

Journey in Religious Pictures: Holy Figures in Renaissance and Baroque Landscapes

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Abstract

Artists have portrayed the beauty and glory of nature since Antiquity. Renaissance and Baroque painters depicted religious episodes in impressive landscapes. The aim of this paper is to examine the sceneries which picturise the journey of a biblical figure or a saint.

There are many stories in the bible which involve voyage either on the earth or from the earth towards the heaven. Noah built an ark for himself, his family and the animals and they rode safely in the flood. Abraham sent Hagar and their son Ishmael into the wilderness of Beersheba. Lot, his wife and two daughters left the wicked city of Sodom. Jacob dreamed a ladder set up on the earth toward reached the heaven. The Book of Exodus tells the journeys of Moses. He was put in a basket and left in Nile when he was a baby and later in his adult life he passed through the Red Sea with the children of Israel.

Gospels describe several journeys. Three wise men made a trip to see the newborn Jesus. An angel appeared to Joseph and warned him to flee into Egypt with the Infant Jesus. Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee, when his disciples were waiting on the boat. Jesus was led away to be crucified in the pictures called *The Road to Calvary*. Jesus walked with two of his disciples on the road to the village of Emmaus. *The Ascension of Jesus* is his departure from earth into the presence of God. Mary's soul leaves her body in the scenes called *Assumption of Mary*. Saint Christopher is painted wading through the water with the Infant Christ on his soulders.

Keywords: Journey, Religious Painting, Landscape, Renaissance, Baroque

Introduction

Landscape painting marks the stages in people's perception of natural world. Its rise and development since the middle ages is part of a cycle in which the human spirit attempted to create a harmony with its environment (Clark, 1976, 1).

The western landscape painting has had a short and fitful story. In the greatest ages of European art, the age of the Parthenon and the age of Chartres Cathedral, landscape did not and could not exist; to Giotto and Michelangelo it was an impertinence. It is only in the 17th century that great artists take up landscape painting for its own sake. They tried to systemise the rules. Only in the 19th century does it become the dominant art and create a new aesthetic of its own. In course of this development the concept of landscape changes from things to impressions. Man first shows his consciousness of nature when his art is still symbolic. Flowers, leaves, individual trees are all things which can be thought of in isolation. The fusion of these elements into a total impression is achieved through the perception of light (Clark, 1976, 229).

Certain events in the bible have subjects that depend on a landscape setting. Since medieval times episodes such as *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*, the *Baptism of Christ* in the waters of the Jordan or the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* have been depicted in religious paintings in settings that evoke the beauties of nature. The natural world may also be seen as God's creation, suggesting his presence in less obvious ways. In Protestant lands, especially during the 17th and 19th centuries, depictions of the observed world were often intended to denote the presence of the divine (Sturgis, 2000, 168).

The Old Testament

The Old Testament, the first section of the Christian Bible, tells various stories that include journeys of holy personages. Noah, Hagar, Ishmael, Lot, Jacob and Moses are among the biblical figures who made noteworthy trips.

The story of Noah's journey is told in the Bible's Genesis flood narrative. Observing the wickedness of mankind, God regrets creating them and decides to destroy the entire human race and all the animals. The only person he wishes to save is Noah. He orders him to build a great ark and take his wife, his sons, their wives and pairs of animals. He plans to make it rain on earth for forty days and forty nights. The waters cover the land for a hundred and fifty days. Then God, remembering Noah, causes the wind and rain to abate. Gradually the waters subside and the ark alights on the summit of Mount Ararat. (Capoa, 2003, 54-58). Even the features of the ark is specified in the narrative.³

The Italian High Renaissance painter Jacopo Bassano (1515-1592) depicted Noah's Ark and the gathering of animals several times. His mastery

³ So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high (Genesis 6: 14-15).

in presenting different kinds of animals in a landscape can be seen in the painting dated 1570's (**Figure 1**).

The flood is one of those events which stress the fact that men and animals share the same world and the same fate. Bassano and his family have been underrated because they concentrated so much on animal painting. Seen in longer perspective, however, it is clear that they were among the first outstanding landscape painters (Clark, 1977, 66).



Figure 1: Jacopo Bassano, *The Animals Entering Noah's Ark*, 1570's, oil on canvas, 207 x 275 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

The story of Lot and his daughters comes from the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Genesis.⁴ Lot first appears in the Bible as Abraham's nephew. When the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah "Cities of the Plain", so angered God, he decided to destroy them, Abraham asked Lot and his family to be spared. The angels who came to warn, forbade anyone to look back as they fled. Lot's wife did so and she was turned into a pillar of salt. Lot and his two daughters took refuge in the hills close to the small city of Zoar (Murray & Murray, 2013, 322).

