

# The Bible and 20th-Century Art

## What Influence Do the Scriptures Still Have?

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**W**as Asher Lev correct? Does an artist—even a Jewish one—need Jesus as a model of expression? Does a painter need the Crucifixion as *the* symbol of unmitigated sorrow?

In his book *Asher Lev*, 1972, Chaim Potok records the anguish of Asher Lev who defied his conservative Jewish Hasidic upbringing to become a world-renowned artist.

His mother was horrified: "Painting is for goyim, Asher. Jews don't draw and paint."

But when he started to draw Jesus, her agony intensified. "Do you know how much Jewish blood has been spilled because of him, Asher? How could you spend your precious time doing this?"

"But I needed to, Mama."

"There are other paintings you can copy, Asher."

"But I needed the expression, Mama. I couldn't find that expression anywhere else."<sup>1</sup>

Does the whole art world feel this way, this secular 20th-century art world? Is Jesus aesthetically necessary?

Asher's final alienation from his parents came when he painted *Brooklyn Crucifixion*, relying on the artistic power of Christ's torturous death as metaphor for the tearing anguish his mother and father endured over his art.

Asher defended himself by saying that "I created this painting—an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment."<sup>2</sup>

### Changing Worldviews

Are the Bible and its Jesus the epitome of artistic metaphor? Do artists today still rely on biblical images and motifs for aesthetic power? Is "The Greatest Story Ever Told" an influence on narratives still being written? Is it a major source, inspiration, or allusion base?

During the Middle Ages, the answer to all these questions would have been a Yes. The Church controlled almost everything—including art. So to rustle up examples of religiously influenced artworks during that period is no demanding feat. They were legion.<sup>3</sup>

When Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy*, he basically could count on a generally accepted worldview of sin. When he consigned adulterers to hell, his readers would agree. But in our secular 20th-century environment, can an artist assume *any* generally accepted worldview about anything? No, an artist cannot. Only 20 to 25 percent of the world is Christian today. Adultery is prime-time entertainment, a sure-thing media

hype. Adulterous activities are depicted as exhilarating, tantalizing options to marriage boredom. In fact, only seven percent of sexual love in the movies is between married people. And the media message is loud and clear: Married love is boring, unexciting—just plain uninteresting.

Dante would have a hard time finding a majority worldview that would consign 20th-century unmarried lovers to anything but a motel room! In view of such, what aesthetic influence does the Bible still retain?

I decided to investigate. Recently I was a participant in an interdenominational workshop for college teachers entitled "Aesthetics and Christianity in a Post-modern World." As my project for the conference, I chose to compile a list of 20th-century artworks that have been inspired in a major way by the Bible, be they done by writers, composers, painters, sculptors, or any other type of artist. I solicited examples from the art, music, literature, and theater departments of Christian Coalition colleges.

In a useful article, C. S. Lewis discusses five ways that a book can be said to be an influence on another book (or other artwork): (1) as a *source*, giving content to write about; (2) as *quotations* used; (3) as *embedded quotations of phrases or sentences*; (4) as a *vocabulary influence*; and (5) as *style*, "that which prompts a man to write in a certain way."<sup>4</sup>

When I sent out the questionnaires to the department chairman of each of the four departments in the 78 coalition colleges, I made no distinction as to which of the

**EXAMPLES OF BIBLICALLY INSPIRED 20-TH CENTURY ARTWORKS**

Biblical Reference	Art Title	Art Form	Author, Artist or Composer
The Psalms	<i>Sacred Service</i>	Oratorio	Ernest Bloch (1880-1959)
Jeremiah	<i>Jeremiah Symphony</i>	Symphony	Leonard Bernstein (1918-1991)
The Samson Story	<i>Samson and Dalilah</i>	Opera	Camille Saint-Saens (1835-1921)
Jesus Birth/Death	<i>The Journey of the Magi</i>	Poem	T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)
The Moses/ Pharaoh Conflict	<i>The Firstborn</i>	Play	Christopher Fry (1907- )
Creation to Revelation	<i>Gates of Hell</i>	Sculpture	Auguste Rodin (1840-1917)
The Crucifixion Story	<i>Stations of the Cross</i>	Painting	Barnet Newman (1905-1970)
Christ Entering a City	<i>Christ Enters Brussels</i>	Painting	James Ensor
Book of Job	<i>J. B.</i>	Play	Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982)
The Crucifixion of Christ	<i>The Seven Last Words of Christ</i>	Choral and Orchestra Piece	Theodore Dubois (1837-1924)
Peter's Denial of Christ	<i>In the Servant's Quarters</i>	Poem	Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)
Selected Biblical Texts	<i>The Light in the Wilderness</i>	Oratorio	David Brubeck (1920- )
Noah	<i>The Flowering Peach</i>	Play	Clifford Odets (1906-1963)
The Moses/ Aaron Story	<i>Moses and Aaron</i>	Opera	Arnold Schonberg (1874-1951)
The Jonah Story	<i>Jonah</i>	Play	Madeline L'Engle

