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Ghirlandaio makes the audacious claim that the transition of dominance from the Romans to Christianity is to be found in the birth of a child who is first adored by lowly shepherds rather than cosmopolitan Magi.

Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448-1494), ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS (1483-1485). Tempera and oil on wood. 167 x 167 cm. Sassetti Chapel, S. Trinità, Florence. Photo: © Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The Shepherds' Adoration

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

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The story of the shepherds and the angels is uniquely Lukan (2:8-20) and is told immediately after the birth of Jesus. The angels appear in the field and make the announcement that “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:11), which prompts the shepherds to visit the child. The shepherds' adoration of the child is described in Luke 2:16: “So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.”

This single verse inspired numerous artists to produce the composition known as the Adoration of the Shepherds. The subject was very popular in the region of Europe located north of the Alps, and it was hardly less popular in Italy, especially after the late fifteenth century. Domenico Ghirlandaio, working south of the Alps in the city of Florence, painted a major altarpiece depicting the Nativity and Adoration of the Shepherds for Francesco Sassetti's sepulchral chapel in Santa Trinità. This painting in some ways typifies the characteristics of the Italian Renaissance (modeling of the figures, local color, anatomical proportion, realistic perspective, use of antiquity), yet it incorporates Northern Renaissance elements in a manner not done prior and never repeated again.

The Lukan story is composed of two parts: the birth of Jesus (2:1-7) and the visitation of the shepherds (2:8-20). The first unit begins with a reference to a census decreed by the Emperor Augustus (2:1). The present text raises some historical questions since there is no evidence of a registration of the whole Roman Empire under Augustus. The theological significance, however, is clear: the Messiah's birth in a lowly manger brings peace throughout the earth. This is a direct challenge to the Augustan propaganda, praising the peace Augustus had brought to the Roman Empire, which was found throughout Roman literature (see Virgil's *Aeneid* and *Fourth Eclogue*) and art (for example, the *Augustus Primaporta* and *Ara Pacis Augustae*, to say nothing of the Forum of Augustus), and was no doubt familiar to Luke's authorial audience.

What modern audience can hear the opening words of the second unit (2:8-20) and resist being swept back into a sentimental stupor recalling Christmas days of past childhood? “In that region there were shepherds living in

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Hugo van der Goes (c.1420-1482), *ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS, PORTINARI ALTARPIECE – OPEN, FULL VIEW* (c. 1475). Oil on wood. 253 x 141 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Photo: © Scala/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” But the authorial audience would most likely have responded to this text in a much different way. Both the setting and the characters would alert the audience that God had chosen to disclose the birth of the Messiah in a dangerous place to a violence-prone group. Sparsely populated countrysides throughout the Roman Empire were havens for vagabonds and thieves, a motif developed fully by Luke (cf., for example, the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37). With this reality in mind, the angelic chorus’s message, “on earth peace among those whom he favors,” delivered to one of the most violent groups in one of the most dangerous places is remarkable! No less shocking is the reaction of these shepherds who, upon hearing this news, decide among themselves to go to Bethlehem to see “this thing which has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us” (2:15).

The birth of the Messiah, according to Luke, has the power to lift up the lowly, the despised, and the violent (1:52). And these shepherds, whose vocation for the authorial audience at first conjures up an image of a despised and potentially violent group, by their actions—finding the child and “glorifying and praising God”—align themselves with the more positive portrait of the good shepherd, an image already evoked by the mention of the city of *David*, who was, of course, himself a shepherd before becoming king. The very form of the story reinforces the final positive impression of the shepherds.

The story of the shepherds’ adoration is, of course, part of the larger nativity cycle, the story of the birth of Jesus. As such, the shepherds have been overshadowed by other details of the story, especially by the Magi (Matthew 2). The prominence of the Magi in Epiphany secured their importance in the story, insuring a minor role for the shepherds, especially in art, for centuries. When the shepherds were treated, it was often to contrast or

complement the role of the Magi. This changed for Florentines in May, 1483, when Hugo Van der Goes's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (p. 36), commissioned by Tomasso Portinari, the manager of the Medici bank in Bruges, arrived in the city and immediately influenced Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Sassetti chapel.

