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OBSERVATIONS ON THE ANCESTOR CYCLE OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL CEILING

Andrea Pappas

The figures in the lunettes and window spandrels of the Sistine Chapel were literally obscured for about 500 years. Now that the frescoes are visible once again, scholars will turn to the ancestor cycle with renewed interest.¹ First, it has been noted that the distributional pattern of the ancestor figures, which alternates across the chapel, is interrupted at the chronological point of the Babylonian captivity, but the significance of this break has yet to be explored.² Second, the lunette figures have been related neither to the quattrocento wall cycles (i.e., the Christ and Moses cycles) nor to the Biblical relationship between the tribes of Judah and Levi. Finally, over half the adult figures in these panels are women, yet Matthew mentions only four women in his genealogy of Christ—in the opening chapter of his gospel.

The ceiling program abounds with references to the Babylonian captivity. For example, with the exception of Jonah, all the prophets depicted on the ceiling are related to this story. Isaiah, who lived three generations before Josias, the last king, foretells the exile. Jeremiah, positioned over the original location of the papal throne, is friend to Josias; his Lamentations has as its subject the captivity. Ezekiel lives during the exile in Babylon; Daniel's prophecy begins there; Zechariah lives just afterward and is prophet to Zorobabel, who rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem; Joel may similarly refer to these events; and the story of Judith, in the corner spandrel, takes place during the era of the captivity. And at least

one of the sibyls, Erithraea, lives in Babylon.³

Although it is one of the most important events in the Old Testament, the Babylonian captivity lacks its own narrative panel, like Moses Leading the Jews out of Egypt or the Flood. Instead, a structural feature in the program—the break in the alternating pattern of the ancestor cycle—alludes to the captivity, which, however, does not occur at the logical point between the last king of Judah, Josias, and the first captive king, Jechonias. Instead, it occurs between Josias and his father, Amon (Fig. 1). The peculiar positioning underscores the continuity of the tribe of Judah and of Christ's line—a matter of potential importance for Julius II.

Emphasis on a second enduring tradition—priestly authority—appears in the relationship between these lunettes and the quattrocento frescoes on the walls below. Zorobabel, in the lunette opposite Josias, receives command of the tribe of Judah from the Levite priests, just as Naason received his commission from Joshua during the return from Egypt. Zorobabel is not a king, but a military commander, as is emphasized by the repetition of his name at the head of the list of the returning families. Like Naason under Joshua and like Moses, he leads the people under his command out of exile.⁴

Zorobabel appears directly over *The Punishment of Korah* in the Moses cycle. The subject relates the consequences of the attempt of Korah's sons and other rebels to

