

AUTHENTICITY IN RELIGIOUS ART

One of the main concerns of religion is authenticity. Which of the Psalms is of authentic Davidic authorship? Is the Shroud of Turin the authentic burial cloth of Jesus? How authentic are the sayings of Jesus incorporated by the Gnostics into their Gospel of Thomas? What constitutes authentic New Testament baptism? How authentic are modern liturgical forms in the light of such early documents as the *Didache* (a primitive church constitution)?

This whole question of authenticity has led theologians into extensive research in attempting to faithfully reconstruct life in Bible times. Also, such an interest leads church historians into the investigation of the evolution of reform movements and the origins of sects and cults. How closely, one may ask, do these new outgrowths reflect the essential spirit of authentic Christianity?

Now, in addition to accurate theological conceptions in literary form, it is also necessary to utilize authentic visual representations. Ancient artifacts from the earliest times of man attest that religion and art have always gone hand in hand. Idols and icons have been common to all lands and all faiths as mantic visionaries have attempted to produce physical images of supernatural beings and worlds. And while it is likely that the original purpose of religious artifacts was simply illustrative or educational, they inevitably evolved into objects of worship. In fact, it was in opposition to this tendency toward idolatry that the higher aniconistic faiths developed. Today, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims deliberately avoid the use of statues and pictorial images in their worship centers. Elsewhere in their classrooms and educational institutions, however, few religions would deny the admission of artistic material. In a teaching situation, it is widely recognized that the old adage is true: *a picture is worth a thousand words*. And so, any kind of artistic rendering that will enable the modern Bible student to better understand the world view of the authors of Judeo-Christian literature must be esteemed of great value.

It is certainly true that through the paintings in the Sistine Chapel one may quite accurately reconstruct many important theological doctrines peculiar to Catholicism in that period of history. Likewise, one can more readily visualize something of the supernatural realm of the Old Testament by understanding the Hebrew cherub to be modeled upon the statues of colossal human-headed bulls that once guarded ancient Mesopotamian gateways. And then to apply this knowledge and to incorporate this imagery into an artistic illustration of the Jerusalem temple greatly enhances the conceptualization of that most important artifact of ancient Israel.

Now admittedly, there is some difficulty in depicting images from the ancient Hebrew world, because those people generally lacked a developed iconography of their religion. This deficiency came from a major tenet of Mosaic belief, that the use of pictorial images in worship was not to be allowed. Nevertheless, there was a degree of laxity in applying this regulation, so that animal forms (lions, bulls, cherubs) could be used in their temple. Also, the archaeological record of Palestine shows a quite free usage of images on coins, seals, and furnishings.

Until recently it was deemed unlikely that any Hebrew artisan would have produced or exhibited a concrete likeness of Yahweh, the supreme Deity. But in 1975 that supposition was disproved by the discovery of an image of Yahweh on potsherds from Kuntillet Ajrud in the Sinai region. And the image depicting the Hebrew God was a very scandalous one - showing Him as a naked man with large genitals and the head of a bull! That Yahweh was a heavenly Bull to the Hebrews can be substantiated by other evidence. That the yearling bull ("golden calf") was used to represent Him was a matter of biblical record. And also there were images from that time that depicted the neighboring Canaanite deity Baal with the horns, ears, and tail of a bull.

Thus, although Hebraic material is scarce, this does not entirely preclude the reconstruction of likenesses of Yahweh, of supernatural beings, or of any component of the ancient mythical cosmology. There are two sources available for the modern artist to use in depicting what the primitive Hebrews had in mind when they contemplated their world and their faith. These sources are: 1) the word-pictures of the Bible, and 2) the iconographs of the ancient Near East. Numerous artifacts attest to the prolific rate at which Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Hittite image-makers produced their idols and sacred illustrations.

Canaanite artisans constructed the Jewish Sanctuary at Jerusalem, and so, it is only natural that Phœnician art should have heavily influenced Hebrew thought forms. For this reason, any modern pictures representing that period must lean to a large degree upon quasi-Egyptian-Canaanite iconography to produce what might have been Hebraic illustrations of the world of Yahweh, had they been permitted.

Visual aids are a superb enducement to learning. But, on the other hand, a pictorial image that is not accurate in its essential details will convey false impressions. For example, the common rendition of a blonde Eve taking an apple from a python is all wrong. Instead, one should envision a brunette, a fig, and an asp (*a la* Cleopatra) to more accurately represent the background of the ancient Near East. Yellow hair, certain deciduous fruit trees, and rainforest snakes are not native to that region. It is significant that the Sumerians of Mesopotamia spoke of themselves as "the black headed people." Also, the apple idea is obviously European; it

comes from the Greek myth of the golden apples of the Hesperides, which were guarded by a serpent - the typical European dragon watching over its golden hoard. And, in keeping with a Near Eastern setting, rabbinic tradition makes the tree of temptation a fig, based on the fact that the guilty couple immediately took fig leaves to make for themselves aprons.