Domenico Bigordi, the first of five children born to Antonia and Tommaso Bigordi, was called Il Ghirlandaio in Florence. He was born the same year as Lorenzo de' Medici, 1449. Domenico was a painter and mosaicist and, according to Vasari, trained as a goldsmith. By the 1440s every large city south of the Alps was influenced by northern artists through the import of paintings. Domenico probably received the commission for the funerary chapel of Francesco Sassetti sometime in 1478 or 1479 before leaving for Rome to do the Sistine Chapel wall frescoes. Ghirlandaio actually painted the Sassetti frescoes between May 1483 and the chapel's dedication on Christmas 1485. Francesco Sassetti (1421-1490) was the general manager of the Medici bank, which had branches across Italy and beyond the Alps. His career with the Medici began as a factor in the Geneva branch between 1438 and 1439 and, according to documents, within eight years he became its manager.

Ghirlandaio's composition finds its source in the Portinari altarpiece. However, while the donors flank the central panel in the Portinari folding triptych, this triptych style never became popular in Florence. The Sassetti altarpiece retains the square *all'antica* frame, but Ghirlandaio places the patrons in frescoed "panels" on either side of it. The square panel is a mixture of the egg-based tempera technique and oil. Ghirlandaio made incisions with a straight edge in the gesso to indicate the general form of the composition. Skin tones and the broad modeling of drapery were laid in over an underdrawing on the gesso. The descriptive details and highlights in the composition were painted more meticulously with the tip of a brush dipped in tempera.

Ghirlandaio's *Adoration* has some distinctive, in some cases unique, interpretations of the Lukan story. The visual depiction of the Nativity typically shows the Virgin kneeling next to the Christ child lying before her, while Joseph can be found somewhere else in the composition, usually off to one side as in the Portinari panel. Joseph here is in the exact center of the painting. The type, an old man with gray hair, remains. Joseph shades his eyes with his hand as he looks upward towards a flying angel. Of course, the focus of the Nativity is on Mary and Christ, not Joseph. This point is made clear from the inscription on the painting's frame: "IPSVM QVEM GENVIT ADORAVIT MARIA" (Mary adored the very one whom she bore). The double focus on Mary and the Christ Child is indicated by other elements as well.

This nativity scene does not occur in the infancy narratives of either Matthew or Luke but might be loosely interpreted as following Luke 2:7: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth,

and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” During the fifteenth century, the literary sources for many details in the scene relied on apocryphal writings and visionary experience, especially that of the Swedish mystic, Saint Bridget.

The Virgin, triangular in form, is given a place of importance in both compositions. Ghirlandaio allowed the traditional Florentine red gown to be seen from beneath the navy mantle which, while retaining the solemnity of the figure, draws the viewer to the beauty of her face. The facial type is most certainly based on a Florentine rather than a Netherlandish female model. The contours and shadows on her face and neck, which emit an internal glow, exemplify Ghirlandaio’s highly effective use of light and color. He carefully arranged each form and its lighting so that where the edge of the form meets the background there is an opposite light level to ensure that the outline of the form is not lost, and *rilievo* is achieved.

Ghirlandaio depicts Mary not only as a woman who reflects upon the Savior, but also a mother who looks at and prays for her child. This eliminates the physical and emotional distance between the Virgin and Child apparent in the Van der Goes painting. The intimacy and relationship between mother and child is further emphasized in the Ghirlandaio painting by the placement of the infant on the fanned-out mantle of the Virgin. The shape of this drapery extends the beauty of the Virgin to the most sacred area of the composition, the body of Christ. Whereas Van der Goes places the radiant Child on bare ground in the center of the composition, for Ghirlandaio’s the drapery provides a soft material for the infant’s body and covers the sheaf of wheat, symbol of the Eucharist, under his head.

Not so subtle is Ghirlandaio’s use of a sarcophagus for the Savior’s manger. The motif of the sarcophagus is not derived from any traditional representations of the Nativity, either written or contained in the iconographic precedents, and it is never followed. That Ghirlandaio chooses to allude to Christ’s death with a sarcophagus may take on more poignant dimensions given the personal history of the Sassettis, whose first son Teodoro died during the execution of this commission.

Ghirlandaio, like Van der Goes, inserts symbolism in seemingly irrelevant details of the nativity scene. Several of these details provide additional confirmation of the connection between the infant Christ’s birth and passion. Ghirlandaio’s placement of a lamb in the standing shepherd’s arms, instead of the hat this shepherd holds in Van der Goes’ painting, not only identifies the shepherd’s occupation but also is a well-known symbol of Christ’s atoning death (cf. the words of John the Baptist in John 1:29: “Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”). Ghirlandaio also replaces Van der Goes’ vase of cut flowers with a goldfinch, again a symbol of Christ’s passion.