German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), depicted the fleeing of Lot and his family circa 1498 (**Figure 2**). This scene, painted on the reverse side of Dürer's *Madonna and Child*, was important for the moral lesson it taught. Like the story of Noah and the flood, that of Lot and the desolation of Sodom and Gomorrah was an allegory demonstrating the power of God to save the righteous. Since the combination of the story of Lot with the depiction of the Virgin and Child is extremely unusual, the exact relation of the two images remains unclear. However, they could be understood as two examples of the value of a just life (www.nga.gov).

⁴ With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, "Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!" (Genesis 19: 15-16).



Figure 2: Albrecht Dürer, *Lot Fleeing with his Daughters from Sodom*, c. 1498, oil and tempera on panel, 41 x 52 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant whom Sarah gave to Abraham as his concubine, is another traveling biblical person in the Book of Genesis. Hagar bore Ishmael who became the progenitor of Ishmaelites. When Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she felt that her son's position is threatened by Ishmael. She urged Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael. They were sent away the desert with some water and bread (Achtemeier, 1996, 396). The book tells where and in what circumstances she wandered.⁵

French Baroque era painter Claude Lorrain's (1604-1682) painting entitled *The Expulsion of Hagar* is dated 1668 (**Figure 3**). Lorrain created a pair of landscapes in the same year: the *Expulsion of Hagar* and the *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel*. These are further examples of Lorrain's often repeated theme of the morning and evening scenes. The figures play a tiny part in the whole of the picture (www.wga.hu).



Figure 3: Claude Lorrain, *The Expulsion of Hagar*, 1668, oil on canvas, 107 x 140 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

⁵ Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba (Genesis 21: 14).

Jacob, on the road to Haran, stops one night to sleep. In his dream, he sees a flight of steps that leads from earth to heaven with two companies of angels climbing and descending. At the top of the ladder is the Lord, who speaks to Jacob.⁶ Several meanings have been attributed to the ladder. Above all, it alludes to God's favor for the entire people of Israel. The presence of angels represents contact between the human and divine spheres (Capoa, 2003, 116-117).

Italian Baroque era painter Domenico Fetti (1589-1623) depicted Jacob's dream in 1613 (**Figure 4**). Jacob is lying on the ground in a wild landscape, dreaming a ladder which opens a shining path through the lurid sky.



Figure 4: Domenico Fetti, *Jacob's Dream*, 1613, oil on wood panel, 43 x 60,5 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan.

The Book of Exodus narrates two journeys of the Hebrew prophet and lawgiver Moses: one when he was a baby⁷, the latter in his adulthood.⁸

⁶ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it^[c] stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying (Genesis 28: 10-13).

⁷ Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him (Exodus 2: 1-4).

⁸ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the

French Baroque era painter Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), depicted the trip of the newborn in his painting entitled *The Exposition of Moses* (1654) (**Figure 5**). When Pharaoh ordered all new-born Hebrew sons to be killed, Moses's mother put him in an ark of bulrushes in the Nile. His sister stayed to watch while Pharaoh's daughter came to the river with her maidens and found the child. The painting is striking for its emotional intensity, with the focus on Moses's suffering parents. The joyful scene of the finding of Moses was a popular one, whereas this subject is far less common. Poussin treated it earlier in 1627. It was greatly admired by contemporaries for the artist's treatment of the subject, his skill in painting reflections and the beauty of the landscape. Pharaoh's city is based on Pirro Ligorio's reconstruction of some of the most famous buildings of ancient Rome. A sphinx accompanied by a river-god and cornucopia identifies the Nile (www.ashmolean.org).



Figure 5: Nicolas Poussin, *The Exposition of Moses*, 1654, oil on canvas, 149,5 x 204,5 cm, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Pharaoh permitted the people of Israel to leave Egypt. But he did not let them go freely and he gathered together his warriors and chariots to pursue them. The people of Israel were very afraid when they saw Egyptian army on the shores of the Red Sea. Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and waters were divided. (Ferguson, 1989, 59). Italian Early Renaissance artist Cosimo Rosselli (1439-1507), created *Crossing of the Red Sea* (**Figure 6**), a majestic painting presenting the victorious Israelites and the defeated Egyptian army in 1481. The impressive sky of the vast landscape is a dramatic reflection of the great event.

Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen (Exodus 14: 15-17).



Figure 6: Cosimo Rosselli, *Crossing of the Red Sea*, 1481-1482, fresco, 350 x 572 cm, Cappella Sistina, Vatican.