Shoddy illustrations in which the Hebrew patriarchs are shown dressed in Arab costumes and riding on camels are everywhere to be found. Most people think of the Hebrew forefathers as desert dwelling Arabs, but actually, father Abraham was a carefully coiffed Sumerian gentleman garbed in a fringed woolen kilt and wearing a round, banded wool cap. Egyptian paintings from later Bible times show visitors from the Levant dressed in colorful kilts or short robes, wearing headbands, and driving asses. (Scholars have labeled Bible references to camels in patriarchal times as anachronisms, since that animal was not domesticated until about 1300 B.C., during the period of the Judges.)

Distinctive headdress was a primary means of national demarcation. Rulers and warrior chiefs of antiquity wore various types of headgear - horned helmets, gold circlets, ribbons, tiaras, turbans, felt caps, and golden wreaths - but never the serrated or crenelated diadems commonly depicted today. Certainly the *fleur-de-lis* or maltese cross, both depicting the Christian Trinity on European crowns, would never appear in antiquity.

Clothing was used as a means of ethnic identification in ancient times, and so styles could be expected to change very slowly. In addition to distinctive headdress, the national origin of people in olden times could be readily determined by their special hair styles and the shapes of their beards. The Hebrew Scripture was very specific in this regard; it made sure that the orthodox Jew could be distinguished by a band of blue ribbon along the bottom of his robe and by the fact that he did not trim his earlocks. Marks in the flesh, such as circumcision, also served this function of racial identification. And quite likely the story of the "mark of Cain" was based upon the custom of facial tattooing that still sets apart one desert tribe from another.

Military armor and equipment were unique with each nation. Sufficient iconographic material is now available to allow the artist to distinguish a Hittite from an Assyrian soldier, and an Egyptian from a Philistine. One can also accurately depict ranks in Roman army uniforms - setting apart tribunes, centurions, legionnaires, *etc.* - with little research effort. But instead of some precision in this regard, it is too easy for movies and art to show the foes of Israel, such as the Philistine giant Goliath, as Greek or Roman soldiers.

Even so, it is high time that the three Arab sheiks on camels were banished from Nativity scenes. The Magi should instead be shown in the habiliments of Zoroastrian priests and riding on white Persian stallions.

One need search no further than an ordinary dictionary to see that the Magi were Persians, not the dusky Iranians or Arabs of today.

Perhaps the biggest offense of common Nativity illustrations are the Muslim minarets and rounded domes of the Bethlehem skyline - which were not to be found in Palestine until after the Arab conquests of the region over six hundred years after the birth of Christ. Also typical of this misinformation is any rendition of the Jerusalem temple that exhibits features of the Mosque of Omar.

Furthermore, to deliberately falsify art can be a devious method of teaching false doctrine. One example of this is the common portrait of Jesus' baptism, which shows the unscriptural method of John's pouring water on His head out of a sea shell. On the subject of Christian baptism, if one accepts the premise that the original mode was immersion, one should choose a visual aid that does not have such pictorial incongruity. Since the word "baptism" in Greek means "immersion," any piece of art that does not depict Jesus' "*coming up out of the water*," as the Bible says, is a gross perversion of truth. By the same token, Catholic madonnas, saints, and Sacred Heart paintings are out of place in Protestant classrooms.

And then, there are those countless likenesses of a Jesus with European facial features that seem to reflect the prejudicial mindset of antisemitism. Quite unwittingly these portraits play right into the hands of an old Jewish calumny that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a blond Roman soldier. Also, such auburn-haired, blue-eyed depictions of a handsome European Adonis contradict every Gospel account that affirms His racial purity. Therefore, Jesus' countenance should exhibit typical dark eyed, olive skinned Semitic features.

Similarly, little pink "cherubs," in reality Roman cupids, and diaphanous, curly-haired, feminine angels, in reality Greek nymphs, should be relegated to whence they originated...pagan statuary. The true picture is this. The Hebrew cherub was a fierce winged creature with a human head and a bovine body, and the Hebrew angel was a mighty masculine warrior with fiery eyes, a mighty voice, full armor, and a black beard.

Thus, it is imperative that our pictures be authentic, so that truth may prevail in all realms of our culture. The day is past when an artist like Leonardo or Rembrandt could illustrate Bible scenes without regard to authenticity of detail. It is time for artists to employ sufficient research to stop misrepresenting sacred history. Surely with all of the archaeological material that is now available, religious art will eventually develop a useful authenticity that will bring it up to the level of other scholastic achievements in the field of biblical exposition.

Richard L. Atkins

Afterword:

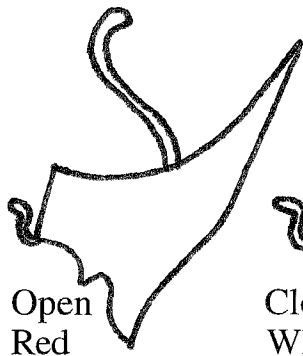
The current reliance upon modern Arab lifestyles to interpret ancient Israelite culture is unfortunate. Despite certain similarities of language, race, and belief that the inhabitants of Palestine have always shared, the differences between the sons of Isaac and the sons of Ishmael have through the years moved them further and further apart.

