoked by the presence of a humanist poet and scholar. [fn: the theme is explicit in Bonaventure’s account of the scene. At first Pope Innocent III “hesitated to do what Christ’s little poor man asked because it seemed to some of the cardinals to be something novel and difficult beyond human powers.” But one of the cardinals, “a lover of holiness and helper of Christ’s poor,” interjected: “If we refuse the request of this poor man as novel or too difficult, when all he asks is to be allowed to lead the Gospel life, we must be on our guard lest we commit an offense against Christ’s Gospel. For in anyone says that there is something novel or irrational or impossible to observe in this man’s desire to live according to the perfection of the Gospel, he is guilty of blasphemy against Christ.” [p. 205, *Classics of Western Spirituality* edition].] Is Ghirlandaio following instructions to show off on Sassetti’s behalf the prestigious circles he moves in? Is this an instance of brown-nosing (as we say nowadays) in paint – Sassetti giving deferential recognition [ingratiating himself] to the man to whom he owes his job and his wealth? Of course such rules of courtesy were deeply ingrained in the social intercourse of the time, and could be expected to be operative in the artwork which was itself a form of social and political currency. But would no one involved have noted the contrast with the utter rejection of power, prestige and wealth explicit in the life and preaching of Francesco Sassetti’s patron saint? Or is the thematic contrast in fact openly present, available for moral reflection by those with eyes to see and ears to hear? Or is the decoration of a chapel with scenes from the

patron's patron saint so completely conventional for a family such as the Sassetti as to be irrelevant, serving merely as the frame for the real portraiture, the real narrative: look at the high social standing we have gained through our connections.

Such questions may be difficult to answer with certainty. Nevertheless, in an age trained to look at visual art as well as scripture and literature through *typological* lenses, we may expect to find attentiveness to the lessons of the story for the moral and spiritual life of the individual – *tropology* – in the place of visual narrative.

Anagogy

The same can be said of the final lens of typology, namely, “the *anagogical sense* when the things that lie ahead in eternal glory are signified” (in the phrase of Aquinas). This concern for the teleological, the eschatological, is evident in the regular movement of decoration towards the climax of the story.

When the life of a saint is the subject, the visual narrative typically concludes with the martyrdom, or the apotheosis, or the crowning in heaven as a faithful servant. In the lower church of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, for just one example, the four sections in the vaulting immediately above the main altar depict the Triumph of St. Francis and his three ladies of Poverty, Chastity, Obedience.

If the Virgin Mary is the subject, one can expect the scene at the highest point of the place to be her Assumption or her crowning in heaven. The mosaic scene in the highest pinnacle of the façade of the Duomo in Siena depicts the Coronation of the Virgin. In the Orvieto Duomo, also dedicated to the Virgin, the same upward movement towards Mary's Crowning is exhibited in both the mosaics on the façade and in the fresco cycle in the apse behind the altar. Mary's earthly life is depicted on the side walls of the apse. The scenes on the East wall, directly behind the altar, present in upward movement the Angel announcing to Mary her impending death; the death of Mary; the apostles taking the Virgin to her sepulcher; Christ awakening Mary and taking her to heaven; Mary elevated to heaven in the presence of the disciples; the Assumption of Mary under the central arch, and her Coronation in the vaulting above.

If the story concerns the life of Christ, then the movement will be towards Resurrection and his return in Judgment. The enormous altarpiece created for the Siena cathedral by Duccio is a *Maestà*, depicting the Mother of God enthroned in majesty under a glorious canopy, surrounded by angels and saints. The multi-paneled narrative on the backside narrates the events of the Passion, beginning with Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on “Palm Sunday”. The Crucifixion is the central and largest scene, but not the last episode. The culmination of the story is the sequence of the Harrowing of Hell, the Resurrection, the *Noli Me Tangere* (John 20:17: “Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God””). But the final scene is that of Jesus's encounter with the two troubled disciples on the road to Emmaus. The bottom-left to upper-right diagonal that marks the direction of the scene leads the viewer beyond the panel itself, into the future. The subtle effect is to evoke a sense of the Supper in Emmaus, where Jesus reveals himself at the breaking of the bread, as a figure of the Eucharist and a foretaste of the Supper of the Lamb.

The narratives-in-mosaic in the ceiling of the Florence Baptistry – stories from Genesis, of Joseph in Egypt, of the life of Christ – revolve around the focal point of the Last Judgment high above the altar on the East side. In the Scrovegni Chapel in Padova, the main narrative of the lives of Mary and Christ spirals down the walls from top to bottom. But the scene that concludes the whole decoration is again that of the Last Judgment, but in this case placed on the rear wall. One leaves the chapel after Mass with a vivid reminder of where one is headed, of the goal and conclusion of all things on earth. Michelangelo's famous frescoes of scenes from Genesis move chronologically along the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel from the East end above the altar towards the rear, ending with God's first "last judgment" of the Flood of Noah's time. The scene behind the altar, painted by Michelangelo twenty-five years after the ceiling, is the Last Judgment.

The grand narrative of salvation stretches from left to right across the four panels on the façade of the Orvieto Duomo begins with the Creation and Fall. The second and third panels, framing the central portal, present the prophecies of a coming Messiah and the life of that Incarnate One from the Annunciation of his birth to his Resurrection. The fourth panel concludes the story with the Last Judgment. Inside the Duomo, in parallel position on the right-most side of the right transept, is the Last Judgment depicted above and behind the altar of the San Brizio Chapel. Circling around the entry half of the chapel are episodes marking the End Times before Christ's return in Judgment.

In sum, these patterns of seeing Old Testament people and events as foreshadowing Christ and the New Covenant, of unpacking the story for its implications for the viewer's life, of gesturing persistently towards fulfillment, is the warp and woof of visual narrative. Visual art in the Renaissance takes on the big story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, Final Judgment, and the New Creation, and places the events in the lives of contemporary folk, rich or poor, as episodes contained in that grand narrative of salvation. History from beginning to end is charged with *kairos*. There is no escaping or ignoring the Place of Narrative in the age's understanding of history and in its art.