A Heretical Visual Journey into the Apocrypha

Eric Ondina
Abstract:

This thesis is both a research paper and a personal reflection which explores the connections between several formative apocryphal texts and my most recent series of paintings. It is through the medium of painting that I have analyzed and visually distilled these heretical narratives into a duel-part body of work. Through this I intend to illuminate the mysteries of our ancient spiritual past, demonstrate these apocryphal scriptures significance and influence in later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology, illustrate the fallibility in the argument for divinely ordained scripture, and ponder the question of how our worldly civilization’s history and culture would appear had these books become canonical.
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF VISUAL ARTS, THEATRE, AND DANCE

A Heretical Visual Journey into the Apocrypha

By

ERIC ONDINA

A Thesis submitted to the Department of Studio Art in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in the Major

Degree Awarded:
Spring 2013
The members of the Defense Committee approve of the thesis of Eric Ondina defended on April 15, 2013.

Professor Carrie Ann Baade
Thesis Director

Professor Robert Neuman
Outside Committee Member

Professor Keith Roberson
Committee Member
Modern Christianity on the surface is a vast and eclectic tapestry whose unique beliefs and practices range from the ancient and mystical to the patently dangerous and absurd. The diversity of the established religions and fringe sects lies anywhere on the spectrum from millennia old orders claiming lineage to Jesus’s apostles, to frightening eschatological cults as tragically demonstrated by the followers of David Koresh in Waco, Texas. While this flowering tree of interpretive Christian spirituality is a triumph over the oppressive orthodoxy which squelched religious freedom for centuries, it nevertheless stems, with modest variance, from a singular root; the Holy Bible. The Bible does not specifically assert to be a direct dictation from god (though it is believed to be by many), unlike the Koran or Book of Mormon; but rather is understood to be the compilation of writings over the course of many centuries which has been assembled into the authoritative canon we have today. Prior, however, to the Council Nicaea and the subsequent establishment of orthodoxy, the landscape of ancient Christianity was just as diverse. Each monastery contained its own wealth of varied scriptures with their own unique theological interpretations; most of these tomes were lost in time or destroyed by heresy hunters, but the few that survive today are a fascinating glimpse into the spiritual past and represent the missing pieces to the larger picture of Western spiritual development.

It is these remaining non-canonical texts, referred to broadly as the Apocrypha, which intrigue and inspire me, not only because of their tremendous theological value, but also because of their wider historical implications. Can you imagine the church revering a head on a silver platter instead of a cross? What if Jesus was the Anti-Christ? Should women cover their heads in fear of being raped by angels? All of these were possible outcomes had one book or doctrine made it out of the primordial soil of early Christianity over the other. It is through the medium

---

1 Many traditions believe in divine authorship, where the divine and/or holy spirit has directly intervened in the formation of the text. I will be approaching this research through a secular rational approach.
of painting that I will analyze and visually distill these heretical narratives into a duel-part body of work. Approaching this subject is a daunting task for any researcher; compounding issues arise on account of the quantity of ancient texts available, competing interpretations, authenticity and dating errors, and other fierce scholarly debate regarding the scripture. My research and visual representations are further muddled by the understanding that I am breaking ground into an uncomfortable area for many people. The adherence to the canonical gospels and its derivative belief systems are a core part of people’s faith and it has been a struggle balancing the literary exegesis and artistic embellishment while remaining sensitive to this fact. I have nevertheless produced these two paintings by analyzing and illustrating in a contemporary baroque style the texts which I believe to be the most influential, plot compelling, and aberrantly unorthodox; the Old Testament Book of Enoch and Book of Jubilee, the New Testament\textsuperscript{2} Infancy Gospel of Thomas and The Book of John the Baptistizer. (Fig. 1)Through this I intend to illuminate the mysteries of our ancient spiritual past, demonstrate these apocryphal scriptures significance and influence in later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology, illustrate the fallibility in the argument for divinely ordained scripture, and ponder the question of how our worldly civilization’s history and culture would appear had these books become canonical.

