

Reap the Whorl

Reflections on The Kasper Collection of Contemporary Biblical Art

By Daniel Otto Jack Petersen, PhD

Prelude

A man walks into an art exhibit and exclaims:

“Deconstructed Christ on a Cross! What the hell have we here?”

It is a large room and he is the only occupant at the moment.

His words echo back to him: “Hell! Here!”

Answer: this is anti-Christofascist art. There are too many colors, too many perspectives, too many Christs and religious variations to fit within (white) Christian nationalism. The collection teems with religious diversity and is capacious enough to host it all.

It just so happens Timothy Morton (they/them) is talking about fascism in their latest book, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology* (Columbia University Press, 2024). Morton plays with the idea of hell in fruitfully obfuscating ways. Drawing on William Blake, they say that Earth is Hell and that there are two opposing iterations of Earth-Hell: that of the “demonic angels” and that of the “angelic demons”. Morton advocates for the latter.

I agree with Blake: we do live in Hell, the demonic angel version of Hell. *So how do we start to live in Hell, instead? How do we get the demonic angels off our backs? How do we start to live in a Hell of angelic demons? Of good people whose goodness is exactly a feel of demonic, of incomplete, of sin?* (Morton 2024: 16, all italics in original)

As the book’s subtitle indicates, this is in part an *ecological* series of questions:

As I write this paragraph, the Supreme Court of the country that exported its KKK values to Hitler’s Germany is busy banning abortion, enforcing prayer in public and stopping the regulation of carbon dioxide. So how do we respond to global warming in opposition to fascism? *Fascies* (Latin) are bunches: in fascism one acquires meaning by belonging to a bunch, a gang. Fascism is a bunch of demonic angels imposing their horrible morality in the form of terrible violence. (42-43)

Morton then wryly remarks: “If the demonic angel Lucifer had fantasized about a religion that would fuck up Earth the most, he couldn’t have done better” (43).

This note of irreverence chimes with the collection’s own heterodoxies and heresies and even touches of polyvalent diabolism. For it is a “fucked up” religion that the works of art in this collection confront, subvert, exceed, sidestep, taunt, and reimagine. They move beyond the demonic angel version of Christianity but also remind us of the resources it already contained. As Morton notes:

Demonic angels think Earth *ought* to burn to a cinder so that Jesus Christ can return and execute numerous enemies. Jesus was not hostile to the physical realm. He gave his disciples bread and wine, which last time I checked were made from things one can find in a biosphere such as water and grapes and wheat and bacteria. He said these things from the biosphere were his body and blood. How much more ecology do you want in a savior of humankind? (43)¹

The presence of the biosphere is replete in this collection, biodiversity woven into its whorling human diversity. Consider a whirlwind tour of the collection, figured as the whirlwind from which God spoke to Job (cf. Job 38). Yet here it is the people speaking from the whirlwind, to the Church, to the post-Church, to the world, and perhaps back to God.

In the whirl, the whorl, of the collection's images recur biblical monsters, serpents, angels, demons, bats, dragons, doves, flowers, theophanies, holy women who run with holy wolves, St Francis's male and female, a panoply of Jesuses, the crucifixion of black and brown flesh, the resurrection and glorification of black and brown flesh, caballero Christs, Picasso-ed Christs, climates and landscapes aflame with wildfire and holy fire, iconography deconstructed and reconstructed along multiple velocities: a celtic cross oroborous-ed, a serpentwined and cloudeclasp'd cross, crosses made of various materials (biotic and florid and artefactual), planets, clouds, animals, landscapes, soulscapes, mountains, trees, birds, and bones. It whorls on and on.

In what follows we will take a closer look at certain qualities of the whorl under five headings: 1) Bible Stories and Theophanies, 2) Jesuses and Christs, 3) Saints, 4) Iconographies, and 5) Cosmographies.

Bible Stories and Theophanies

Did you hear these stories as a child? Did you in turn read them to your children? Yes to both for me. I heard them in Sunday School at Eastern Heights Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana in the 1980s. I read them aloud to my own children before bed in that same Indianapolis for a while, and then later in Glasgow, Scotland where they are all now grown and we all reside.