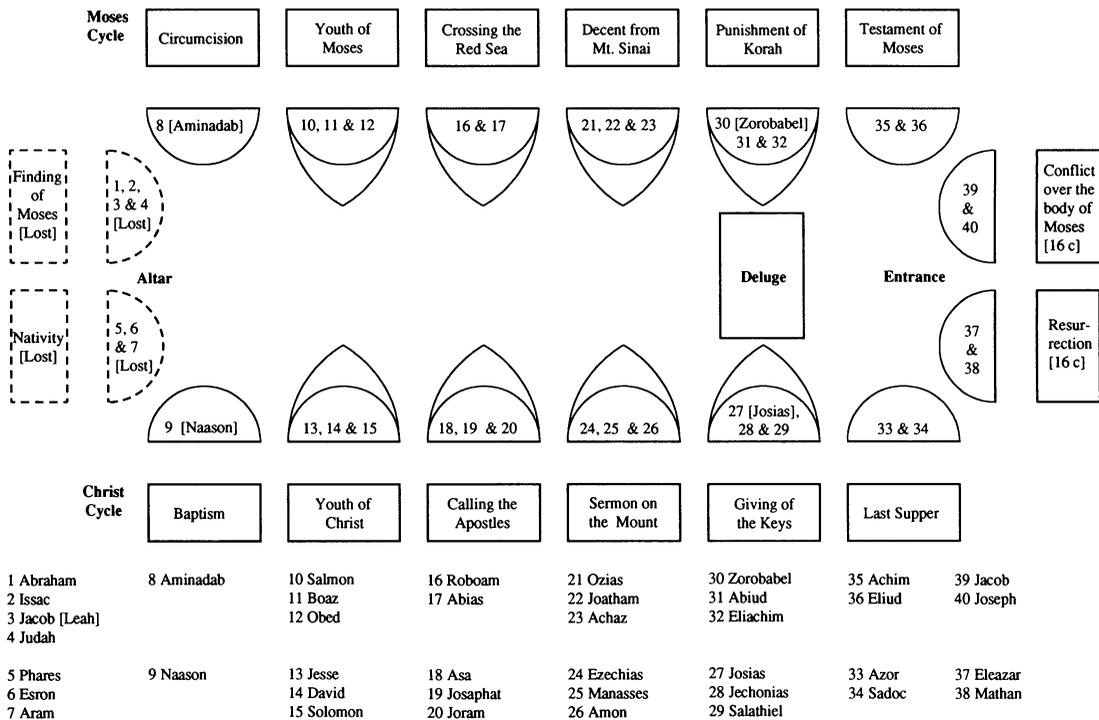


Fig. 1 Diagram of the Sistine Chapel ceiling with the wall cycles

usurp Moses' authority, a God-given privilege. At the center of the fresco, the papal tiara on the head of Aaron and the inscription on the triumphal arch in the center emphasize the source of sacerdotal power. In the corresponding position across the chapel, Josias sits above the fresco of *The Giving of the Keys to Saint Peter*, which depicts the founding of the Christian priesthood. The conspicuous presence of Josias and Zorobabel intensifies the notion of punishment for disobeying divine law and its representatives, and legitimates their authority. Josias and Zorobabel are examples of obedient leaders, and their juxtaposition with the subjects of the lower scenes reveals this obedience.⁵

Dynastic power has its counterpart in the linked destinies of the tribes of Levi and Judah. Renaissance thinkers drew the parallel between the popes and the Levites.⁶ The Old Testament relates the fortunes of the twelve tribes, and the tribe of Judah is a dominant theme.⁷ The Bible generally names the tribe of Judah first when listing the tribes; if not, then the Levites—the priests—take precedence. The army commander of Judah often has command of other tribes, and it is the Levite priests who bestow this authority. Significantly, this honor falls on a leader who typically appears in the genealogy of Christ. A notable example occurs during the return from Egypt, when Naason is chosen to head the

families of Judah, listed in the census as the largest tribe.⁸ When the Levite priests assign places of encampments around the tabernacle, Naason and his tribe receive the eastern site, sharing it with Moses and Aaron.⁹ When the armies make their offerings in the temple, the priests choose Naason to make the first day's offering. Later, when the tribes set out from Sinai, the tribe of Judah proceeds at the head, with Naason in command.¹⁰

Just as the leader of the tribe of Judah occupies a privileged place in the Old Testament, so, too, do the Levites, who, as high priests of the Israelites, oversee holy objects, sacrifices, offerings, and other rituals. The hierarchy of the Levites positions the descendants of Aaron, brother of Moses, in the office of high priest. Thus, the descendants of Aaron often share command with the leader of Judah.

The lost quattrocento fresco of the Finding of Moses may have represented Levi, grandfather of Moses, for whom the Levite tribe is named. The other quattrocento frescoes narrate several incidents in each panel, and there would have been ample space to incorporate a scene including Levi.¹¹ As the fresco directly below the lunette that contained Abraham, Isaac, and Judah, as well as Jacob—father of Judah and Levi—that subject would have been consistent with the dynastic imagery of the chapel. The female figure in the lunette probably represented Leah, the first wife of Jacob, mother of Levi and Judah, who gave issue to the lines of Moses and Christ. Two cinquecento drawings of the Abraham lunette differ from William Young Ottley's familiar engraving.¹² Both show more of her figure, and one includes her emphatic gesture. She leans out from behind the figure of Jacob and extends her

whole arm and fingers toward the fresco below, as though to her son Levi or to her great-grandson Moses. Her gesture seems to accentuate the relationship between the two tribes and their leaders.

The extraordinary number of women and their significance to the meaning of the ancestor cycle merit close attention. Although they comprise half of the adult figures, Matthew, the source for the names on the tablets, mentions only four women in his genealogy. The standard interpretation of the female figures in the lunettes as the wives of the adjacent males runs contrary to the Old Testament. Rather than in relation to their husbands, the women in the genealogies of the Old Testament usually appear as mothers. The typical pattern arises in Kings: a chapter begins with a king assuming rule, and his wife emerges in the chapter devoted to his heir—as his mother.¹³ Chronicles has a similar pattern: women are not wives of kings, they are mothers of kings.¹⁴ Thus, the primary relationships in the lunettes are not nuptial, but maternal, in keeping with the chapel's dedication to the Virgin. Furthermore, all but three women appear with infants or toddlers, and approximately half refer to or explicitly depict nursing. The theme of mothers nursing children recalls the Virgin, to whom the Sistine was dedicated, as a metaphor for the church. Lactation forms a crucial part of this metaphor: "The divine milk of Mary-Ecclesia . . . which will become the Sacred Blood giving life to the faithful."¹⁵

Three women in the lunettes and spandrels diverge from the maternal type. Those with Aminadab and Naason, although young, have no children, while the woman with David is unique by virtue of her years—she is past the age of child-

bearing. The first of these females combs her hair; her pose resembles the Venus Anadyomene, who wrings water from her hair. Positioned close to the altar, she also appears over the Moses cycle, as is appropriate for Elisheba, the daughter of Aminadab, who becomes the wife of Aaron, bearing sons who will be selected by God as high priests of the Levites.¹⁶ She, like Leah, is an important link between the Levites and the Judahites—the high priests and the kings. Moreover, the activity of hairdressing recalls preparations made by a bride.¹⁷ The female figure opposite, in the Naason lunette, who gazes into a mirror, also partakes of classical imagery. Although Hartt interprets her as an allusion to the Virgin, she also finds her counterpart in the figure opposite—Elisheba. Both are blonde, the hair of Naason's partner now arranged. Elisheba wears a pink chemise and has a green garment draped over her lap, while her counterpart wears a pink chemise with a green overdress, creating a visual correspondence unique in the cycle.¹⁸ Oddest of these nonmaternal figures is the woman with David. If she is intended as Bathsheba, her representation is peculiar indeed: middle-aged, careworn, and ignoring the male figure next to her. Rather than spinning, she winds a hank of yarn into a ball. Her age and occupation—winding a measured length of thread—recalls Lachesis, one of the Fates, commonly identified as Destiny.¹⁹