five ways they were to use as they sent me lists of works with which they were familiar. I also told them that the artworks did not have to be necessarily Christian artworks, just 20th-century artworks in which the Bible had been a major source or influence.

In order to give those who answered the questionnaires some

idea of what I wanted, I enclosed the above page of examples plus two blank pages on which they could record their contributions.

### A Hemingway Hero

Just how did some of these 20th-century artists use the Bible? Take literature, for instance. Ernest He-

mingway, certainly a non-Christian author although reared in a Christian home, utilized numerous Christ/crucifixion images in his famous novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*.<sup>5</sup> The plot of the story is simple. An old Cuban fisherman has gone 84 days without catching a fish. The other fishermen make fun of him, saying that he is a has-

been. Manolin, a boy whom Santiago taught to fish, does have faith in him, however, although Manolin's father has told him not to fish with unlucky Santiago any longer.

So Santiago goes out into the Gulf Stream alone and catches a giant, 18-foot marlin, the largest ever caught. He battles the great fish for three days, finally tying it to his boat. But on the way back to shore, the sharks eat the marlin so that when Santiago gets back home, only the skeleton remains.

Santiago is considered the prime example of a Hemingway Code Hero, a type of person who persists with courage and honor in a meaningless and often violent world. It is a world where one loses in the end, no matter how much "grace under pressure" one exhibited. Life is a futile battle, so the only way to cope is to live with certain principles. A true code hero "can be destroyed but not defeated." Santiago's marlin was destroyed, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that Santiago had behaved honorably, according to a code.

So what about the Christ/crucifixion allusions? Many exist. Manolin is a disciple figure. Having been taught to fish by Santiago, Manolin responds with the gift of a warm relationship. When Santiago is battling the marlin alone, he longs for Manolin's company, much as Christ longed for his disciples' companionship in the Garden of Gethsemane. Communion imagery is used in the sentence, "I must have water for him, the boy thought, and soap and a good towel."

Just as Jesus was in the tomb alone three days and two nights, so Santiago battled the marlin alone. Just as Christ fell carrying the cross, so Santiago fell carrying the mast. Santiago's bleeding hands and straw hat are symbols of Jesus' bleeding hands and crown of thorns. The harpoon in the shark's side reminds the reader of the spear in Christ's side. Cruci-

ifixion imagery is invoked when Santiago "settled . . . against the wood and took his suffering as it came . . ." and ". . . just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling a nail go through his hands and into the wood." Also, several references exist to purple and vinegar.<sup>6</sup>

But so what? What do all these obvious Christ/crucifixion images mean? Why did Hemingway, a non-Christian writer, use them so prominently and prevalently in the story?

Maybe he felt that, like Asher Lev, you just can't ignore the aesthetic power of the Christ story. What excels it for model of expression? For metaphor of torment?

Hemingway probably used all the Christ allusions for two main reasons. In the first place, the theme of one's being able to be destroyed but not defeated is a very Christian-compatible one. Every Christian martyr has had to die with that thought—if not those words—in mind. Anyone who is stronger, bigger, taller, swifter than another can *destroy* the weaker, smaller, shorter, or slower person. But millions have died for political or religious reasons fully believing that their death was not defeat, because they died loyal to a code, a set of beliefs, an honor system.

And what better universal example would Hemingway's readers identify with than Jesus? Whether or not they believed in Christ's divinity, these readers would still know the story, would still respond to the images, would still see the parallels between Christ and Santiago. Both were destroyed but not defeated. Both lived unflinchingly by a code. And the crowd was wrong about both. Those gathering around the marlin's skeleton never understood; nor did those gathering around the foot of the cross.