Now, one major factor that has caused English scholars to go through the Arab to understand the Jew is British politics. The English have become a nation of Arabophiles, because their old imperialism has put them so often in the Arab camp. The Crimean War pitted Great Britain against another Christian nation, Russia, in alliance with Muslim Turkey. And when Turkey took sides with Germany in World War I, the English courted other Islamic allies and became enamored with desert culture through the adventure stories of Lawrence of Arabia. Later, the British protectorate in Palestine after the war made it even more fashionable to extol all things Arabic.

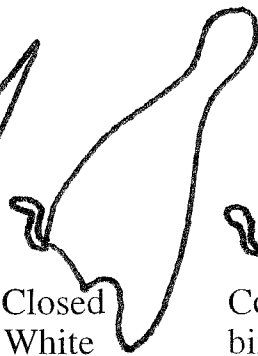
The plain fact of the matter, however, is that the current decadence of the Palestinians and the sad state of their living conditions is a far cry from the ancient glory that was Israel in her prime.

As to other errors in biblical portrayals, the artist is not always at fault, for some very misleading ideas are conveyed by incorrect translations of Hebrew or Greek words in the older Bible versions. Unicorns, candlesticks, and horns on the forehead of Moses are all false concepts arising from deficient knowledge of the original language. Also, apples, roses, corn, turtles, and pennies are misleading terms in the Bible that are peculiar to English culture in Elizabethan times.

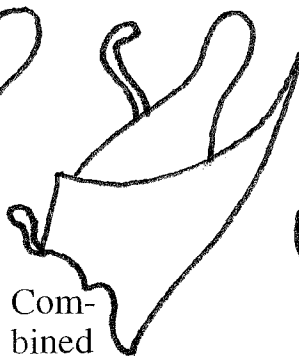
DISTINCTIVE HEADWEAR



Open
Red
Crown of
Lower Nile



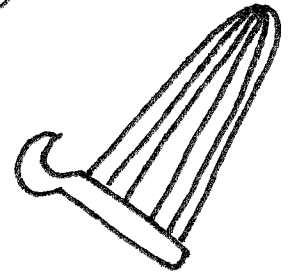
Closed
White
Crown of
Upper Nile



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Mitanni



Hittite God



Canaanite
God



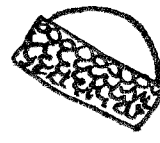
Sumerian
God



Old Baby-
lonian



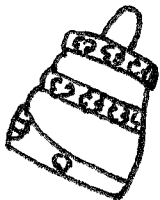
Sumerian



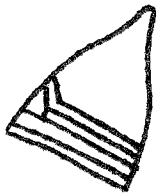
Sumerian



Greco-
Roman



Assyrian
King



Assyrian
Officer



Assyrian



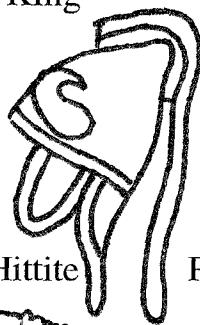
Assyrian



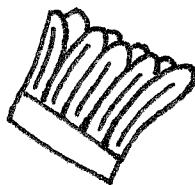
New
Babylon-
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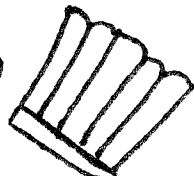
New
Babylon-
ian Noble



Hittite



Philistine



Persian



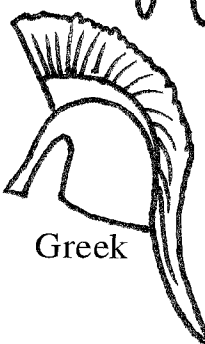
Medean



Phrygian



Israelite



Greek



Roman



Greek



Sassanian



Egyptian
Soldier



Canaanite

TYPES OF CROWNS

Crown, Coronet: Latin *corona* or Greek *stephanos*. Both terms mean “garland,” “wreath,” or “crown.” The metallic crown may be pointed to simulate light rays or crenelated to simulate battlements of a walled city.

Diadem: Latin *diadema*, taken from the Greek word for fillet or band. Originally the diadem was a cloth headband, sometimes adorned with jewels; formerly worn by Oriental kings.

Fillet: a narrow band of ribbon or the like bound around the head.

Chaplet: a wreath or garland for the head; a string of beads.

Aureole: Latin *aureola*, “golden,” fem. of *aureolus*. The radiance surrounding the head or whole figure of a sacred personage; a halo. Some Persian crowns exhibited points of flame on the rim. Late Roman emperors adopted the use of aureole crowns.

Crest: Latin *crista*, “tuft.” A tuft of hair, mane, or plume on the head of an animal and duplicated at the top of a helmet; the helmet itself; a crown.

Tiara: a jeweled ornamental coronet worn by women; a bee-hive shaped diadem worn by the Pope, surmounted by the mound or orb and cross of sovereignty and encircled with three crowns; a headdress or turban worn by the ancient Persians and later Byzantine kings.

Miter: Latin *mitra*, from the Greek word for “belt” or “headband.” Official headdress of the Jewish high priest and of an Episcopalian bishop (tall cap with deep crosswise cleft, simulating the cloven tongues of flame at Pentecost).