Classical elements are a common feature in Florentine paintings by 1483. Each artist and patron chooses to incorporate different classical structures in

unique ways that are sometimes relevant to them personally or to the community in which they live. Often the patron or artist will seek the assistance of a humanist for the iconography. The sarcophagus and pilasters (each with a Latin inscription), the triumphal arch above the procession of the Magi in the background (the shepherds have taken center stage here for a change), and the cityscapes of Jerusalem and Rome have significance to the patron and spectator that contribute to the meaning of the painting.

For instance, the pilasters supporting the sarcophagus and the triumphal arch have inscriptions that introduce the theme of the successive reigns of the Hebrews, the Romans, and of Christ, through the story of the Roman general Pompey. The inscription on the triumphal arch through which the Magi pass cites the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem: "GN[AEO]. POMPEIO MAGNO HIRCANVS PONT[IUS]. P[OSUIT]" (Hircanus, High Priest, Erected This For General [Imperator] Pompey the Great). This inscription suggests that the Jewish High priest, Hyrcanus, erected the monument in gratitude to Pompey, who after the conquest of Jerusalem reinstated him in his office.

The pilaster on the left records the date: "MCCCCLXXXV" (1485). The manger-sarcophagus used for the Savior's crib, together with the ancient pilasters supporting the roof, are the foundations for the new temple succeeding its Hebrew and pagan predecessors. The letters on the sarcophagus read: "ENSE CADENS SOLYMO POMPEI FVLVI[VS] / AVGVR / NVMEN AIT QVAE ME CONTEG[IT] / VRNA DABIT" (Falling at Jerusalem by the sword of Pompey, the augur Fulvius says that the urn which contains me shall produce a God). If the first inscription on the arch indicated the triumph of paganism over Judaism, this second signifies the victory of Christianity over the heathen world.

The most distant hill on the right is believed to be Jerusalem with the Dome of the Rock visible. In the center of the background is a view of Rome, which includes the Torre delle Milizie and the mausoleum of Hadrian. Therefore, the two world empires, Hebrew and Roman, are now in the background to the beginning of Christ's new kingdom.

Luke, like Ghirlandaio, was also interested in the relationship between things religious and political, though the two seem to have construed that relationship quite differently. Luke alone among the Evangelists takes pains to set the story of Jesus' birth against the backdrop of the Roman Empire. He notes that the census prompting Mary and Joseph to sojourn to Bethlehem was the result of "a decree" that "went out from Caesar Augustus." We have already noted that for Luke the "peace" that Christ's coming brings is celebrated by the angelic host before the shepherds. The contrast between Christ's peace and Augustus's Pax Romana was surely clear to Luke's audience. Though scholars disagree about exactly how, almost all agree that in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke attempts to legitimate Christianity, then a tiny Jewish messianic set, within the larger Roman

empire—trying to forge a way for the movement to survive while at the same time holding true to its central tenets. By Ghirlandaio’s day, of course, hindsight shows that Christianity has triumphed and stands in a succession of “global” empires from the Hebrews to the Romans to the Christians.

The vast majority of the art produced during the Renaissance and Baroque periods were intended as spiritual aids for believers’ meditation on various aspects of the life of Christ and his followers. Ghirlandaio’s *Adoration of the Shepherds*, like the Gospel of Luke before it, makes the bold move of placing Christianity on the larger political landscape. And like the Third Gospel before him, Ghirlandaio makes the audacious claim that the transition of dominance from the Romans to Christianity is to be found not in Emperor Constantine’s conversion or his mighty Christian army, but rather in the birth of a child who is first adored by lowly shepherds rather than cosmopolitan Magi. Further, no sooner has the child been born than the audience is asked to reflect on Christ’s death already foreshadowed in the symbols surrounding his birth (a sarcophagus, a goldfinch, a lamb, a wheat sheaf) and to contemplate the social and political implications which an embrace of this Child and his good news must surely entail.[†]

NOTE

[†] Several paragraphs of this article are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from the fourth chapter of our book *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003). This material is reprinted with permission from Continuum International Publishing Company.



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