Art and Design

Michelangelo, Frustration Into Art:
A Closer Examination of His Famous Sistine Chapel Ceiling

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Scholars continue to debate the intentions of artists, especially those who produce great works. After long familiarity with such great works as Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel Ceiling, the contemporary viewer may have become desensitized to some very important imagery. Millions of people flock to the Vatican every year to see his greatest accomplishment, but how many truly understand it? The ceiling’s imagery leads the viewer through the chapel with the story of Noah, the creation and fall of man, and the creation of the earth, together with prophets, sibyls and other figures. But within these marvelous narrations are intriguing, hidden imagery. Some scholars have made allusions to the possible scientific references in the ceiling, but new ideas have emerged about other hidden message on the ceiling. It is well known that Michelangelo did not like Pope Julius, or the church, and he needed a way to express his vexations. Michelangelo was not shy about his feelings and may have used the Sistine Chapel Ceiling as a visual means of expression for his frustration. Mostly supported by Rabbi Benjamin Blech, this theory gives a radical new insight into the ceiling. Michelangelo declared his frustrations first, with personal jabs at the Pope and, second, with both pagan and Jewish allusions aimed at the corruption in the Church.

Michelangelo first directed his frustration against Pope Julius himself, specifically using obscene gestures to convey his anger. Not once, but
twice, the artist painted the Renaissance equivalent of the middle finger towards the Pope. Michelangelo was well known for his temper, and the Pope was not known for his kindness. As Illetschko observes, “He (Michelangelo) felt humiliated on a daily basis by the authoritarian brusqueness of the Pope, who treated him like a mere artisan and servant” (45). He used Julius as the model for the Biblical figure of the prophet Zechariah (Fig. 2). Dressed in classical garb, the prophet reclines slightly and reads a manuscript, while two mischievous putti look over his shoulder. According to Blech, the putti

on the left lays one hand over the other and puts his thumb between his index and middle finger, “giving the fig” (136). Zechariah is unaware of the gesture, as was Pope Julius. Again in The Cumaean Sibyl, Michelangelo has a putto displaying the same gesture (Fig. 3). The sibyl sits reading a book, while two putti fetch another. As is well known, the Cumaean Sibyl was a symbol of Rome. Michelangelo was therefore showing not only his distaste for the Pope, but also for the city of Rome and all it stood for. As Blech observes, “As he [Michelangelo] described it in his poetry, the Vatican of his day had distorted and betrayed both Christ and Christianity. This is why he had to be so cunning and careful about hiding his messages” (178).

Michelangelo also directs a visual pun against the Pope in several of the ignudi (Fig. 4). One male figure leans back on a bed of acorns, which references the Pope’s family name, Della Rovere, or “of the oak.” But a deeper connection can be seen between the acorns and the ignudo. The very strong resemblance of the acorns and the gentiles of the ignudi, can only be seen as a derogatory visual pun aimed at the family name Della Rovere (Illetschuko, 43).
Michelangelo thus insults not only the Pope, but his family name as well. Michelangelo even used an image of God Almighty Himself to insult Pope Julius. In *The Separation of Day and Night*, God is seen flying away from the viewer, his clothing draped around Him and His arm outstretched (Fig. 5). Though clothed, the image of the Almighty’s backside is highlighted, and it seems, according to Blech, “as if the Lord is mooning Pope Julius II from his own chapel ceiling, sticking out the divine backside over the Papal ceremonial area” (Blech, 196). Michelangelo was showing that not only was he upset, but also God Himself was unhappy with the Papacy and had turned his back on Rome.

Michelangelo also used four of the ancient sibyls on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling in a most interesting way. Though they are all seemingly unrelated, they were, nonetheless, chosen to correspond to the four exiles the Jews faced as recorded in the book of Daniel: Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. There exiles are echoed in the four pendentives in the Chapel’s four corners (Blech, 177). Unrelated to the four exiles, The Cumaean Sibyl, as previously noted, is used to insult the Pope directly.

The four pendentives of the ceiling were the hardest portion to paint for Michelangelo, but he was able to take the deeply sunken corners and bring them forward to a pleasingly flat plane (Blech, 158). On the side of the chapel with Zechariah, are two of the pendentives. On the left of the prophet is Judith beheading Holofernes, and on the right is the climax of the battle between David and Goliath (Fig. 6-9). Over the altar are the remaining two images; the one on the left is the story of Esther and Haman, and on the right the story of Moses and the brazen serpent. Ju-
dith and Holofernes represent the Grecian exile; the story of Esther represents Persia; David and Goliath takes place against the Philistines, who represent Babylon; and finally Moses and the brazen serpent represent Egypt. Most importantly, however, these stories represent hope. Even in their darkest hour, the Jews were delivered. The images also contrast the heroism of female and male figures (Blech, 164). As Blech elaborates, “Masculine strength combined with maternal compassion comprises the perfect balance without which divine rule cannot function”(164). This idea is a strong message from Michelangelo and is echoed seamlessly in the sibyls.

