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**In *Liberation of St. Peter*, Raphael develops a typology of
divine liberation from tyranny.**

Liberation from Tyranny

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In Acts 12, Luke recounts how King Herod – after he ordered James, the brother of John, “killed with the sword” – imprisoned Peter for preaching the gospel about Christ. The believers in Jerusalem had identified King Herod and Pontius Pilate specifically as political leaders who conspired against Jesus (Acts 4:27); now the King was laying “violent hands upon some who belonged to the church” (Acts 12:1).

The King intended to deliver Peter to his enemies after the Passover, but before this happened, Peter was delivered from prison.

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, “Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.” He did so. Then he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel’s help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision.

Acts 12:6-9

Raphael’s fresco *Liberation of St. Peter* shows the critical elements of the story in three scenes from left to right: the soldiers in front of the prison door, the sleeping Peter being awakened by the angel, and the freed Peter walking with the angel past the sleeping soldiers.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the High Renaissance style was firmly established in Rome; and Raphael, known as the great assimilator, had been called to decorate the Pope’s private apartments, today part of the Vatican Museum. Pope Julius II della Rovere (pontiff from 1503 to 1513) was a powerful leader who planned to create a Second Golden Age of Rome in terms of artistic production. Michelangelo was just completing the painted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the Pope’s private chapel, when Raphael began this Room of Heliodorus, or *Stanza d’Eliodoro*, in 1513.¹ The room was used for private audiences with the Pope. Each wall is painted with an historical or

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Raphael (1483-1520), LIBERATION OF ST. PETER (1513). Detail of center. Fresco. 154 x 200 cm. Stanza d'Eliodoro, Vatican, Rome. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

legendary narrative with special significance not only for the papal devotions, but also the political aspirations of freeing Italy from French military control: the miraculous bleeding of a Eucharistic wafer during the *Mass at Bolsena*, the *Expulsion of Heliodorus* from the Temple of Jerusalem, the *Repulse of Attila* by Pope Leo I, and the *Liberation of St. Peter*.² Each of these scenes depicts God's miraculous protection of the Church.³

In the *Liberation of St. Peter*, the artist portrays the Apostle with the features of Pope Julius II. This allows the depiction of Peter's salvation to double as a celebration of a victory for the papacy over an invading French army. Pope Julius had been praying at San Pietro in Vincoli (St. Peter in Chains) – the church in Rome where the chains that bound Peter are displayed – when he learned of an unexpected victory against the French in 1512. To commemorate the victory, that evening Julius II staged a re-enactment of the liberation of Peter and led a procession to Castel Sant'Angelo with more torches than had been previously used.⁴

The architectural prison setting in this fresco is inspired by the contemporary High Renaissance style of Donato Bramante (1444-1514), the architect of St. Peter's Basilica. For instance, the monumental arch is constructed of rusticated blocks seen in Roman palaces of this time. The grate continues the visual tradition established for other scenes depicting the imprisonment of John the Baptist and Peter. Raphael exhibits an exceptional handling of light in the clouds that drift in front of the Moon (in the scene on the left) and the torches that flicker off the guards' armor (on the right). The central scene truly has a transcendent and radiant light (see cover detail in color).

The contemporary New Testament scholar Susan Garrett argues that Luke regarded Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension as an "exodus" because in these events Jesus, "the one who is stronger," led the people out of bondage to Satan. Luke believed that Satan had long exercised authority over the peoples of the world (Luke 4:6; cf. Acts 26:18). Jesus' "exodus" from Satan's power (through his resurrection and ascension) becomes a typological model for subsequent events in the life of the Church, especially Peter's miraculous release from prison and King Herod's ensuing fall. Peter (like Jesus) is freed from a horrible tyrant and "led out of bondage" and (as at the resurrection) the miraculous rescue is followed by the tyrant's demise.⁵

Whether the story of Peter's liberation is interpreted by a fifteenth-century artist and pope or by a first-century New Testament scholar, its symbolism of freedom from spiritual and political oppression is evident. As modern disciples, we too can find comfort in this scene where God's freedom succeeds over tyranny.

NOTES

1 In addition to the Heliodorus, there are three other "Raphael Rooms" in the papal residence. Raphael was first commissioned to paint the Room of the Segnatura, which was originally a library and study. He adorned its walls with representations of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. For a discussion of the most famous fresco in this room, The School of Athens, see Heidi J. Hornik, "Pursuing Knowledge," *Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 31 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics, 2009), 46-49.

The Room of the Fire in Borgo originally held the meetings of the highest court of the Holy See during the time of Pope Julius II. Raphael did not fresco this room until it was appropriated as a dining room during the time of Julius' successor, Pope Leo X. This room

was decorated with images of two previous popes who took the name Leo.

The Room of Constantine was to be used for receptions and official ceremonies. Raphael died before this room was finished so its paintings depicting the life of Constantine were completed by the school of Raphael. For more information, see the Web pages on the Raphael Rooms at *Vatican Museums* (accessed March 22, 2011), http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/x-Pano/SDR/Visit_SDR_Main.html.

2 Nicholas Penny, "Raphael," in *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed March 14, 2011), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T070770.

3 The *Expulsion of Heliodorus* depicts Pope Julius II witnessing a second century BC event recorded in 2 Maccabees 3:21-28, when God sent a horseman and two youths to drive Heliodorus out of the Temple in Jerusalem before he could steal its treasures on behalf of the King of Syria. The *Repulse of Attila* shows the legendary appearance of Peter and Paul armed with swords during a meeting between Pope Leo the Great and Attila which caused the Huns to desist from invading Italy in 452 AD. In the *Mass of Bolsena*, Pope Julius II observes a miracle in 1263 that convinced worshippers that Christ was present in the Eucharist. As the Vatican Museums sums up the artistic program of this room: "Faith had been threatened (*Mass of Bolsena*), in the person of its pontiff (*Liberation of St. Peter*), in its site (*Encounter of Leo the Great with Attila*) and in its patrimony (*Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple*)." (*Vatican Museums*, accessed March 22, 2011), http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/SDR/SDR_02_SalaElio.html.

4 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 523.

5 Susan R. Garrett, "Exodus from Bondage: Luke 9:31 and Acts 12:1-24," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), 656-680, here citing 659-660.



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