The New Testament

The New Testament, the second part of the Christian Bible, narrates the life of Virgin Mary and Jesus and discusses the miracles and teachings of Christ. Some of the episodes involve voyages either actual or spiritual.

The wise men described in the Gospel of Matthew⁹ as the first gentiles to believe in Christ were venerated as saints in the middle ages. They traditionally numbered three, called Casper, Balthasar and Melchior. In their rich iconography, they are sometimes depicted as one old man, one middle-aged and one youthful. They were naturally regarded as the patron of travellers before Saint Christopher became more popular (Farmer, 321-22). Pictures portraying the rich caravan of the three wise men, journeying toward Bethlehem are commonly entitled *Journey of the Magi*. When they reached to their destination, they worshiped the Infant Jesus and presented him with gifts (Ferguson, 1989, 77). Dutch Baroque era painter Leonaert Bramer (1596-1674) depicted the journey of the three magi to Bethlehem in 1638-1640 (**Figure 7**). Angels are leading the three magi with their torches in the dark landscape.

⁹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him (Matthew 2: 1-2). Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed (Matthew 2: 7-10).



Figure 7: Leonaert Bramer, *Journey of the Three Magi to Bethlehem*, 1638-1640, oil on panel, 79 x 107 cm, New York Historical Society, New York

After the Magi had worshipped the Infant Jesus, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Jesus and his mother and flee to Egypt and stay there until the death of King Herod (Murray and Murray, 2013, 170). The Gospel of Matthew narrates the Egyptian journey of the holy family.¹⁰ Italian Early Renaissance artist Fra Angelico (1400-1455) depicted the flight into Egypt in 1451-1452 (**Figure 8**).

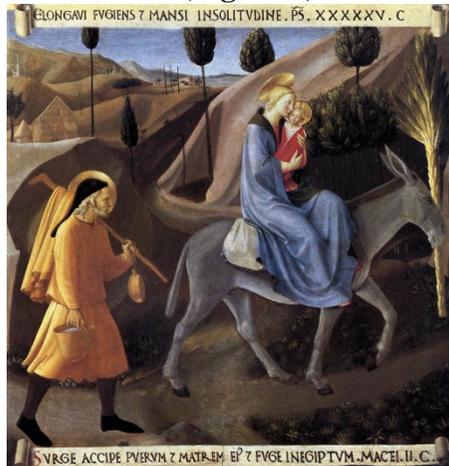


Figure 8: Fra Angelico, *Flight into Egypt*, 1451-1452, tempera on wood, 37 x 38,5 cm, Museo di San Marco, Florence.

¹⁰ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Matthew 2: 13-15).

“Christ walking upon the water” is one of the miracles of Jesus that is narrated by the the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John.¹¹ One evening, Christ ordered his disciples to cross over the sea of Galilee before him. A great wind arose that theratened the boat. Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. (Ferguson, 1989, 84). Flemish Baroque era painter Paul Bril (1554-1626) created a stormy seascape in *Jesus Walking on the Sea of Galilee* (1590’s) (**Figure 9**).



Figure 9: Paul Bril, *Jesus Walking on the Sea of Galilee*, 1590’s, 73,5 x 101 cm, Museum of John Paul II Collection, Warsaw.

The Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke relate as Christ was led away to be crucified, a man called Simon from Cyrene carried his cross. It is the only evangelist John¹² who says that Christ was compelled to bear his own cross (Ferguson, 1989, 87).

German court painter Christoph Schwarz (1545-1592) in his painting *Christ on the Way to Calvary* dated 1580 (**Figure 10**) depicted a crowded scene with the people and soldiers following Jesus on the way to Golgotha. He even added Saint Veronica who wiped the face of Christ with compassion and had the image of his face on her veil.

¹¹ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” (Matthew 14: 23-27).

¹² Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha) (John 19: 17).



Figure 10: Christoph Schwarz, *Christ on the Way to Calvary*, c. 1580, oil on copper, 24,4 x 36,8 cm, Private Collection.

One of the occasions on which Christ appeared to the disciples after his Resurrection is a prologue to a much more frequently depicted scene *Supper at Emmaus*. Luke, alone, describes how two disciples, on their way home from Jerusalem to the neighbouring village of Emmaus met Christ and walked with him.¹³ Christ is dressed as a pilgrim with a wallet and staff (Hall, 1974, 178).

Flemish Baroque era painter Jan Wildens (1586-1653) depicted a tranquil and beautiful landscape with a road in the center of the picture leading to Emmaus in *Christ on the Road to Emmaus* dated 1640's (**Figure 11**). The figure of Christ who is dressed like the two disciples can be recognised by his halo.



