The Painter and the Prophets

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THE PAINTER AND THE PROPHETS

THERE has been no dearth of brave and confident generalizations about Michelangelo the man, the painter, the poet, the sculptor, the architect. These estimates speak boldly about his psychology, his aesthetic and poetic philosophy, but rarely, if at all, of his theology. It is difficult to say of any one of these judgments whether it reveals more of its author and his age or of Michelangelo and his. Whatever of the truth may or may not be found in the great spate of words committed to the task of judging Michelangelo’s achievement, there is little doubt that we know it as much in terms of the judgments of five centuries as we do in and for itself—perhaps more. For the frame often dwarfs the picture, and when the picture is the Sistine Chapel ceiling, so far removed in physical reality from the viewer’s eye, so endlessly complex, so prolific of intimate relationships among its own figures that even a telephoto lens does not make everything clear—when it is such a picture, then it is possible to elaborate almost any sort of judgment about it and to construct for it a frame compounded as much of fantasy as of fact.

The rhapsodies start early with the extraordinary rhetoric of Giorgio Vasari’s life of “Michelagnolo Buonarotti of Florence, Painter, Sculptor and Architect,” in which Michelangelo is given the status of divinity, or at least of a divine afflatus.1 By comparison, Ascanio Condizi’s Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti, published in 1553 as a corrective to the exaggerations and misstatements of the first version of Vasari’s Vita, may at first sound weak and almost unappreciative.

1. See, for example, the opening paragraph, in which the birth of Michelangelo, “a genius universal in each art,” is described in terms which rival the creation of Adam, or the narration of the “honoured obsequies, attended by all artists,” to which approximately one-seventh of the life is devoted; in Giorgio Vasari, The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, trans. A. B. Hinds (London: Everyman, 1927), IV, 108, 179–192.
Condivi calls his master "the unique painter and sculptor"; before he is finished, he has found him without any competition among the ancients, in sculpture at least—a superlative he limits to one art for the sole reason that "of the painting of the ancients there is no memorial." Finally, Condivi praises him as one who "loved not only human beauty, but universally every beautiful thing."

Benvenuto Cellini, who knew Michelangelo fairly well, cannot so much as mention him in his autobiography without the Homeric adjective: almost everywhere that Michelangelo's name appears so too does the description "great" or "noble" or "stupendous," but most of all and highest of all "the divine Michel Agnolo."

The encomia continued to be as ornamental through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although, following the initiative of Pietro Aretino, some exception was taken in the years of the Counter-Reformation to the abundance of nude figures in Michelangelo's work. His offers of friendship spurned by Michelangelo, Aretino had seized the opportunity to attack the nudes in the "Last Judgment" wall of the Sistine Chapel in a letter to Michelangelo which he then had caused to be as "open" as possible, with the consequence that Pope Paul IV had ordered the immediate diapering of the figures. For many in the seventeenth century, Michelangelo ranked somewhere behind Raphael as a painter, but still held title to immortality. In the eighteenth century, the English painter William Hogarth found "the whole mysterie of the art" of painting in a statement attributed to Michelangelo by the late sixteenth-century theorist Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo. And in the same century, in the same country, Sir Joshua Reynolds saw "sublimity" best expressed in the work of Michelangelo, placing him in this respect even before the still rapturously admired Raphael.

2. See the translation by Charles Holroyd in his Michæl Angælo Buonarroti (London: Duckworth, 1911), III, 3.
3. Ibid., pp. 66, 74-75.
6. Ibid., pp. 94-95.
8. Ibid., p. 510.
It is in the nineteenth century, however, that the descriptions appeared that seem today to hover over any discussion of Michelangelo's work. Following closely upon the first modern biographies in England, Germany, and Italy, Walter Pater, in 1872, identified "the true type of the Michelangelesque" as

sweetness and strength, pleasure with surprise, an energy of conception which seems at every moment about to break through all the conditions of comely form, recovering, touch by touch, a loveliness found usually only in the simplest natural things—ex forti dulcedo.⁹

Appreciations by Henry Fuseli and by Stendhal, by Burckhardt (but not in his Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, in which Michelangelo plays a very minor role indeed), and by Michelet, made notable additions to the Michelangelo dossier. At the end of the century, in 1892, the two-volume Life by John Addington Symonds filled in the picture sketched by the same writer in his Renaissance in Italy and in the preface to his translation of Michelangelo's sonnets. These are the terms in which always thereafter Michelangelo would have to be accepted or rejected: "Michelangelo . . . as Carlyle might have put it, is the Hero as Artist." But this is not mere hero worship:

About the quality of his genius opinions may, will, and ought to differ. It is so pronounced, so peculiar, so repulsive to one man, so attractive to another, that, like his own dread statue of Lorenzo de' Medici, "it fascinates and is intolerable." There are few, I take it, who can feel at home with him in all the length and breadth and dark depths of the regions that he traversed. The world of thoughts and forms in which he lived habitually is too arid, like an extinct planet, tenanted by mighty elemental beings with little human left to them but visionary Titan-shapes, too vast and void for common minds to dwell in pleasurably. The sweetness that emerges from his strength, the beauty which blooms rarely, strangely, in unhomely wise, upon the awful crowd of his conceptions, are only to be apprehended by some innate sympathy or by long incubation of the brooding intellect.¹⁰

In these same concluding pages of the Symonds biography, another of the central distinctions about Michelangelo is made, one that will

be made again and again, in just these terms: "If we seek Michelangelo's affinities," Symonds asserts, "we find them in Lucretius and Beethoven, not in Sophocles and Mozart. He belongs to the genus of deep, violent, colossal, passionately striving natures; not, like Raphaello, to the smooth, serene, broad, exquisitely finished, calmly perfect tribe."  

How this rhetoric proliferates itself! In the classic *Abstraction and Empathy* of 1908, Wilhelm Worringer recalls for his readers "the incubus, the oppressive dream . . . the tormented, impotent desire to tear oneself free, which lifts every creation of Michelangelo's spirit into a realm of profound and gigantic tragedy."  