Thrill and horror and wonder are evoked by these vivid and visceral tales from scripture, interwoven with many gentle and poignant moments as well, of course. Though the stories immediately put pictures into young imaginations, they are often also accompanied by artwork. Much of that pictorial representation pulls punches and traces only the more savory elements—or evokes the horrors and wonders through a turgid atmosphere of fraught landscapes and figures. Those from more liturgical backgrounds will have seen much of this portrayed in “high” art of sculpture and painting. Those, such as myself, of a more evangelical background will have seen something more akin to illustrations that might accompany Reader's Digest or a Collected Classics series of books sold by travelling salesmen. Either way, the already utterly picturable stories of the Bible find their way into printed art and the two avenues feed into one another. Our reading of these stories as, for example, United States Americans, becomes a reading of our pictures and dramatizations (Hollywood and otherwise) back into the Bible. The artists here continue and also disrupt that tradition in their renditions of scenes and stories from both “Old” and “New” Testaments.

Matt Ballou's paintings could be from a (surely banned) illustrated children's Bible. Instead of prettifying the disturbing

¹ Morton, a Buddhist of many decades and also a recent “convert” to Christianity, notes that the Buddha also emphasized the biosphere as the stuff of the path to enlightenment he taught (43).

tales, it renders their most lurid moments with a palpable, opulent delight.

A cyclopean, huge-handed, blobbish, blood-hungry, and alien-green Jehovah, silly and terrifying, stands behind Zipporah, egging her on in the circumcision of her son for the sake of her “bridegroom of blood”, Moses (cf. Exodus 4:24-26).

Jael is pegging Sisera in the skull with a burst of thick, giallo-bright blood. Sisera is comically dead with X-es for eyes and, conversely, the look in Jael’s eyes almost seems to say “Look what you made me do!” (cf. Judges 4:17-22).

Onan very graphically, almost comically, “spills his seed” outside Tamara, his widowed sister-in-law (cf. Genesis 38:9).

A man haloed with holy delight is dashing a Babylonia child against the rocks (Psalm 137:9), an orgiastic revenge fantasy in perhaps the brightest colors of the series and a copious wave of blood that Stanley Kubrick would envy.

Boys raised in the violent masculinities of the Gunfighter Nation [Richard Slotkin] can’t help but thrill to the exploits of Israel’s warriors, not least the implicitly fat-phobic episode where Ehud disembowels the “obese” Moabite king Eglon. Though here rendered in gory glee, the painterly depiction is in no stronger terms than the graphic details of the text (cf. Judges 3:12-30).

Perhaps the painting that most looks like it could belong in a children’s Bible is of the “legion” of demons that have just been dispossessed from a human body and relocated into a herd of pigs stampeding to their watery deaths (cf. Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-37). Gladness and madness look conflated on the former Demoniak’s face.

Conversely, there is the tonal shift of the depiction of Lot’s daughters about to have (or having just had) sex with their drunken father, the burning planes of Sodom and Gomorrah in the distance (cf. Genesis 19:30-38). Such sudden stylistic shifts did occasionally happen in illustrated Children’s Bibles. Here we have that turgid atmosphere I mentioned above. If we view this painting last, it is a somber closing to the otherwise rather garish series.

In a very different illustration style is **Alonzo Williams**’s almost East Asian influenced series of theophanies in the lives of Elijah, Hagar, and Job. These are dense with line work and nonhuman animals and landscapes and heavenly phenomena. We will return to Williams’s depiction of Elijah and Job below in the section on cosmography. Here we focus on Hagar (Genesis 16:7-11). In (incidental) counterpoise to Ballou’s cycloptic Jehovah, Williams here furnishes a one-eyed headlight theophany whose hands signal “Halt, stop fleeing, go back to your mistress, I’ve got plans for you and your offspring.”

Hagar herself, in an earthy *imago Dei*, roils up from rock or root like smoke, a look of mild bemusement, an openness, her shift the same stuff as the ground, tree, rock; her face and skin a dotted flesh, flesh of dots—that is, earthstuff like the rest of the scene. Except her veil roiling up into the sky, into the Lord’s own robes curling further into the air around the trees. Otherwise one’s eyes get lost in all the wild wickerwork of the wood about, not merely a stage, but players themselves in the “theodrama” (cf. Deane-Drummond on Balthasar [theocomedy too]): knots in boles, upsweeping branches and spiny globular leaves or fruit or flowers (that echo or are echoed by the shekinah of the theophanic head), the mushroom-head of foliage crowning a straight trunk, and below a spray of flowers drooping or swaying in a gentle breeze, bluebells or snowdrops or lilies of the valley, a sliver of a brook, and dark swells of earth in

the foreground.