\textsuperscript{2} Since I will be analyzing material that predates the distinction between Old and New testament, I will be using these terms somewhat loosely as to adapt to our modern conception of the terms; Old Testament meaning the religious works of the ancient Israelites and New Testament implying the sacred writings of the early Christian and proto-Christian sects.
My first painting in this series is a stylized, interpretive illustration which focuses on the first part of the *Book of Enoch* known as the *The Book of Watchers*. (Fig. 2) This story has many elements in common with the first chapters of the *Book of Jubilees*, whose imagery I have also incorporated. The *Book of Enoch* is one of the oldest and ostensibly most influential in the development of Abrahamic religion; it is a composite of five booklets with the oldest portions dating to the 3rd Century BCE. The book claims to be the Jewish patriarch Enoch’s history, account of a heavenly journey (not unlike Dante’s Divine Comedy) and subsequent return to Earth with prophetic knowledge. Enoch the man is scarcely mentioned in the Old Testament; he is first inconspicuously introduced in the Book of Genesis 5:21-24 while recounting the lineage of Adam\(^3\). This passage is striking on account of his conspicuous age. The number curiously matches the modern calendar as well as the statement that he “Walked with God” the only biblical patriarch/prophet to do so (until Elijah is whisked away on a flaming chariot). What is peculiar about this passage is how the *Book of Genesis* simply continues on its course without any further elaboration. The *Book of Enoch* takes this small shout-out and literally expounds one of the most startlingly vivid, mythologically dense, and brazenly psychedelic books in ancient literature.

It goes without saying that the *Book of Genesis*’s Garden of Eden and Noah’s flood are one of the most widely recognized and familiar stories in Western civilization if not the world. These melodramatic stories of how the sinister snake instigated Man’s fall from grace through the seductive influence of Women\(^4\) and God’s whim to drown the entire world to death in a

\(^3\) “21 When Enoch had lived for sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah. \(^{22}\) Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah for three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. \(^{23}\) Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. \(^{24}\) Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.” NIV

\(^4\) Genesis 2:4-3:24
crushing deluge\(^5\) have been so sugar glazed and force fed that most never examine the original Biblical source. If they had, they might have noticed the awkward little passage Genesis \(^6\) which is nestled neatly in-between these stories and oddly enough, never quite seemed to make it into coloring books or Sunday school teachings. This passage, in no uncertain words states that Sons of God (angels or perhaps demigods)\(^7\) came down from heaven after noticing our comely women and, without making much of an interpretive stretch, raped them. This unholy union between god and mortal spawned the Nephilim (often translated as Giants) who were the epic hero warriors of old. The dire consequences of mortal/divine shacking up were a common theme in ancient myths. This story has its precedents in many other local Semitic and Hellenistic traditions, even modern laypeople are aware of how Zeus made quite a few conjugal visits into the realm of mortals. It can thus be assumed that this mythos permeates far deeper back into time and ancient thought than when this passage was first penned thousands of years ago. Running alongside the seminal creation story and infused with this pervasive god-fearing tradition is the first book in *Enoch*, known as the *Fall of the Watchers*, the focus of my painting.

The *Fall of the Watchers* expands upon the brevity in Genesis in gruesome detail and recounts a terrifying action/drama of how two hundred rebellious angels, led by a core of angel generals, swarmed out of heaven and chose any women they desired. During this time they taught our ancestors the secrets of weapon making, herbalism, astronomy, astrology, sorcery and even the unforgiveable depravities of wearing jewelry and cosmetics. And just when this godless world could not get any more evil, bursting out of their mortal wombs and onto the cosmic stage

---

\(^5\) Genesis 7:1-8:22

\(^6\) When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, "the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. Then the LORD said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterwards—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown. NIV

\(^7\) Gaster, Myth Legend and custom in the Old Testament pg 79.
were the Nephilim. The Nephilim rampaged throughout the land, devouring all of the toils of mankind, and not content when the humans could no longer sustain them, the humans too were consumed by the monsters, along with every living thing in God’s former domain. Unable to satiate their raging bloodlust, they turned on each other, cannibalizing the flesh of their kin in an orgy of blood and wickedness. It was about this time that the arch-angels still loyal to god glanced down below and finally determined that enough was enough. They beseeched god to allow them to intervene and restore god’s righteousness upon the earth. God passively agrees and the arch-angels soar out of heaven, confronting the fallen watchers upon the corrupted wasteland of earth. The heavenly angels slay the watchers and their unholy brood, binding their leader, Azazel in adamantine chains under the earth until the Day of Judgment comes. God then rids the world of its vileness through the cleansing deluge we all know from Genesis as Noah’s Flood. 8