To come to our own day, Erwin Panofsky attempts a scholarly explanation of what has been called "the tense and superb arrogance of Michelangelo," 13 of his "explosive personality" and "volcanic nature," 14 of his "protest, achieved with obvious difficulty, against beautiful, perfect, immaculate form, a manifesto in the shapelessness of which there is something aggressive and self-destructive." 15 For Panofsky, much of the tension, the explosiveness, and the self-destruction can be explained by "Neoplatonism":

... among all his contemporaries Michelangelo was the only one who adopted Neoplatonism not in certain aspects but in its entirety, and not as a convincing philosophical system, let alone as the fashion of the day, but as a metaphysical justification of his own self. . . . While the Neoplatonic belief in the "presence of the spiritual in the material" lent a philosophical background to his aesthetic and amorous enthusiasm for beauty, the opposite aspect of Neoplatonism, the interpretation of human life as an unreal, derivative and tormenting form of existence comparable to a life in Hades, was in harmony with that unfathomable dissatisfaction with himself and the universe which is the very signature of Michelangelo's genius. 16


Finally, among all who make this approach to Michelangelo, smothered in adjectives, there are those who find in him beyond everything else the "mark of the superhuman," for, as Leonardo Olschki says, "Michelangelo's universality consists in his belief in the superhuman as the only worthy subject and motive of artistic creation." 17

THE SISTINE CHAPEL

To the "tormented" creature preoccupied with the "superhuman," "Neoplatonist" by conviction and colossus by achievement, one must add a kind of special pleader in the artist who crafted the Sistine Chapel. In it, Heinrich Wölfflin says, "Michelangelo first advanced the thesis, which became deeply significant for the whole century, that no beauty exists outside the human form." The basis for this statement, sharp and definitive as it is, is the vault itself and the vault alone, for he alludes to no other clarification of purpose by the painter.

On principle, he abandons the decoration of flat surfaces with linear designs derived from vegetable forms, and where one would expect entwined foliage decoration one finds human forms and nothing but human forms, with not a trace of ornamental filling-in where the eye can rest. True, Michelangelo made distinctions and subordinated some of the cate-

platonizing notions." Necessarily, Michelangelo spoke the language and painted and carved the figures of his own time, but all his major sources of aesthetic doctrine as cited by Panofsky—Dante and Cristoforo Landino's Commentary upon the Commedia, Petrarch, Marsiglio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola—were far more Christian than Platonic or Neoplatonic, no matter what the borrowings from classical materials. When Panofsky says that Michelangelo's "figures symbolize the fight waged by the soul to escape from the bondage of matter" (ibid., p. 181), he is describing a struggle altogether familiar to Christians, and familiar in just these terms. It is unfortunate that Panofsky's skillful but incomplete examination of the iconography of Michelangelo's works should rest so firmly upon a tradition of interpretation so far removed from the obvious origins of all Christian iconography in the Bible and, if one must go beyond primary sources, in biblical commentary. This is a particularly lamentable omission in the case of Michelangelo, for we know of the influence upon him of the Bible and Christian poets with at least as much certainty as we do of the influence of Plato and the so-called Neoplatonists. It should be added here that a similar incompleteness, with heavier overtones of personal conviction, mars the presentation of the poetry of Michelangelo in Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance by Nesca A. Robb (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935), pp. 239–269.

egories of figures, as well as introducing variety into the color by making some figures of stone-bronze-color, but this is not the same thing, and, look at it how you will, the covering of the entire surface with human bodies betrays a sort of recklessness which furnishes material for reflection.¹⁸

Perhaps, for all of Wölflin's seeming logic and for all the seeming soundness of the arguments of others who have made similar points about the nudes of the Sistine Chapel, it was neither "recklessness" nor the thesis that "no beauty exists outside the human form" that motivated Michelangelo in the choice of the human figure as the central symbol, the metaphor, and the subject of the 145 pictures that make up the vault. We have substantial evidence in Condivi's Vita that Michelangelo was a student of holy Scripture and had a particular admiration for Dante, most of whose works, the biographer tells us, he knew by heart.¹⁹ We have the witness of Michelangelo's own work, with the high place accorded biblical subject matter, and particularly Old Testament figures, those surrounding Moses in the Tomb of Julius II, the David, the Sistine frescoes. We know that the original plans for the Chapel were simply to surround geometrical ornament in the center of the great rounded arch with portraits of the twelve apostles in the pendentives,²⁰ and that at Michelangelo's own undertaking there was substituted the extraordinary sequence of Old Testament narratives, surrounded by prophets, sibyls, slaves, and ancestors of Christ—with the prophets and the sibyls specifically replacing the apostles. And we have, too, the witness of Michelangelo's letters and even more of his poetry to his philosophical and theological specula-

¹⁹ Holroyd, op. cit., p. 74.
²⁰ A few technical architectural terms must be used to identify various sections of the Sistine ceiling. A pendentive is an overhanging surface, usually triangular and curved, which joins a dome or vault (an arched roof) to a wall. The triangular shape of the Sistine pendentives is unmistakable to a viewer in the Chapel itself, but is not always clear in reproductions. A spandrel is another triangular form, formed by the exterior curve of an arch and the enclosing right angle or by the space between the curves of contiguous arches and the horizontal lines above or below them. A lunette is a semi-circular window or window-space, partly surrounded by a vault which the wall intersects. The best way to make sense of these terms and of the descriptions of the Michelangelo paintings to which they are apposite is to consult such a volume as the new Phaidon Press Michelangelo or the older Phaidon edition of The Paintings of Michelangelo, or Charles de Tolnay's Michelangelo, II. The Sistine Ceiling (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949). All these volumes provide excellent gatefolds of the ceiling as a whole and single reproductions of its major component parts.
tions. All of these activities and articulations—those of the biblical
and Dante student and those of the writer and painter and sculptor—
suggest a concern with the human form other than that of physical
beauty, or at least that the marvel of outward beauty chiefly signifies
for him the interior depths, serene as well as tormented, and as thor-
oughly Christian as they are outwardly "Neoplatonist."

