SYMBOLISM IN THE GENESIS MOSAICS OF SAN MARCO

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Abstract: Throughout early Christian art, the work of the mosaic is prominently used to adorn the ceilings of basilicas, especially in the apse of the churches. Being an especially rich medium of expression, this is symbolic because the apse was associated with the vault of heaven (Hetherington 14). Within San Marco’s basilica of Venice, this tradition is no different. The vaulted ceilings are covered in mosaics of glass and gold, making it sparkle and twinkle to the viewers below and giving it a truly heavenly quality. Though not in the apse, but rather in the narthex, the Creation mosaics speak volumes about the theological, societal, and gender issues facing the state during the time of its construction in the thirteenth century, and connect the viewer to the fall of man, which led humankind to its current state of depravity.

1. Introduction

At a first glance, the mosaics seem to tell the same ageless story of creation by an omniscient God, and the moment when sin first entered the world, thus entrusting us to toil the earth and face death. However, much deeper meaning lies behind the stance of the characters depicted, the colors used, and the layout of each scene. Created for a largely illiterate audience in Venice, the narrative is meant to be “read” through the pictures, rather than actual words, though there are a few Latin terms strategically placed by the mosaicists (Jolly 6). The depiction of the story of Creation is not unusual, in fact it was quite popular in the thirteenth century. It answered and explained many questions about the circumstances of our lives, such as why men are the heads of families, the relationship between men and women, and why we must work to survive (Anthony 195). Though historians are not certain who actually did the work on these mosaics, the artwork possesses distinct Byzantine influence, but because of the linear quality unique to this basilica, it is speculated that the artisans were Italians who worked under Byzantine masters (Anthony 195).

2. Narrative

The creation cupola is composed of three registers read from left to right, top to bottom, giving a visual representation of the actual fall from Eden, because the viewers’ eyes fall from top to bottom to interpret the entire story. Yet another effort to give the mosaic a sequence is the personification of each day as a certain number of angels, much like the use of Roman numerals.

The narrative begins with the story of Creation prior to Adam. The Creator is depicted as an all-powerful God, but embodies Christ of John 1:1 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”), holding a cross-scepter in His left hand, with His right
hand raised to gesture speech and action (Jolly 14). Thus the Trinity is represented through this
depiction of God. Most often throughout this narrative, He appears on the right side of the frame,
a reference to His primacy, and is gesturing towards the action, therefore a part of what is
happening within the story. This is the pictorial translation of “and God said” from Genesis.

In the scene depicting “the separation of light and darkness,” light is represented as red, and
darkness is represented as blue, a formula which pervades the rest of the narrative and giving
symbolic significance to later use of color (Fig.1). Many of the writings of Augustine influenced
the interpretation of these events and are significant in this light and dark representation. Light is
associated with truth or righteousness, and darkness is associated with pride or sin, therefore
asserting that God separated light from dark in the beginning, not to create evil, but rather to
permit it to allow free will in his creations (Jolly 17).

![Figure 1. Separation of Light and Darkness](image1)

After moving through the first register, the second register begins with the “creation of the
heavenly bodies.” (Fig.2) Once again, color symbolism is used, as the sun (light) is red, and the
moon (darkness) is blue. Lucifer is even depicted within the face of the blue moon.

![Figure 2. Creation of the Heavenly Bodies](image2)
The next scene is that of “creation of the birds and marine creatures,” which expresses the love the Venetians have for the sea. The creatures are shown as pairs of males and females that overlap, becoming one being as a response to God’s command to “increase and multiply.” (Fig. 3). The animals in the “creation of the terrestrial animals” follow the same trend (Jolly 19). (Fig.4)

![Figure 3. Creation of the birds and marine creatures](image1)

Figure 3. Creation of the birds and marine creatures

![Figure 4. Creation of the Terrestrial Animals](image2)

Figure 4. Creation of the Terrestrial Animals

An interesting characteristic of the scene depicting the “blessing of the birds and marine creatures” is the serpent coiled beneath the feet of the five angels (Fig. 5). This is significant because this scene falls directly below the depiction of “the separation of light and darkness” in the first register, thus reinforcing the concept of the origin of evil. Because of the shape of the cupola, it is possible to create a vertical axis enabling viewers to compare scenes below and above one another. Not surprisingly, then, the scene directly below the “blessing” is that of the “temptation of Eve,” where the serpent takes an active role in the narrative. (Fig.6) This vertical axis also creates a composition of cause and effect; the jealous evil being tempts Eve, therefore causing the fall of humankind.
Figure 5. Blessing of the birds and marine creatures

Figure 6. Temptation of Eve

Also present on the second register is the “forming of Adam.” (Fig.7) The creation of the first man is significant because he is formed as a single being, rather than in a pair, as previously depicted in the creation of the birds, marine animals, and terrestrial animals. Instead of simply speaking Adam into creation, God sits upon a throne and forms Adam with His hands.