The divine figure is just that, a *figure* amidst a rich earthly landscape, an epiphanic presence as gentle as its words of reassurance to Hagar. Her own pronouncement on the eye of this god (not featured in the verses lettered on the piece) is that “You are the God who sees me” and “I have now seen the One who sees me” (v. 13). Seeing the One Who Sees Us could be considered the theme of this series by Williams. It is of a different timbre than Ballou’s series and they work well together as a rather unsettling chiaroscuro of biblical imagery and themes, the disturbing dark-light of scripture. (And Williams will lean into the darker shades in the works discussed below.)

Askia Bilal’s approach is unique among these, rendering Cain and Abel abstractly and geometrically with a loudening cone of bloodtalk between them. The fact that it is the only piece by Bilal (the only artist to enter just one work) adds quite literally to its singularity. It calls for pause by both its distinction as the sole abstract(ed) piece and in that it is the lone entry of the artist. It would be just as easy to rush past, but it pays to pause with its interesting fleshtones and patterns in skin and the blood between them. It thus also marks a counterpoint to Ballou’s bright gore. The First Murder is geometricised and (re)made human by staring deeper into the molecular scope of flesh and bloodshed, even while rendering colorful hood and hat and filigreed ivy.

Mike Sleadd’s cartoonist/Picasso-ed versions of Noah’s Ark, the Tower of Babel, the Last Supper, and the Crucifixion are, like Williams’s works, dense with detail, human and nonhuman. The Last Supper of modern personages could be rabbis, philosophers, film directors, the unhoused, and others, the scene rather comical in figuration, if also melancholy in eyes and mouths. The angels piss rain down on Noah’s Ark with its comical, if somewhat bewildered, animals. The people excluded from the ark are not only in danger of drowning but of being eaten alive by sea creatures. The Tower of Babel is seven storeys of men and women pillars, cars, missiles, and so on. And Sleadd’s Crucifixion features Christ and the thieves (one of them in modern garb) abstracted ala Picasso in upper left. Below them is a Roman soldier (also with a Picasso face) and a serpent slithering near a tree stump. On the right side is a local community largely ignoring the spectacle (chiming with Kasper’s Pax Romana). [animals] This is a whole different kind of children’s illustrated Bible if you like. Its world-weary downbeat whimsy would have delighted and perturbed me in ways I couldn’t possibly have understood at a young age (not unlike the works of Maurice Sendak). And so even now we may be a kid again, flying a kite in the shadow of towering, mass-destroying hubris or watching (with a few nonhuman animals) the ultraviolent, body-horror torture-porn on our doorstep that everyone else is somehow ignoring.

Shannon Soldner’s Four Horsemen couldn’t be more human and of our moment with their casual dinner attire or work boots or punk outfit amid the raging wildfires in the hills behind. The filigreed geometricities echo Bilal, but here in the exterior rather than interior, the land and air no less molecular than flesh. Soldner’s Parable of the Sower similarly etches lambent ramifications in flesh and earth. And like Bilal, the remove or disorientation of modern dress and setting provoke pause. Why should the apocalypse be so terrifying in finery? And why are its wasting conflagrations paired with Jesus’ botanic ecological picture of the subtle sure growth of justice and peace and harmony and joy upon the Earth?

Jesuses and Christs:

Jane Mudd's Jesus (both black and white) is, on the one hand, a man of food, female companionship, and earthly delights, both pre- and post-resurrection. On the other hand, he is a man of action and anger (on the boat and the cross): he is concerned about the weather while his disciples sleep through the storm; he rages against the (mis)use of his name and the murder of the Holy Spirit in holy war and righteous mass destruction (bombs above, crusades below). The Death of the Dove is the Death of Love. Earthly, sensual love no less, of all kinds. That deliciously chill (and probably shocking) Jesus (black and "white") with wine and Mary Magdalene is what's at stake in the fascist, warmongering killing of the Spirit and its literal killing of flesh.

As already noted, **Mike Sleadd's** Jesus looks world-weary and harassed in the Last Supper and, conversely, is cubistically abstracted in the Crucifixion. He is a difficult Jesus to read, and why shouldn't he be? Some Jesuses can be way too clear and readable.