In looking for evidence of this thematic material in Michelangelo's
poetry, one must clearly restrict oneself to the years up to and includ-
ing those four, from 1508 to 1512, in which he worked on the vault
of the Sistine. This means that one must exclude the late religious
sonnets—for all the striking corroboration of a fervent Christian
faith to be found in these unusually lucid and straightforwardly or-
thodox poems. This means too that one must not roam happily in the
poems which find in his friendships with Tommaso Cavalieri and with
Vittoria Colonna the beauty, the balance, the selflessness, the grace in
sum, which is better explicated and defended in Cicero's De Amicitia
and St. Ailred of Rievaulx's work on holy friendship than in Plato's
Symposium, to which commentators ordinarily go for explanation of
these relationships in Michelangelo's life. This means, ultimately, re-
stricting oneself to a handful of poems and fragments, which can
merely suggest the contents of the later, richer, more artfully con-
structed works. But even in these early pieces, written when he was in
his thirties, the themes are the basic ones. In the reproofs to Pope
Julius II and the excoriation of the atmosphere of the Curia, there is
Michelangelo's typical disgust with the things of this world, expressed
epigrammatically:

Signor, se vero è alcun proverbio antico
questo è ben quel, che Chi può, mai non vuole.

My Lord, if one ancient proverb is true
it is that which says, He who can never will.21

And he complains, not once, but several times:

Qua si fa elmi di calici e spade
el' sangue di Cristo si vend' a giumelle,
e croce e spine son lance e rotelle;
e pur da Cristo pazienza cade!

21. The best edition of the poems is Die Dichtung des Michelagnolo Buonar-
notti, edited by Karl Frey (Berlin, 1897), but the sonnets at least can be consulted
in any one of several editions, some bilingual, of the translations of J. A. Symonds.
Here chalices are made into helmets and swords, and the blood of Christ is sold by the handful, His cross and thorns are spears and shields; and even the patience of Christ wears thin.

He describes, as well, the physical misery, the dizziness he encountered on the scaffolding, his body aching from the cramped position in which he had to lie in order to paint the ceiling above him, un ricco pavimento, a rich covering of paint drops on his face, his eyes squinting and his judgment poor. And there are the early madrigals in which he laments the unsteady course of earthly love, manic in its heights, depressive in its depths:

\[ \begin{align*}
  \text{Chi è quel che per forza a te mi mena,} \\
  \text{Oime, oime, oime,} \\
  \text{Legato e stretto, e son libero e sciolto?}
\end{align*} \]

What is the force that pulls me toward you,
Alas, alas, alas,
That all at once draws and ties me and sets me loose and free?

There is in this poetry an unending series of paradoxes and problems, in which the self, all too conscious of itself, is never sure just who or what is in possession:

\[ \begin{align*}
  \text{Come può esser ch'io non sia più mio?} \\
  \text{O Dio, o Dio, o Dio!} \\
  \text{Chi m'a tolto a me stesso?}
\end{align*} \]

How can it be that I am not myself any more?
O Lord, Lord, Lord!
Who has robbed me of myself?

These early poems anticipate almost every one of the major themes of the poetry to come: the simple and moving last sonnets, prayers each of them, prayers at the foot of the cross, prayers asking for strength and purgation and for grace in his last moments, that he might be brought to see God, and prayers in contemplation of the precious Blood and the crucified Christ; the poems in morte, after the death of his beloved friend Vittoria Colonna, and those with which he mourns the death of the exquisite youth Cecchino Bracci, who died in 1544 at the age of seventeen; all those on the afflictions of love,
love insistently mortal and hence inevitably tainted, whether directed to Tommaso Cavalieri or to Vittoria; all those poems, of a tolerable variety, in which desire, concupiscence, of no matter what kind, leads to death, death physical or spiritual, after which the poet must bemoan his personal loss. Only the foretaste of the poetry of beauty is missing, and this is at least implicit in the philosophy of the poems outlined, however much of the tenderness and the poetic strength of the later Michelangelo may be lacking.

It is not difficult to see in this poetry, by suggestion at least, the lines which celebrate heavenly beauty prefigured by earthly loveliness, the lines that mark the evanescent character of beauty in nature just as in man, the lines which proclaim man's exile here on earth and look forward to his beatitude in the heaven to come. There are loud echoes of the Platonic doctrine of reminiscences, or at least of the conventional vocabulary of this concept of an ultimate reality, a heaven beyond the heavens, whose archetypes are seen on earth only in fuzzy reflection and wavering shadow. But here again the outward appearance of Platonism or Neoplatonism is, like the elusive beauty Michelangelo pursued so relentlessly in his poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, merely suggestive of a greater Christian or Judaeo-Christian reality. The underlying idea is familiar enough to readers of the Old Testament and the New, to readers of Marsiglio Ficino's Theologica Platonica and Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man, or of any other work in which a pagan cortex is described that a Christian nucleus may be defined; it is particularly clear to all who know Dante's poetry well, even if not as well as did Michelangelo. The personification of love that speaks in that poem of Michelangelo's written some time in the 1530s—

I son colui che ne' prim anni tuoi
Gli occhi tuoi infermi volsi alla beltate
Che dalla terra al ciel vivo conduce.

I am he who in thy first years
Turned thy frail eyes toward the beauty
That leads living men from earth to high heaven.