In summary, by using the well-known Christ Crucifixion story, Hemingway invested his own

tale—an aging fisherman who lived by a code—with aesthetic power, lending impact to his themes.

But Hemingway used such potent biblical imagery for a second reason. The literary critics were labelling Hemingway as a failure, a writer who was finished, who was only imitating his former successes. He, like Santiago, had much to prove to his peers. Both needed a magnificent catch, better than anything that had been caught before. At one place in the story, Hemingway wrote of Santiago's fishing lines (symbolically literary lines) that Santiago "kept them straighter than anyone did." Santiago reflects, "I keep them with precision. Only I have no luck any more. . . . It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact."<sup>7</sup>

Hemingway wanted to prove his critics wrong so much that he read over the manuscript to the story 200 times before releasing it to publication in 1952! And when in 1954 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and in the presentation *The Old Man and the Sea* was specifically mentioned, Hemingway must have indeed felt vindicated of his critics' accusations. He had proved that he was not finished!

Christ, too, was declared finished, verified as dead on a wooden cross. Likewise Christ was not through and "Up from the grave He arose! With a mighty triumph o'er His foes," victory most glorious after his critics had declared him done.

Perhaps Hemingway would have agreed with Asher Lev—there is nothing, absolutely nothing upon which an artist can rely to evoke emotion, to connote images of anguish and struggle and defeat and triumph like the Christ/crucifixion story. Potok and Hemingway, one a Jew and the other a non-Christian, both realized the aesthetic potential of the Bible and used it powerfully, craftily.

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## Bible and Art

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### A Perduring Presence

Now back to the questionnaires I sent to the department heads. What did the responses indicate? Those that responded sent back about 250 examples from the four areas. The results were both discouraging and encouraging—discouraging because not many responded, but encouraging because those who did had so many examples.<sup>8</sup>

Was Asher Lev right? Can the art world ignore the crucified Christ? The results of my questionnaires indicated that the Bible does continue to impact the arts, although perhaps not as significantly as formerly. If not the dominant force behind 20th-century art, it is nevertheless a force still influencing the art world. Yes, "The Greatest Story Ever Told" is being retold, repainted, resung, redramatized.

The tragedy of the majority of 20th-century artists is that they may find power in the Bible as source, quotation, or stylistic influence. But what about the Jesus of the Scriptures? What have they done personally about him? To reference the Bible in their artistic creations is inadequate. To capitalize on the aesthetic Christ is likewise not enough. It never has been. Artists search for truth. So did Pilate—sort of. Pilate—the most tragic character in the crucifixion narrative—no code hero here!

"Pilate said to him [Jesus], 'What is truth?'"<sup>9</sup> But Pilate was never really interested in the answer to that question. Pilate—the man who by his own testimony found no fault in Christ—never accepted him as his personal Saviour. Finding Jesus faultless, "he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'"<sup>10</sup> The dramatic irony is that in washing him-

self symbolically of Christ's innocent blood, Pilate remained filthy still.

No, a knowledge of Christ has never saved—not Pilate, not artists who reference him, not you nor me. And unless 20th-century artists can use their talents to dramatize, to orchestrate, to paint, to write about the Christ of the crucifixion in such a way as to draw their listeners, viewers, or readers into a personal relationship with Jesus, their highest artistic calling will never be reached.

#### NOTES

1. Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York: Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, 1972), pp. 164-165.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 313.

3. Two classic books on this topic are by Cythia Pearl Maus, *The Old Testament and the Fine Arts: An Anthology of Pictures, Poetry, Music and Stories Covering the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954) and *Christ and the Fine Arts: An Anthology of Pictures, Poetry, Music and Stories Centering on the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

4. C. S. Lewis, "The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version," in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 126-145.

5. Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952. Reprinted in *The Scribner Quarto of Modern Literature*, ed. by A. Walton Litz (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978).

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-292.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.

8. Readers interested in a list of these examples may obtain a free copy by writing to *Dialogue: The Bible and Contemporary Art*, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring MD 20904, U.S.A.

9. John 18:38, RSV.

10. Matthew 27:24, RSV.

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