Figure 7. Forming of Adam
After the scene of the "blessing of the seventh day," is the "animation of Adam." The composition of this portion of the narrative differs from the others, because the Creator is at the left of the scene with Adam on the right, as the primary figure. This placement of the figures suggests that Adam is created in the image of God, and is therefore a perfect creation when he has received his soul. Adam adopts an erect posture, imitating that of God (Jolly 24). (Fig.8)

Figure 8. Animation of Adam

The scene of the "introduction of Adam into Paradise" marks the end of the second register. God clutches Adam’s right wrist as He gestures toward the beautiful creation in front of him, as though presenting it as a gift to the first man. Again on the right hand side of the composition, this is Adam’s first introduction to the Tree of Knowledge, which will ultimately cause his depravity.

Figure 10. Introduction of Adam into Paradise

The third and final register is distinctly different from the preceding registers because the background is dominated by green vegetation, and dark colors, rather than the pure gold background present in previous scenes. The darker colors, and fall to the bottom of the cupola signify the beginning of the end, and a more extensive introduction of evil into the world. It is interesting to note this change in representation coincides with the creation of Eve, Adam’s helpmate.
This fall begins when God states that “it is not good for man to be alone,” in the “naming of the animals” scene. In contrast to the paired and unified male and female animals, Adam stands alone. Eve is created when God takes a rib from Adam’s side, an act that brings both of them to a more debased state (Fig. 11). Adam is asleep, an act which was associated with the pursuit of sensuality and immorality. God is seen in profile rather than from the front, and this state is often associated with evil in order to avoid eye contact between the viewer and the evil beings (Jolly 48). Also, rather than being seated in majesty at His throne, or standing erect, God is bending over Adam in a more human pose. The rib is taken from the left side of Adam’s body, thus introducing Eve as a negative creation from the beginning. Placed behind Adam is the Tree of Knowledge, and it appears to spring forth from his side, implying that the source of sin comes with the creation of woman. It also provides a reference to the tree upon which Christ will be crucified, also implying that one day a “new Adam” will come to redeem humanity (Jolly 33). While Adam sleeps, his fingers clutch the soil beneath him, a foreshadowing of the punishment that will come with expulsion; no longer will the earth be a place of peace and rest, but rather toil and hardship.

![Figure 11. Creation of Eve](image)

The next half of the frame shows God actually building Eve, fashioning her shoulder with one hand and holding her wrist with the other (Fig.11). Rather than depicting her creation in two parts, first a body then a soul, as Adam was created, she is created in one act. This suggests that perhaps Eve was not made in God’s image; Adam had a soul in the image of God and was a perfect being, but, as Jolly puts it, Eve is a “derivative” of Adam, thus a less perfect creature, making it impossible for her to be made in the image of her Creator (Jolly 34). The presentation of this theological idea is important because of the common belief that women were subordinate to men, and the San Marco depiction of the creation of woman makes her in the image of man, rather than God. This also leads us to another theological point commonly supported during medieval times: the woman is of the flesh while the man is of the spirit. The mosaicists further support this point by placing the Latin term “carne” (flesh) directly above Eve’s figure. The artisans also subtly continue their equation of good and evil by placing a blue tree next to Eve’s left arm, reinforcing her connection with a sinful nature, and she is mostly pictured to the left of the scenes.
This narrative also serves to answer a common theological question of the day. Since Adam is made in the image of God, who is perfect, how could he have failed by eating of the forbidden tree? Clearly depicting Eve as a lesser and carnal creature suggests that evil entered the world through her, and then influenced the more perfect Adam. In the scene of the “introduction of Eve to Adam,” she stands at the center of the frame, with her hands at her sides, while God and Adam gesture with their hands, implying her passivity, and therefore inferiority, in contrast to the active males within the same frame.