—this persona is indistinguishable from the one that appears in Dante's La Vita nuova, the destination of his followers is the same in
the later as in the earlier work, nothing less than to come close to the love that moves the sun and the other stars, to beauty bare, to within the presence of God Himself. This is the subject of the Sistine Chapel ceiling—this love whose beauty is not mortal (Amor, Michelangelo cries in one of his later poems, la tua belle non è mortale, "Love, thy beauty is not mortal"); this presence he would see wherever he goes (Deh famitti vedere, he pleads with God in one of the last sonnets, in ogni loco!, "O Lord, make me see thee everywhere!"). For the sibyls and the prophets were to Michelangelo intercessors with heaven in that central quest of his life just as was the dead youth Bracci, or Vittoria Colonna, or any other in the long line of illustrious ambassadors dispatched from man's earthly dwellings to his heavenly home by poets from Dante's time and Petrarch's to Shakespeare's and John Donne's. To Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura and the other members of that blessed company, Michelangelo added not only, in a familiar tradition, the beloved dead of his poems, but, in a less familiar one, the great figures that surmount the walls of the Sistine and support the Old Testament histories of its ceiling, the sibyls of Delphi and of Erythrae, Isaiah, Jonah, Daniel, and all the rest.

THE SIBYLS

The thirteenth-century sequence, Dies irae, most probably composed for the first Sunday in Advent, later to become a part of the Requiem Mass, begins:

Dies irae, dies illa,
Solvet saeculum in favilla;
Teste David cum Sibylla.

Day of wrath, that day
When the world shall melt into ashes,
As David and the Sibyls say.

For Michelangelo, this was a testament not lightly to be disregarded; to him, the sibyls were witnesses of more than ordinary significance. He had a whole tradition to rely upon in choosing five of them to sit beside the prophets in the Sistine pendentives. Whether his source was the Divinae Institutiones of Lactantius, written at the beginning of the fourth century, or that most curious of the pseudepigrapha, the
Sibylline Oracles, compiled mainly in the course of four centuries from about 160 B.C. to A.D. 240,22 these ancient pagan prophetesses would serve him well as mediators of grace,23 figures of ecstatic character, whose messianic predictions had had at least a literary importance for centuries and who had, some of them anyway, convinced not only Lactantius but St. Augustine and other Fathers of the authenticity of their visions of the coming of Christ.

The precise text upon which Michelangelo may have based his conceptions of the sibyls would be difficult, if not impossible, to run to earth. There is little doubt that he knew both the Institutes and the Oracles and probably selected his five from the same master list of ten sibyls in Marcus Terentius Varro's Res Divinae upon which Lactantius had based his brief discussion and characterization of these pagan prophetic women, best identified by their geographical locations. He had the illustrious sanction of Virgil, in the Fourth Eclogue, the so-called messianic eclogue, where the Cumaean sibyl prophesies the coming of a redeemer of distinctly Christ-like features,24 and in the remarkable passage in the Sixth Book of the Aeneid in which the same sibyl's

22. The Sibylline Oracles grew to their present form from a pagan nucleus. Several centuries before Christ, there existed in Egypt, as elsewhere, a collection of the sayings of various pagan quasi-prophetesses, and as early as the middle of the second century B.C., Jews in Alexandria, wishing to make use of this popular collection for their apostolate among the pagans, inserted in it references to the belief in one God, to the Mosaic ordinances, to events in Israel's history, and to the messianic times. From perhaps the year A.D. 80, Christian interpolators made additions of their own to those of the Alexandrian Jews. Since the messianic references are interpolations, the Sibylline Oracles have no theological value; but they do serve as a guide to the temper of the interpolators as well as of their readers. And it is as a guide to Michelangelo's mind that the sibylline books are mentioned here. The real witness of the pagan sibyls, when freed from all accretions, is—like that of the whole world of pagan myths and sages—quite different, of course, from that of the prophets of Israel. While the former voice man's gropings for God, his yearning for redemption, the latter tell of God's search for man and announce the redemption to come.

23. The word "mediators" is used here and elsewhere in this study with strict regard for its Catholic sense. According to Catholic teaching, it is Christ who has broken the chains of sin, Christ alone who is the Saviour of all, the one Mediator of justice between God and man. Only in, through, and because of Him can others mediate with God. Therefore the apostle can write: "Pray for one another that you may be saved" (Jas 5:16). It is because of Christ that Mary, the saints of the New and of the Old Testaments, all the blessed in heaven, can be called upon for their intercession. This is the sense in which Michelangelo saw the sibyls as mediators of grace.

24. Some of the "messianic passages" in the translation of John Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921), pp. 11, 12, are more clear than others. For example: "On thee, child, at every turn the unlaboured earth shall shower her gifts.
trance, after Apollo possesses her, is described in a way that foreshadows the mystical union of God and the soul to come through Christ. 25 Twice his master Dante had referred to Cumae, 26 and there was a vast literature of mythology, of ancient drama and poetry, and of what at least pretended to be history, even of philosophy and the vague outlines of ancient anthropology, to guide him in his use of the sibyl of Delphi. For the others he had a variety of sources to draw upon, if he wanted to use any: St. Augustine’s description of the Erythraean sibyl in The City of God, where she serves as a prophet of the Last Judgment, 27 and the characters given Persica and Libya by Lactantius and the Oracles. But the abiding impression one receives from any lingering examination of these figures is that they represent a thoroughly original interpretation of the prophetic women of the pagans, different, of course, in temperament and dignity from the uniquely inspired prophets of Israel with whom they alternate in the Sistine pendentives, and necessarily more limited in insight, but each speaking in her own way those clear and precise words of Virgil’s Cumae: Deus, ecce deus! 28

One can see these prophetesses as marking a sequence “determined, first, by their spiritual link with the histories above, and secondly, by the idea of the decrescendo of the prophetic faculties proceeding in the direction of the altar”: 29 one can accept some sort of plan to represent continents and nations; or one can, with more justice perhaps and certainly with greater ease, speculate on the attitudes of the figures and through them on an iconography of grimace and gesture, of drapery and scroll, as Wölflin does:

What is it that distinguishes the Delphic Sibyl from all Quattrocento figures? What gives such grandeur to the action, and endows the whole

. . . Yet shall some few stains of the old-time sin live on. . . . And thou, dear offspring of the gods, mighty seed of a Jove to be—enter thou on thy great office, for the time is all but here! Behold, the world’s ponderous sphere bows before thee—earth and the tracts of ocean and the empyreal vault!”