In my first painting I have extracted multiple motifs from this story and melded them into a dynamic composition. The piece is painted in oil on a hand molded, cresting, reinforced plaster slab, which is bordered by a deep cradle frame. It was my intention to make a painting which mirrors this mini-epic in scale, drama and abject gruesomeness. With this in mind I decided to invoke the compositional and painting techniques found in the dynamic baroque of the 17th century while emulating the decisive moment found in 18th century Romanticism. There is also a clear reference to the Northern European Renaissance in the detail, cathedral-esque shape of the substrate, insider humor, and violence. These fuse into a style I have developed in this series which is both contemporary and historically reinforced. While my painting seeks to provide a portal into the past, I seek to do so through a modern lens, injecting subtle to sardonic satire into my subjects. This is readily apparent along the bottom of the painting; in the lower right hand

8 Apocryphal Old Testament, Sparks, 1 Enoch I-XII
corner an oblivious woman pampers herself with gold and makeup, her stomach bursting at the seams as her hulking half-angel broodling slithers out. She is a sarcastic embodiment of how our contemporary sensitivities are want to perceive this story. The Abrahamic religions are not renowned for their justice towards women, and *The Book of Enoch* once again exemplifies this ancient trend. Women are the seductresses and the baby factories, the intermediaries and cause of the sinfulness pressed upon the world; because of their erotic allure, mankind suffered nightmarish consequences. My painted jezebel is a mocking testimony to this ancient fear mongering. (Fig. 4)

My second painting in my two part series is titled *The Coronation of John the Baptist; Jesus Christ Charlatan*. It draws inspiration from two very different books of competing proto-Christian sects; *The Book of John the Baptizer* and the *Infancy Gospel of John*. As the John the Baptist figure dominates the paintings composition, I will begin with him.

The writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John give us similar but discordant accounts of John the Baptist and his movement. While the exact details vary from gospel to gospel, what we do know is that he was a wild, frontier preacher in the galilee who led an eschatological movement espousing the imminent coming of the kingdom of god. John then reluctantly baptizes Jesus, and embraces him as the messiah he has been waiting for. Later, John the Baptist is arrested by Herod for not blessing the marriage between him and his brother’s wife, Herodias. Herod initially refrains from killing him because of John’s popularity with the people. However, Herodias, being a characteristically resentful and vindictive woman in the finest of biblical tradition, does not forget this indignation. During a dinner party held by King Herod, Herodias’s daughter Salome performs an erotic dance, known in western art and literature as the Dance of

---

the Seven Veils. The aroused King Herod, imaginably howling and panting like a Tex Avery cartoon, grants Salome anything she wishes. Salome, after being coerced by her Mother, requests the head of John the Baptist. Reluctant, but not wanting to lose face in front of his guests, Herod concedes and John’s head is sliced off and served up a la carte on a dinner platter.\(^{10}\)

What we can infer from the Synoptic Gospels, is that John the Baptist led a large, influential, Jewish splinter sect whose followers believed him to be the incarnation of god or resurrected Elijah. The synoptic Gospels also tell us however that John rebuked these claims and referred them to the actual messiah, Jesus. If we are to believe the scriptures at face value, then the highly unlikely scenario of John, a self-appointed prophet, (reigning supreme as messianic leader of a large group of zealous adherents) willingly steps down and acknowledges his greater in Jesus. However the fire of religious extremism, especially when fanned by the power of a charismatic cult leader, wasn’t any easier to extinguish then as it is now, and thanks to a specific reconstructed gnostic text known as the *Book of John the Baptist*, we have more insight into the specifics of this early religious conflict.

*The Book of John the Baptist* is a gnostic holy book whose origins are proposed to be in the 3\(^{rd}\) century CE. It comes from an ancient, gnostic sect in modern day Iraq which practices ritualistic baptism and worships John the Baptist as the messiah, while rebuking Jesus as the antichrist. This fascinating sect known as the Mandaeans, against all odds, still exists today in the environs of Baghdad, Iraq. *The Book of John the Baptist* is a narrative gospel about the life and ministry of John the Baptist. Unlike the synoptic gospels of Jesus however, the *Book of John the Baptist* reads as extremely surreal, esoteric, and mystical. For example each chapter begins with “John proclaims in the nights, John in the evenings of the night, John proclaims in the nights.