Following this part of the story comes the “temptation of Eve.” (Fig.13). In this frame, Eve is pictured standing beside the same blue tree next to which she was created, and the serpent is curled around its branches, elevated above her, taking the place of the Creator in the former frames. Adam stands with his back to her, as though to signify his obedience to God and ignorance of the serpent’s tempting words. The concept of his absence from the occurrence is further supported by the Latin text above the frame which reads, “here the Serpent speaks to Eve and deceives her,” not even mentioning the presence or actions of Adam. It is interesting to note that this is the first of several inscriptions not taken directly from Biblical texts, but rather written to support the theological ideas within the narrative (Jolly 47). Because Eve was pictured earlier with the blue tree, and is the first to interact with the serpent, the artisans imply a likeness between the two. This makes sense because it once again ties the birth of evil to Eve. One fifteenth century theologian, Peter Comestor, even stated that the serpent had the head of a woman, therefore establishing a link with Eve, and giving her reason to trust Lucifer (Jolly 45). In Michelangelo’s depiction of the temptation of Eve on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, he paints the serpent to have the torso and head of a woman, with the tail of a snake, proving this was no uncommon way of thinking.
After Eve decides to take the fruit, the next part of the narrative is “Eve plucking the fruit and tempting Adam.” Here, the posture and placement of Adam and Eve are reversed, as she is pictured to the right of the frame, standing elevated and erect, as though in the pose of the Creator, while Adam stands to the left. This physically demonstrates the results of her eating of the forbidden fruit; she is prideful and assuming she is equal with the Creator. Because her eyes are opened fully, she is for a moment like God, however human nature quickly takes control (Jolly 48). Standing in profile, the posture of evil, her right hand is raised in the act of speech, with her left hand gesturing downward as though to indicate her new knowledge of their nakedness and suggesting the inception of lust into the world. Adam partakes of the fruit with his wife, and some theologians suggest this is because of his love for his wife and his desire to be with her rather than separated from her (Jolly 49). This would explain why a perfect being would choose to fall into depravity.

Once the first couple eats of the forbidden fruit, they are both aware of their nakedness and shame, covering themselves with fig leaves (Fig.14). Again, the postures of both figures are important in deciphering this frame. Adam is pictured plucking leaves from the tree, the same posture of Eve when she takes the fruit, and Eve’s body is facing away from Adam with her legs crossed and her head turned back towards him. This intertwining of the legs is a reference to the serpent curling around the tree and indicates sexuality and carnality. A similar posture is also assumed in a later mosaic rendering of Potiphar’s wife, who attempts to seduce Joseph, also depicting her sinful nature and sexuality (Jolly 50). The next frame of “Adam and Eve hiding from God” is ironic because at this point Adam and Eve should be even more like their Creator since they now posses the knowledge of good and evil, however, their contorted postures reveal them as most unlike their Creator and represent the physical effects of their sin.
In the following frames, God questions Adam and Eve, and then passes judgment upon them and the serpent. At this point, the next frame is “God dressing Adam and Eve.” God is pictured in the center, primary position, and He is dressing Eve in her garment while Adam watches (Fig. 15). Her clothing does not cover her legs, and Adam’s gaze is directed downward towards them, implying his lust after her. Early Christian theology determined that the provision by God of garments for Adam and Eve was a physical representation of their new mortal, human state, and this frame reinforces that view (Jolly 56).

Figure 15. God dressing Adam and Eve

The final two frames of the narrative within the cupola are those of the “expulsion” and the “labors of Adam and Eve.” (Fig. 16). The expulsion scene falls directly below the “introduction of Adam into Paradise” in the register above, and Eve imitates the posture of the Creator’s pose in the former frame, by eagerly introducing Adam into their new world, associating her with the earthly realm, similar to the opinion about women during the medieval times. A cross is pictured in the tree at the viewer’s left of the frame, once again foreshadowing that redemption will come only through Christ’s death on a tree.

Figure 16. Expulsion and labors of Adam and Eve

A strange thing happens in the depiction of the “labors of Adam and Eve.” Eve is pictured upon a throne, seated majestically much like God, while Adam labors in the earth beside her (Fig. 16). Her spindle and distaff resemble a scepter and she watches as Adam toils and carries out his curse. Eve’s figure is more voluptuous, and she is clothed in finery. Perhaps this relates to the belief during the Middle Ages that women were prideful and more concerned with their looks and finery, and it was the husband’s responsibility to regulate the way their wives dressed and behaved. Her position as a queen is a reference to the power women held over men with their
sexuality and carnal nature and serves as a warning to male viewers to be wary of the wiles of women.

3. Epilogue
At a first glance, this cupola contains the ageless story of the Creation of the world; however, after “reading” the scenes more carefully, the characteristics of thirteenth century Venetian society become apparent. This is only one small portion of the glittering mosaics adorning the ceilings and domes of the Basilica of San Marco. Perhaps the rest deserve more than a passing glance and murmured appreciation of their gilded glory. They contain a glimpse into our past and help us to understand where we have come from and where we are going, and were meant to be interpreted by its pilgrims!

References