25. See the Aeneid, VI, 77 (in the Jackson translation, p. 233): “. . . in her cavern the prophetess, intolerant yet of Phoebus’ will, raved in limitless frenzy, straining to exorcize the mighty god from her soul: but all the more he curbed her foaming lips to weariness, subdued her fierce heart, and moulded her to his constraint.”


28. Aeneid, VI, 46.

with an appearance of necessary inevitability? The motive is the sudden attention of the Seer as she turns her head and momentarily pauses, holding up the scroll. The head is seen from the simplest viewpoint, not tilted, and full front, but this attitude is held only under strain, for the upper part of the torso is bent sideways and forward and the arm, reaching across, is another contradiction of the direction of the head; yet, despite the difficulties, it is just this which gives the pose with the head seen from the front its force, and the vertical axis is maintained among opposing elements. . . . The eyes of the prophetess follow the direction of the head by their own movement to the right, and the effect of these searching, wide-open eyes carries at all distances. . . . The hair is blown in the same direction and so is the great sweep of the mantle which encloses the whole figure like a sail. 30

But all of these alternatives miss a few essentials, simple and obvious, but certainly to Michelangelo’s point.

On one side of the ceiling, a perfect symmetry is established among three of the sibyls, the central position being assumed by Cumaeas, the venerable prophetess crowned by Virgil and Dante. She is of signal importance because of that similitude in the last book of the Paradiso in which the transitory nature of man’s perceptions of God in general and of Dante’s vision of Him in particular is briefly and beautifully compared to the scattering of the leaves on which the sibyl had written her revelations:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Così la neve al sol si disigilla; } \\
\text{così al vento nelle foglie levi } \\
\text{si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla. }
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thus does the snow lose its imprint in the sun; } \\
\text{thus in the wind on the frail leaves } \\
\text{does one lose the sibyl’s sentence.}^{31}
\end{align*}
\]

On either side of the Cumaean sibyl are Libyca and Delphica, both of a surpassing youthful loveliness, although the latter seems closer to ecstasy and vision; both, at the moment, free of the book which appears in one way or another with each of the sibyls, although Libyca seems to be reaching for her volume while Delphica has consigned hers to the figures behind her, those tradition calls genii; both, really,

31. Dante, Paradiso, XXXIII, 64–66.
in poses of the same order, although the Libyan sibyl is much more contorted as she turns toward the book than is the prophetess of Delphi.

Across the vault, the two remaining sibyls, Erythraea and Persica, the youngest and the oldest in appearance of the seers, offer another perfect balance as they face each other, their books and their supporting figures in similar harmonies of place and movement. Behind Erythraea and her book rises the figure of a genius holding a scale, a suitable symbol for one who prophesies the Last Judgment. Behind Persica and the book she is reading with such concentration rests another apparently aged figure, kneeling, perhaps in prayer, fitting attitudes and symbols for the sibyl mentioned first by Lactantius and, by implication anyway, marked as the oldest of the ten he lists.

By their precise symmetry of position, the sibyls point, intentionally or not, to the central panel of the center field of the ceiling, to the Creation of Eve, and then, necessarily, from one side of that central scene to the other: from the Creation of Adam, back to God Separating Sky and Water, the Creation of the Sun and Moon, and God Separating Light and Darkness; from the Fall and Expulsion from Paradise, to the Sacrifice of Noah, the Deluge, and the Drunkenness of Noah; on the one side events that proclaim God's solicitous intervention in human affairs from the very beginning of time, on the other side events that show man's fall from grace and the punishments meted out by a just God, but always with the prefiguration of redemption inescapably present. And if in the ark of Noah's salvation we can see a "type" of Christian baptism and in God's covenant with Noah a prefiguring of God's new Covenant with all men sealed by Jesus, so too in Michelangelo's sibyls can we see forerunners of the prophets. For they are themselves what might be called cousins once removed of Old Testament figures, offering to the meditative viewer of the Sistine Chapel vault a valuable iconography of salvation, incomplete without the prophets, but demonstrating on another level the long reach in time and the vast spread in history of the prevision of the Messiah, who is really the subject of the plastic contemplation in line and color, of the prayer in paint, that is Michelangelo's ceiling.

32. See 1 Pet 3:20–21.
The Prophets

Two themes clearly unite the seven prophets Michelangelo chose to alternate with the sibyls in the Sistine pendentives: their visions or prefigurations of the Messiah and of the Last Judgment. Whether we start with Jonah, who himself prefigured the death and resurrection of Christ, and, following the great arc made by his left hand, move to his left, past Daniel, Isaiah, Zechariah, Joel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, or reverse the direction, we are confronted with the same ineluctable and unassailable narrative of prophecy and prediction. Verse by verse, chapter by chapter, seer by seer, we face redemption and apocalypse, we face the Redeemer and Judge. Any attentive examination of the texts must yield these points, these themes, and the unifying Figure who joins together not only those twelve enthroned visionaries who act, in one way or another, as His appointed representatives, but every one of the 343 figures who fill the ten thousand square feet of the Sistine vault.

The revelations of the coming of the Messiah in the writings of the seven prophets are familiar enough not to require extensive rehearsal here; but the close relationship in each of the books between the texts of messianic prophecy and those which reveal divine judgments of that special character we call apocalyptic does require and deserve further amplification if the special roles of the prophets in the Sistine Chapel and in Michelangelo’s life are to be more accurately presented.