The first of the four, The Delphic Sibyl is the golden-haired daughter of Apollo, from ancient Greece (Fig.11). She sits slouched, her scroll open, with two putti reading a scroll behind her. The Sibyl is sexually ambiguous with small wisps of hair flying from her headdress (Blech, 171). The Eritrean Sibyl is originally from Babylonia, the same area where Abraham was born, and her right arm is reminiscent of Michelangelo’s David (Blech, 172)(Fig.12). She sits with her legs crossed, flipping the pages of the book that is placed on a pedestal in front of her. Foretelling Alexander the Great’s triumph, The Persian Sybil is an old woman squinting at a book, her figure oddly masculine (Fig.13). Two shadowy putti can also be seen behind her. The Libyan Sibyl, representing Egypt, was known for her quote about the “coming of the day when that which
(Figure 10) Michelangelo, *The Libyan Sybil (Sistine Chapel)*, 1508-1512, Vatican City

(Figure 11) Michelangelo, *The Delphic Sybil (Sistine Chapel)*, 1508-1512, Vatican City

(Figure 12) Michelangelo, *The Eritrean Sybil (Sistine Chapel)*, 1508-1512, Vatican City

(Figure 13) Michelangelo, *The Persian Sybil (Sistine Chapel)*, 1508-1512, Vatican City
was hidden shall be revealed” (Fig.10). The fact that each of these represents Jewish exiles raises the question of how Michelangelo would have known this information and why he would have cared about the plight of the Jewish.

As a youth at the Medici court, the artist studied under tutors whose teachings included the Kabbalah, the esoteric and mystical side of Judaism. He lived with the Medicic family until the death of Lorenzo de Medici in 1492 (Kristof, 74). Michelangelo also learned about the history of the Jewish people and their lifestyle. He saw these people as wrongly persecuted by the church. This influence perhaps contributed to his inclusion of Old Testament Imagery on the ceiling. Although some scholars, such as Charles De Tolany, state that Michelangelo did not have a choice in subject matter because of the images on the walls of the Sistine Chapel (41). This is because the walls had been covered centuries before with New Testament imagery, leaving the Old Testament for the ceiling. But Michelangelo was still left to paint in whatever style and design he pleased, leaving plenty of room for his own interpretations (Murray, 57). Michelangelo was nonetheless both intelligent and crafty and would have easily been able to find a way around the limitations placed on him by advisors.

Kabbalah is also a religion of numbers and places great importance on the Hebrew Alphabet. Kabbalah appealed not only to Michelangelo’s artistic sensibility but also to his scientific sentiment. Numbers important to the followers of Kabbalah include twenty-two and seven. The number seven can be seen in the number of Jewish prophets on the ceiling. The prophets: Zechariah, Joel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Jeremiah, and Jonah correspond to the seven candles on the Menorah. Each prophet looks out in a different direction, as do the eyes of God (Blech, 179). The Prophets may also correspond to the seven Middot, or spheres, on the Kabbalistic tree of life (Blech, 179).

Michelangelo’s choice of prophets is also significant, specifically Jeremiah and Jonah. Jeremiah sits with his legs crossed, looking down at the altar, his head resting dejectedly in his right hand (Fig.14). The left has always been a side associated with evil, and Jeremiah gives his “sinister side” to the Pope (Blech, 213). The Pope would have sat right under Jeremiah and seen this disapproving gaze. This gesture is made even more

(Figure 14) Michelangelo, Jeremiah (Sistine Chapel), 1508-1512, Vatican City
meaningful in light of the fact that Jeremiah was the Prophet who warned the corrupt priests of the Temple that, as Blech observes, “their bronze and gold would be taken away and their Temple destroyed unless they cleaned up the corruption within” (Blech, 214).

As a young man, Michelangelo also would have heard Savanarola’s vigorous sermons, which “were that of the Old Testament, full of violence, calls for repentance, and threats of imminent punishment.” (Tolany, 60). He may not have been completely influenced by Savonarola, but his call for repentance would surely have spoken to the artist. Jeremiah also wears the colors of Rome: red and gold. Jeremiah is sometimes seen as a possible self-portrait of the artist (Illetschko, 39). This is yet another veiled, though not very well covered, stab by Michelangelo at the sins of Rome and of its luxuries.

The final image was that of Jonah, who seems almost to fall back onto his pedestal and is clad in short white tunic with a large fish and two putti behind him (Fig.15). Jonah is a type of Christ, but Michelangelo did not portray him in that fashion. Rather he saw Jonah as a reflection of himself (Blech, 223). Forced into a mission he did not want and accepting a task in which he had absolutely no interest, Michelangelo was in a predicament similar to that of Jonah. Both are fish out of water, so to speak.

Though the idea that Michelangelo infused many messages of reform is not definite, it is hard to deny its strong possibility. It is possible that he hid these meanings and chose specific symbols to convey a simple message: things need to change. And as Illetschko observes, Michelangelo gave a sense of continuity “by a means of a physical and mental dynamic that swept everything along with it” (95). The consistent themes of frustration, disappointment, and hope for the future of the church help to unite his message. He hoped that, like Jonah, his sermon would be discovered and his preaching accepted. As Blech remarks, “...Michelangelo closed his sermon on the Sistine ceiling with the prophet who discovered that, in spite of his doubts and foreboding, his message was taken to heart by those who heard him...” (226).
Works Cited