Nora Othic's Cowboy Jesus seems essentially undifferentiated from his bandmates, though it is worth noting that his instrument is the resonator guitar, his emblems are rose and catfish and dove, and he appears to be of Latin American and/or indigenous descent (as also with the rest of the band). His resonances are multiple, ecological, fun, (a)rousing, and no doubt amorous. (Thus overlapping with Mudd's Jesus.) Go listen to some classic and contemporary western swing and then ponder this Jesus some more.

Shannon Soldner's Judean Jesus is as surprising as Mudd's, but here because he is depicted in the very moment of being surprised to be alive again, presumably having just a moment before risen from the dead, the grave clothes still clinging, still within the tomb, his wounds lit by whatever the light source is here. I at first took his gesture to suggest he is shewing the observer away ("Occupied!"), as if this is a scene not meant for human eyes (as indeed it is nowhere recorded in the Gospels), perhaps a rebuke to certainty over faith [as he later tells Mary "Don't touch me!"; later I realized that maybe the artist just meant the "Holy fuck! I'm alive again! In *this* body again!" moment Jesus was having (and deliciously crude and sacred copulation would link back to Mudd's Jesus with Mary Maggie). ["Christ Waking" also calls back to the very awake Jesus on the sea of Galilee amidst his dozing disciples. His look here could also convey his alarm at his Church's cumulative horrors these several thousand years later.]

Jesus's presence is also implied by his absence in **Williams's** empty cross (as indeed all the crosses--"He is not here, He is risen"), **Hardy's** man and woman in the Salvatore Mundi pose (which Leonardo depicted as Jesus himself), and Ballou's Demoniac's sudden hilarity and the pigs' sudden pandemonium (Jesus just out of frame, his command still lingering in the air).

Saints:

Cheryl Hardy's St Francis, husband and wife; Colleen Smith's Mary, Mary Magdalene, Eve, and Joan of Arc; Jane Mudd's St Mary Magdalene; Nora Othic's band of apostle saints (including another Magdalene)

Iconography:

Four Crosses: Alonzo Williams's tranquil, contemplative, pastoral resurrection cross draped with cloth; Matthew Ballou's Nehushtan Cross; Mike Sleadd's multi-material cross; Colleen Smith's Orouboros-ed Cross [also the banner on Joan of

Arc and images on candles in Smith's Mary and Mary; all three could be saint prayer cards]; Even more so, Nora Othie's western swing band portraits are very like prayer cards. And Othie too provides a richly adorned cross with the Lamb at its centre. Roses, lilies, dove in flight, fish and anchor, sacred heart with thorns, chalice with "Cowboy Jesus" embossed. [Kasper's Pax Romana is almost a counterpoint to the sole focus on Jesus's crucifixion when there were thousands of others.]

Cosmography:

Hell, Earth, Purgatory, Heaven: Ballou's Hell and Sleadd's Heaven make incredible counterpoints, and, just as traditional theology would have it, are incredibly incommensurate. **Sleadd's** Heaven is incomputably expansive, encompassing the cumulonimbic and *peopled* skies, the piscine and tentacular depths of the seas, the swollen looming planets of the galaxies and the lightless voids between, of which the universe is sewn, matter and anti-matter—as well as the inner cosmos of the psyche and the shuddering otherness of angelic beings.

Conversely, **Ballou's** Hell is compacted right down to a tight cranial damnation of hard-bounded, hardheaded focus. It resonates in its closed space, an impossibility. It is somehow a sonic image, a reading of some sound impossible to hear because entirely sealed in its own vacuum, perhaps a scream, perhaps a whimper or snarl or cackle. It is inaudible pain constricted into its own anti-iconic sonic boom, booming solely in this head, effacing this face, Predator and Alien in one on this anti-prayer card, within the within, for, ironically, it is a visage built from the purest ontological xenophobia. It is inhospitable to the alien only incidentally, simply because it has hoarded all hospitality into its own being. There is no metaphysical place for an Other in Hell. [These are the Frogs that hop from the mouth of the Dragon, the human-faced Locusts that will devour the Earth if given a holiday from the Abyss.]