---

\(^{10}\) Matthew 14:1-12
Glory rises of the worlds.” There are consistent references to earthly elements, including light and water, and there are also many syncretic fusions with pre-existing Hellenistic, Jewish, other Semitic mythos. Notably in *The Book of John the Baptizer* a comically desperate Jesus begs John for his endorsement, which John reluctantly gives, at the behest of an angel, who calls Jesus a “Deceiver.” This is not an endorsement of Jesus, but rather the writer’s counter argument to the Christians, implying that John was Jesus’s superior. What I address most literally in my piece is the enthronement of John, in the characteristically gnostic and esoteric passage of *The Book of John the Baptizer* 3:3-4. Addressing this in my painting, a crown is placed upon the head by an angel proclaiming John as the true Messiah. His baptismal vessel pours sanctifying water upon the sinful world, his massive hand pointing at the viewer. I made his gesture forceful and scolding to match the severe personality rendered in the book, and to deliberately oppose the traditional Jesus iconography of the solemn Pantokrator. (Fig. 5)

In a scripturally unrelated digression, I have also included in my painting a portrait of Salome. In western art and culture Salome has been scorned as the archetypal femme fatale, whose treachery is likened to that of Judas. It was my intention to reimagine her, without her legend being soiled by the synoptic gospels. As I was painting John the Baptist as the messiah in the tradition of Jesus, then Salome would be his Magdalene, the scarlet woman who was redeemed. I literally depicted her redemption as she basks in the sanctifying waters from John’s baptismal chalice. (Fig. 6)

---

11 *Book of John the Baptizer* ch 8. The Pre-Nicene New Testament; Price
12 The sun opened his mouth and spoke to John, “You have three headbands and a crown equal in value to the whole world, you have a spiritual ship that sails the Jordan. You captain a great vessel which sails in mid heaven between the waters under the earth and above the firmament.
The second book whose motifs I have included in my painting is the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. I remember in my fifth grade religion class as I was suffering through one of my teacher’s fiery sermons on the nature of Christ that I asked the seemingly simple question, “What was Jesus like as a kid?” Stumped, he deflected my question by saying since gospels don’t tell us, it was not important to the faith. Well conveniently, I was not the only one to posit this awkward question, but in fact, it has been a raging debate in christology for centuries. Prior to being squelched by orthodoxy and Jesus’s vague childhood being left a permanent mystery, there were many writers who answered this historical vacuum quite unequivically. One of these early texts, was the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which fills in the gaps of his life ostensibly from Jesus’s flight to Egypt and where the *Gospel of Luke* begins.

While reading the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, it immediately becomes clear that young Jesus isn’t the same as adult Jesus. While adult Jesus is the all forgiving savior of mankind, young Jesus is a rambunctious child prodigy with a chip on his shoulder, armed with divine super powers and answering to no one. The passage which I literally reference in my painting is chapter 4. In this chapter, a young Jesus is playing in a pool by the river, sculpting twelve sparrows out of clay, until the bitter local children tattled on Jesus to his adoptive father Joseph, because he was playing on the Sabbath. The young Jesus then commanded the mud sparrows to fly away, and they took on life and flew off. The children, being properly put in their place, scattered, but a cantancorous old Pharisee began to knock over Jesus’s mud pool. Jesus obviously wasn’t done with playtime, because with a curse he caused the Pharisee to wither up and die.  

\[13\] Immediately following this passage in the next chapter, Jesus was walking through the

city and another one of the children ran and struck him on the arm. Jesus again cursed him, and the child fell to the earth and died. So much for turning the other cheek!

These unconventional stories call for an unconventional illustration. The Mandaean, *Book of John the Baptizer* exposes Jesus as a charlatan, and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* reveals Jesus as super powered demigod, and since the purpose of my painting is to “reveal,” I literally did so, by “exposing” Jesus’s naked darierre!

Religious art has historically been objects of devotion, and in the 21st century religious artworks have been objects of scorn and the practice of shock art and insulting religion became fashionable. Through these paintings, I would like to think I am taking the high road across both of them. It was my endeavor that by painting these pieces I could shed light onto these pivotal but forgotten facets of religious history. We live in a world of escalating religious extremism and waning rationalism. It is no exaggeration that the secular values our western civilization were founded upon are coming under mounting attack by the steady, erosive forces of ignorance and fanatacism. The irony is that the perpetrators of this assault almost unanimously lack even the most basic literacy of their own faith. Through the medium of art, I determine to humanize religion. If the faithful can see their faiths as human, not divine, then those who use religion as a weapon will quickly find themselves short of ammunition.
Figure 1.

Figure 2.
Figure 3.
Figure 4.
Figure 6.

Works Cited