The least obvious, and yet in some ways the most important, of these relationships is to be found in the book of Jonah. As a “type” of Christ, Jonah is unmistakable: in his being swallowed and, after fervent prayer, being vomited forth from the belly of the whale, the prophet prefigures His passion and resurrection, for “Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (2:1). As one who saw the coming of the Last Judgment, Jonah is not so clear, and yet we know of the destruction ordained of God for Nineveh, that pagan city of “wickedness” to which he has been sent to preach. And we know as well that Jonah’s prophecy of destruction, a prophecy in which he merely acts as intermediary for God, is not fulfilled and that God brings mercy to bear upon Nineveh and pardons the
repentant pagan people. Jonah is angry at the display of mercy, and yet he knows better, for he says after the pardon: "I know that thou art a gracious and merciful God, patient, and of much compassion, and easy to forgive evil" (4:2). What, finally, we know with Jonah in the last verse of his book is that God's mercy extends beyond the children of Israel to all mankind, indeed to all creation: "And shall not I spare Nineveh," the Lord says, "that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons that know not how to distinguish between their right hand and their left, and many beasts?" (4:11).

Michelangelo's Jonah has learned this lesson—in detail. In that great contortion of his body which follows the motion of his arms, he directs his impassioned glance across the whole ceiling, presumably taking in the Creation of Adam and all antecedent events in the making of the universe. Most strikingly, he distinguishes between his right and left hand: his index fingers point down, both of them, perhaps indicating, as De Tolnay suggests, "the abyss from which he came but which he has left behind in this moment of grace and renovatio";more important, he points with the two fingers to the spandrel in which is re-enacted the nailing of Haman to the trunk of a tree and in which Esther appears in two different scenes, one in which she is warned by Mordecai of the attempt to be made on the life of King Ahasuerus, and the other in which she warns the king of his peril. Thus does Michelangelo's Jonah point with the fingers of his two hands to two figures, to Haman, the recipient of God's just wrath, and to Esther, the agent of His mercy. Thus has the Jonah here in the Sistine learned the lesson of the last verse of the last chapter of his book and thus does he point to one who has been delivered, whose prayer to the Lord that He show Himself "in the time of our tribulation" and "deliver us by thy hand, and help me, who have no other helper, but thee" (Est 14:12, 14) has been answered. It is a rich reading of the words of the book of Jonah and a profound parable based upon it that Michelangelo paints, in which many events are linked, all of which prefigure the Last Judgment, as justice and mercy are demonstrated and order in the universe is revealed through a

33. De Tolnay, op. cit., p. 52.
34. For the source of this variation on the biblical text, see Dante, Purgatorio, XVII, 25–30.
MICHELANGELO: Daniel
MICHELANGELO: Zechariah
MICHELANGELO: Ezekiel
The Painter and the Prophets

prophet who finds his place in this firmament not only as one who saw signs but as one who was himself a sign.

On the lateral wall to the right of the altar (and to the left of Jonah) sit the two prophets who most unmistakably represent the central themes of the pendentives, Daniel and Isaiah. Their roles could not be more clearly defined, the first the author of “the first great apocalyptic work”; the second the great prophet of deliverance, the recorder of so many of the titles of Christ—for example, Emmanuel, mighty God, Prince of peace—and the description of the Messiah as born of a virgin mother, endowed with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might and knowledge, and destined to bring peace and justice to the world.

The first half of the book of Daniel is autobiographical in tone and largely devoted to a series of eloquent tributes to the Lord, ending in chapter 6 with the prescient words: “He is the Deliverer and Saviour, doing signs and wonders in heaven and in earth, who hath delivered Daniel out of the lions’ den” (6:27), a majestic description of the Messiah which is repeated almost word for word to bring the book to a close. As much as anything else these words describe the visions which make up chapters 7 to 12 of Daniel; they suggest, at least in part, the high wonder and dramatic portent of a book in which the kingdoms of Christ and Antichrist are set against each other and the angels act as explicators and exegetes in sorting out Daniel’s visions for himself and for his readers.

Perhaps the most striking quality of both books is the alternation of the two themes which concern us here. In the rich mosaic which is the book of Isaiah, the elements of sin and chastisement, of rise and fall and rise, of justice and injustice, alternate with the great consoling passages which delineate the marks of the Messiah and lead the writer of the concluding chapters to those passages which recount the final fall and rise of Israel, when the Lord “will bring upon her as it were a river of peace” (66:12). But before this longest of the prophetic books is brought to a close, there is a brief, tightly organized section of four chapters (24–27) of typically apocalyptic character, which, whatever the modern disputes about its authorship, must have struck Michelangelo as further evidence of the indissoluble tie that

links together Messiah and Judgment and gives motivation and purpose to the Sistine seers.

It is fitting, then, to find in Michelangelo's Daniel and again in his Isaiah as much security without complacency as paintings can convey. The reflective Daniel sits transcribing the momentous messages brought to him, now perhaps by the weighty book held before him by one genius, and later, once more, by the other genius who stands behind him, wrapped symbolically in the prophet's mantle. Michelangelo's noble Isaiah has turned from his book and does not quite pay full attention to the two genii who hold forth new visions to him: this prophet has seen a fulfillment larger than words or gestures can indicate; he is content to rest upon what he knows and to point the index finger of his left hand in a delicate but firm motion that leads the viewer's eye downward, perhaps to the altar, almost certainly to the Chapel itself, and by implication to its raison d'être, not simply as a church where Mass can be celebrated, but as the outstanding chapel of the Vicar of Christ on earth.

The remaining four prophets are, as one might expect them to be, old men, Michelangelo's contemplatives, who sift through the evidence for the coming of a Messiah, even as Isaiah did, and look for the likelihood of an exacting punishment and a just reward and the signs of both, just as Daniel and Jonah and Isaiah did. They are grouped together in the Sistine, at Jonah's right and to the left of the altar, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah, all pondering the significance of what they have seen and are in the process of transmuting and transmitting. Only one of them, Jeremiah, is not engaged in the actual process of examining or communicating part of his text, and he is so engrossed in the meaning of what he has to say in his book of Lamentations that he can be described as engaged in the same process, a central one for these four men in the Sistine.