Figure 11: Jan Wildens, *Christ on the Road to Emmaus*, 1640's, oil on canvas, 123 x 168 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

The Ascension of Christ is the last appearance of Christ on earth after his Resurrection and his departure to Heaven. This dramatic event central to

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him (Luke 24: 13-16).

whole Gospel story is terated differently by the four Evangelists. Matthew and John do not mention it and Mark says merely. Only Luke¹⁴ gives a full account divided between the last chapter of his Gospel and the first chapter of the Acts (Murray and Murray, 2013, 34).

Italian Early Renaissance painter Pietro Perugino (1445-1523) created *Ascension of Christ* (**Figure 12**) at the request of the Benedictine monks of the city of Perugia in 1495. The twelve apostles and Saint Paul stand at each side of the Virgin Mary. Above them, Christ can be seen inside a mandorla. Between heaven and earth, angels play music or pray to God (www.mba-lyon.fr).



Figure 12: Pietro Perugino, *Ascension of Christ*, 1495-1498, 265 x 325 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Lyon.

The term assumption comes from the Latin “adsumere” meaning to take up. The belief that the body and soul of Virgin Mary were taken up to heaven after her death is first found in late fourth century apocryphal writings (Ross, 1996, 26). The scene of the assumption is set in the Valley of Josaphat, the cemetery where the apostles took Mary’s body and placed it in a tomb. At the moment of assumption, Jesus appears with a group of angels. The archangel Michael uncovered the tomb, Mary’s soul was united with her body and the angels carried her up to heaven (Zuffi, 2003, 366). Flemish Baroque era painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), created a lively and eloquent scene in *The Assumption of the Virgin Mary* dated 1616-18 (**Figure 13**).

¹⁴ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God (Luke 24: 50-53).
After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight (Acts 1: 9).



Figure 13: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Assumption of the Virgin Mary*, 1616-18, oil on oak, 168 x 284 cm, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf.

Saints

Saints have been regarded as protectors of certain countries, cities, arts and professions. Saints Bridget, Christopher, Michael, Julian and Roch are seen as patrons of travellers (Giorgi, 2003, 381). Saint Christopher is the most popular and frequently depicted saint related to journeys.

Saint Christopher was originally named Reprobus, a huge man from Canaan in third century who wished to serve the most powerful being on earth. He served a king for a long time. Then he met a hermit who speak to him of the power of Christ. The holy man advised him to stay near a river and ferry poor travellers across, since serving the humble was a way of serving Christ. One day, a child asked to be ferried across. During the trip, the child became very heavy; Reprobus thought he was carrying the weight of the entire world. The child then revealed himself to be Christ. He converted to Christianity and his name changed into Christopher, meaning Christ-bearer (Giorgi, 2003, 89).

Flemish Northern Renaissance artist Joachim Patinir (1485-1524), depicted *Saint Christopher* in 1515 (**Figure 14**). Described by Albrecht Dürer at the outset of the Renaissance as “the good painter of landscapes”, Patinir was considered the first modern painter to specialise in this genre. Among the reasons for the spectacular rise of this genre the geographical context was important. Antwerp was the leading art market of Europe and in contrast to other major cities in Europe, the range of works produced there was enormous and was controlled by the artists themselves rather than by the Church (www.museodelprado.es).



Figure 14: Joachim Patinir, *Saint Christopher*, 1515, oil on panel, 125 x 170 cm, El Escorial, Madrid.

Conclusion

There are numerous Biblical episodes that include journey either actual or spiritual. The voyages of Noah, Lot and Moses are survival. These holy personages had to leave their home and go to a distant land to protect themselves and their families or the whole nation. Jacob dreamed a ladder that goes into heaven and enabled the up and down trip of angels. Virgin Mary and Jesus made spiritual journeys towards heaven in the eyes of their beloved ones. All these holy trips narrated in the Old and New Testament inspired Renaissance and Baroque landscape painters. Artists depicted figures walking, riding or ascending in majestic views of the natural world.

Greek and Roman mythologies which had been another great source of subjects for the European artists of 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, embrace journeys of divine characters. Helios, the god of sun, crosses the sky in a golden chariot drawn by four horses. His sister Eos, the goddess of dawn, drives across the sky in a chariot pulled by two fine horses. Jason, the legendary Greek hero and leader of the Argonauts, made a tiresome voyage to acquire the Golden Fleece. Odysseus, the Greek hero and king of Ithaca, made the most popular journey in mythology. The *Odyssey*, Homer's great epic poem, focuses on the ten year trip home of Odysseus after the fall of Troy. These narratives have also inspired pleasing and exciting seascapes, landscapes and skiescapes.

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