For all these reasons, however, Ballou's Hell is *metal as fuck* (hereafter MAF). Hell always has been. (And let's be honest, Heaven is MAF too. Sleadd clearly displays this.) Maybe this Hell-Head is the tiniest and only possible rebellion against all that overblown glory of Heaven, making the most of what's left to creatures overwhelmed with sacramental participation in the Divine, in which they live and move and have their being. Maybe Hell's denizens just want a little metaphysical acreage truly all their own, no matter how compressed to ontic coal. [Maybe the Church creates these Hell-Heads perforce. The cultically tortured mind becomes a helm, a visor for inner visions of a hyperreal existence beyond the cult, virtually cobbled from what reports one could glimpse outside it. Ballou's Hell is perhaps the only non-scriptural image in the collection. It's a crucial minority report here, perhaps for more reasons than expected or intended.]

Between these two expressions of MAF is James **Kasper's** Purgatory, Where (indeed) Most Will Pause. For this hand-carved piece shows Purgatory as the link point between Earth and these metacelestial exographies (though it is not even accepted as a reality among all Christians). As Kasper notes, many have thought that its entrance is terrestrial, a cave or other earth opening. An angel and demon are its gate-guards (or guides), hosts at their posts. The lascivious tongue of the fiend is a different kind of Hell-Head and the angel's tranquilly shut eyes refuse to countenance it. Does Purgatory just "purify" our bodily pleasures away? Just where is it preparing us for? A place where we cannot stick out our tongues, cannot lick and slurp, smile and crack dirty jokes? Who wants such a heaven? Would Jesus and Mary Magdalene want it? Or Cowboy Jesus and his good time Apostles?

Yet Sleadd's Heaven is nothing if not bodily (think bodies of water and heavenly bodies as much as human or

animal bodies). Kasper's carven hill and sky above also indicate a corporeal vision. The stairway leads to a land one treads with toes. (And, hey, the reptilian feet and hands of the fiend are as good as the human extremities of the angel. And both have wings.) That aspired-to Heaven is surely a tongue-wagging place, where one might even lick an angel's eyeball—on those rare occasions where they open to look at their mugging demonic companions. Perhaps we may see these two in Kasper's piece are pals, an odd couple, frictionous but friendly.

Finally, it is on Williams that we will end (and return, on repeat, a helical ascending spiral upward and downward, growing strange, changing, futures possible and open). In Williams's Elijah and Job are bones (death-and-life) caught between, caught up into, suffused and saturated with Heavens, Hells, and Purgatories. All that rigorous, [maniacal], granular, and delightful cross hatching is the gritty metaphysics of spiritual planetary life. It leaves its mark. It is the texture of existence.

In Elijah (1 Kings 9:11-13), a wickerwork mountain (or planet) looms forth in the wickerwork darkness of night (or space). The bright clouds gird the loins of its amplitude. Highest up is another shekinah-faced theophany. The gods above (the Trinity?), the shepherd and sons below, shepherding clouds. The still small voice is "entering in" Elijah's right ear and coming out his left as an effusion (not flock) of disparate birds, among them the phoenix, the pteridactyl, doves. And below, on is right, are full on bat or dragon wings and other monstrous appendages, dinosaur bones(?), human skulls, out of which rockets a long, thin, black cross bisecting the heavenly tableau.

This anticipates the monstrous horde amassed about Job, yokai-like. There are more human skulls, moths, grasshoppers, angler fish, oni or demons, horses, bats, crows, dragons, and entities difficult to name. Some will be tempted to pronounce it Boschian. I'd say the Hellboy universe would be more accurate (both Mike Mignola's and Guillermo del Toro's versions). Yet it is not a Hellscape, but Earth, the Earth and Cosmos as God from the Whirlwind describes them in lengthy detail to Job (chapters 40-41), replete with chthonic monsters, Behemoths and Leviathans. The theophanic figure in both Elijah and Job is similar to that in Hagar, but without the singular eye. There is no face or even one feature of a face, almost as if this is not the "God who sees you" but the God who opens *your* eyes. You have been seen, now it is time to see: cosmic carnival, planetary panoply, teeming biosphere, a spooky parade of creatures [cf. Foster on Yokai] that does not privilege what we have heretofore deemed charismatic (perhaps threatening us back, but willing to be ludic if we can play along [cf. Haraway 2016, one aspect of what I call the "ecomonstrous"]).

Conclusion [postlude]

It is likely evident now why we might consider this collection a shifting collocation of anti-Christofascist art. What certainties and boundaries and verities and borders could it possibly communicate or patrol? It is an irruption out of and away from xenophobias, transphobias, climate change denials, anthropocentrisms and many other ills of U.S. Christian nationalism and ossified traditionalism. The wind of this whorl is blowing, a ructious *ruach* that lists where it will.

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