Michelangelo's Jeremiah may represent him as the author only of the five chapters of Lamentations and not of the fifty-two of the book of prophecy which precedes it in the Bible; or in some other way his significance among the Sistine prophets may be limited to the text of Lamentations, for in a fragment of the scroll visible at his right, in the lower lefthand corner of his pendentive, appears the Latin transliteration of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, ALEF, in capital letters, and the Roman numeral V, which together clearly indicate the
opening verses of the five chapters of Lamentations, each of which consists of verses which begin, in turn, with each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Michelangelo's intention may have been simply to emphasize the book of Lamentations rather than to separate it from the other book of Jeremiah, for the tone and substance of both are essentially the same. The evil doings of his people are spelled out in the one—lying, oppression of the weak, idolatry, giving heed to false prophets, and the persecution of Jeremiah himself—and so too are the punishments that will come upon this people that is, in one of the great figures of Israel and its Creator, as clay in the hands of the potter. In the other, a brief compendium of the misdoings and the misfortunes of the Jews is offered, complete to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, ending with the most moving of Jeremiah's laments, that prayer in which he begs the Lord to "convert us . . . and we shall be converted," to "renew our days, as from the beginning" (Lam 5:21, 22).

That Jeremiah should be the most deeply absorbed in thought of the Sistine prophets is reasonable enough. He is overwhelmed with grief, broken in heart; his is the most prolonged of lamentations and for the most personal of reasons, for the persecution of himself he narrates is so intense and bitter and so completely indefensible as to prefigure graphically the persecution of Jesus. There is, however, as there must be in the words of any of the prophets chosen for the Sistine pendentives, comfort for all in the prediction of the coming of a Messiah in chapters 30 and 33 of the book of Jeremiah, and personal comfort for Baruch in chapter 45, to whom the Lord, Jeremiah reveals, will bring salvation, indicating the kind of renewal of "our days" he pleads for in the last of his Lamentations.

The element of the personal is strikingly present again in Ezekiel, both as he appears in the Old Testament and as he is painted by Michelangelo. This is, after all, the seer of visions so completely his own as to rival the most recondite of mystics. But in the vision of mankind reborn in flesh and bone on Judgment Day (37:1-14) he is also the prophet of the resurrection and, in the course of many messianic prophecies, the most articulate of defenders of God's justice as it will be distributed in the separation of the wicked from the virtuous (chaps. 18 and 33). In the persecutions of Gog, ruler of Magog, which Ezekiel prophesies, there is perhaps as precise an analogy to the
book of the Apocalypse of the New Testament as there is to be found anywhere in the Old. And, finally, in the rebuilt Temple of the last nine chapters of his book, there is a vision of the City of God remarkable for its reach across the two Covenants between God and man and for the precision of its name, "The Lord Is There," one which for generations of Christians has accurately described the splendor of the New Jerusalem.

Michelangelo's Ezekiel is a man possessed by the words in the scroll hanging from his left hand, possessed but far from certain of all the consequences of his visions: he looks far into some indeterminate beyond and in the extraordinarily eloquent gesture of his right hand pleads some cause, presumably that of the "children of a hard face and of an obstinate heart" (2:4) to whom the Lord has sent him as prophet, which is to say as intermediary. For it is Ezekiel as no other prophet who is addressed by God, again and again, as "son of man." And if Ezekiel seems, in this company, the most possessed by his prophecies, that too makes sense if one examines the text which must be the source of our understanding of the background of the prophets the painter chose to paint: for it was Ezekiel who was commanded of God to eat the book of "lamentations and canticles and woe" he has been handed from heaven, just as John the Evangelist was commanded later (2:8—3:3; Apoc 10:9—10). And like John, he did eat it and digest it and in the Sistine version of the enraptured "son of man" it has—visibly—become part of him.

With Joel and Zechariah, Michelangelo demonstrates an originality at once arresting and profound, which signifies the use he makes of the prophets. For in choosing these two among all the eleven minor prophets after Jonah, he underscored, although with a measure of poetic indirection and pictorial subtlety, his strikingly personal understanding of prophets and prophecy.

One recognizes with ease the pre-eminent position of Daniel and Isaiah, of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, among the prophets: they are the four major prophets, messianic and apocalyptic by turn in their revelations and so understood by commentators and exegetes for centuries. The place of Jonah in this group is equally self-explanatory: as a figure of Christ he belongs logically to this number, and it is in that special role that he rests above the altar, sitting in review upon all events of the Sistine vault. What about Joel and Zechariah? Why not
the other minor prophets who also, lucidly and persuasively, forecast
the coming of the Messiah? Why not Amos and Hosea, Micah and
Nahum, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Haggai, Malachi? There are many ex-
planations, perhaps, but none so convincing, really, as the great spirit
of rejoicing which fills the rhetoric and swells the poetry of the three
chapters of Joel and of the fourteen of Zechariah. For while in these
books alarms are still sounded and the perils of Judgment pro-
claimed, the prevailing tone is of jubilation in Judaea, which “shall
be inhabited forever” (Jl 3:20), and of singing in Zion, “for behold
I come and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord” (Zach
2:10). The land is now sanctified, in the words of Zechariah (2:12),
and the type of Christ he presents is complete even unto name: he is
the high priest Joshua, the son of Jehozedek (3:1). And Joel’s invi-
tation is complete to the last generation:

Gather together the people,
sanctify the church,
assemble the ancient ones,
gather together the little ones
and them that suck at the breasts:
let the bridegroom go forth from his bed
and the bride from her bride chamber.

(2:16)

His prophecy is of complete fulfillment on the Day of Judgment:

And it shall come to pass in that day,
that the mountains shall drop down sweetness,
and the hills shall flow with milk:
and waters shall flow through all the rivers of Judah:
and a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord,
and shall water the torrent of thorns.
Egypt shall be a desolation
and Edom a wilderness destroyed:
because they have done unjustly against the children of Judah
and have shed innocent blood in the land.
And Judaea shall be inhabited forever,
and Jerusalem to generation and generation.
And I will cleanse their blood which I had not cleansed:
and the Lord will dwell in Zion.