The quattrocento wall frescoes serve to explain the historical break in the ancestor cycle, just as they illuminate aspects of the female figures in the lunettes and span-

drels. The female figures collectively represent the Church as an institution and complement the allusions in the wall frescoes to its dynastic origin. Attention to these vertical relationships suggests another aspect critical to the legitimacy of the cinquecento papacy: the Biblical accounts of the relationship between the kings of Judah and the Levite high priests. Julius II's ongoing difficulties with the pro-conciliar factions in the Church certainly would warrant—as it did for his uncle, Sixtus IV—a reminder of the doctrine of papal primacy. Given at least one attempt to use the council to depose him (that engineered by Maximilian of Spain and Louis XII in 1507), the presence of discreet references to the proper relationship between kings and the high priest in the decorative program of the ceiling is not surprising.²⁰ The Babylonian captivity is uniquely suited to this message since it was punishment for disobedience to ecclesiastical law—in particular, violation of the proper relationship between king and high priest. Such disobedience resulted in the removal of the papacy to Avignon, referred to at the time as the “Babylonian captivity.”²¹ The structural emphasis on the Babylonian captivity in the ancestor cycle is meaningful in the context of Julius's struggle with the aftermath of the Avignon papacy. As the richness of the imagery of the Sistine Chapel continues to unfold, future research on the ancestor cycle may reveal further connections between cinquecento theology at Julius II's court and the quattrocento programs.

NOTES

I would like to thank Eunice Howe for her helpful comments, criticism, and reading of this manuscript.

1. Previous interpretations of the ancestors have occurred in discussions of possible authors of the

ceiling program. See Edgar Wind, "Sante Pagnini and Michelangelo: A Study of the Succession of Savonarola," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 26 (1944): 211–246; Frederick Hartt, "Lignum Vitae in Medio Paradisi: The Stanza d'Eliodoro and the Sistine Ceiling," *Art Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (June 1950):115–144; Esther Gordon Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, Part I," *Art Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (June 1979):223–256; *id.*, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, Part II," *Art Bulletin* 61, no. 3 (September 1979):404–429. Space does not permit a summary of their arguments here.

2. However, see Malcolm Bull, "The Iconography of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling," *Burlington* 130 (August 1988):597–605.

3. Hartt, 210.

4. 1 Esd. 5:7–39.

5. See L. D. Ettlinger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

6. It "is a commonplace of Renaissance commentaries to compare the Pope to both Moses and to Aaron." John Shearman, "The Chapel of Sixtus IV," in *The Sistine Chapel*, ed. Roberto Salvini (New York: Abrams, 1971), p. 55.

7. 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chron., and 1 and 2 Sam.

8. Num. 1:4–7, 27.

9. Num. 2:3–9.

10. Num. 7:12, 10:11–16. It is interesting that Aminadab, the last leader of Judah during the exile in Egypt, and Naason, the first leader of Judah after, face each other across the chapel, as do Josias and Zorobabel. Another explanation for the distribution of names on the tablets may arise from the correspondence, proposed recently, to music performed in the Sistine Chapel.

11. For example, Gen. 46:8–27.

12. Several drawings produced between 1512 and

1534 reveal William Young Ottley's engravings of the two lost lunettes to be pastiches of cinquecento sources and Ottley's own imagination. For example, he included the type of name tablets that appear in the entrance end of the chapel, rather than matching the later type that appears in the presbytery. Space does not permit a discussion of the other inconsistencies in Ottley's engravings.

13. For example, 2 Kings 18:2 reads: "[Ahaz] was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah."

14. Thus, 2 Chron. 12:13: "Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign. . . . His mother's name was Naamah the Ammonitess."

15. Edgar Wind, quoted in Frederick Hartt, "Pagnini, Vigerio, and the Sistine Ceiling: A Reply," *Art Bulletin* 33 (1951):262–273. Hartt, "Lignum Vitae," 205, notes that "the women foretell Mary," but he does not discuss in what way they do so.

16. Exod. 6:23.

17. See, for example, this type of imagery in the Song of Solomon.

18. Hartt, "Lignum Vitae," 206.

19. Salvini, p. 209, refers to a previous attempt to so identify her. However, she, with the woman holding a pair of scissors in the spandrel opposite, may also refer to the participation of the Buonarotti family in the Florentine textile industry. Edward Maeder, in an unpublished lecture, discusses the importance of this with reference to the depiction of the costumes of the ancestors.

20. This plot is discussed in M. Creighton, *A History of the Papacy: From the Great Schism to the Sack of Rome*, 6 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, 1923), V, pp. 106 ff.

21. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), "Avignon" and "Babylonian Captivity."