(3:18–21)
Thus do we move along the far side of the Sistine Chapel, to a middle-aged Joel coming to the end of his scroll, with a fine balance of two genii behind him, establishing the harmony of symmetry—they stand on either side of the prophet—and the poise of completion—the closed book firmly grasped in the hand of one of them suggests termination as clearly as does Joel's look at the last characters on his scroll. This genius, he of the book, points outside the pendentive, past the serene countenance of his fellow genius, to the aged figure of Zechariah who occupies the position opposite to Jonah at the far end of the vault, facing the older generation of prophets (as Michelangelo sees them). Zechariah is not merely an old man: he is the middle-aged Joel turned ancient; no hair on his head, but fully bearded; his nose, his lips, the shape of his head notably cast in the mold of Michelangelo's portrait of the prophet Joel, to whose prophecies his bring more detail and descriptive splendor. Zechariah is shuffling through the pages of his book, coming, at perhaps an old man's pace, to his last words; his happily joined genii looking on behind him with obvious pleasure, relaxed and at ease, in their equanimity entirely different from any of the other genii who accompany the prophets except the composed pair who echo the joyful and consoling meaning of the portrait of Joel.

**Mediators of Peace**

The central place of the prophets in the New Testament is nowhere better defined than by Jesus in answering the doctor of the Law who wanted to know "which is the great commandment in the Law."

Jesus said to him:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God
with thy whole heart,
and with thy whole soul,
and with thy whole mind!"

This is the greatest and the first commandment.

And the second is like it:

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

On these two commandments depend the whole

Law and the Prophets."

(Mt 22:36-40)
Thus did Jesus Himself denote the place of the prophets: alongside the Law, they unfold the commandments, they unfold the love and justice of God. And so too does Michelangelo designate the position of the seven prophets of the Sistine Chapel: alongside the histories of the central field and those of the spandrels and the bronze medallions, alternating with the spandrels and the lunettes which present the ancestors of Christ, the prophets—like the sibyls—perform a mediating role in the Sistine Chapel, a work of exposition which is the pictorial analogue of their scriptural duty. But it is not enough to say this, for it leaves unsaid the special words which denote the special grace of the prophets in the life of Michelangelo and which account for the special place—the dominating one—of these particular men of God in the design and execution of the Sistine.

The prophets tell forth the sins and chastisement of Israel, and thus by implication the sins and chastisement of all the children of God everywhere and through all the ages; they also foretell the surcease of suffering which will come through the Messiah at the Last Judgment:

And all the elect, while they were by their holy living serving as His forerunners, gave promise of Him by prophesying both in deeds and words. For there never was any saint who did not appear as His herald in figure.  

But the prophet is gifted with something larger still, larger than foreknowledge and the articulate tongue with which, in his mantic role, to cry forth his prophecies: he speaks well, he speaks boldly, and he speaks, as the Greek word prophētēs properly translates the Hebrew nabi, for someone, in the name of someone—for and of the Lord. He is, by definition, an intermediary between God and man, who brings upon all who heed his message goodness and understanding and honor: for, as St. Gregory says, “it was meet that all should display that goodness in themselves whereby both all became good, and which they knew to be for the good of all.”  

The mediation of the prophets is of an exquisite symmetry; its nature is perfectly reciprocal: as the prophet feeds us, we feed him:

He too feeds the prophet who understands and keeps what is written. Our faith supports him, our advance gives him nourishment; he feeds on

37. Idem.
our minds and senses, his discourse is sustained by our understanding of it. We give him bread in the morning, in that, placed in the light of the Gospel, we bring to him the establishing of our hearts. By these things is he nourished and strengthened and fills the mouths of them that fast.  

Here, in brief, is the motive force in Michelangelo’s life, the asceticism which governed not only his personal life but the conduct of his career as an artist. Here is the link between the Scriptures, the prophets, and the sibyls on the one hand, and the poetry, the sculpture, the friendships with Vittoria Colonna and Tommaso Cavalieri, the language of Neoplatonism and of traditional Platonism on the other. The prophets are indeed mediators in Michelangelo’s life: they are as logical to him as intercessors in heaven as the saints, for they are members not only in the large sense of the communion of saints but also of the special body of those canonized, whether by vox populi or by the positive action of the Holy See, and duly represented in martyrology, missal, or breviary. Thus are the seven prophets of the Sistine traditionally granted feast days, or at least commemorated, in the calendar of the Church. Thus does one pray in the Patriarchal Diocese of Jerusalem:

Lord Jesus, King of the prophets, thou didst foretell by the mouth of thy holy prophet Isaiah thy incarnation, life, death, and glory. Grant, through his intercession, that these sacred mysteries [of the Eucharist] may lead us thy servants to the everlasting joys. Who livest and reignest with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, world without end.

 Almighty, everlasting God, in thy fatherly goodness, through the intercession of blessed Jeremiah the prophet, release from the bondage of sin thy servants who plead guilty in thy sight. Let the pain of remorse which is their punishment be outweighed by thy gracious mercy which brings them pardon. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

O God, thou didst reveal to thy beloved servants the prophets the riches of thy wisdom and knowledge. Grant that, through their intercession, we may never withdraw from the true wisdom, which is Christ, and so in heaven rejoice in the eternal revelation of thy glory. Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

To Beatrice and Laura, then, to Vittoria and Tommaso and young Bracci, and to his sibyls, Michelangelo added the prophets, and did not simply add them, but gave them the place of honor in his personal world of intercessors. This is an artist quite worthy of Cellini's superlatives and Vasari's and Condivi's, but far more important, a man, a poet, a painter of far greater subtlety than the one conjured up by the descriptions of a "deep, violent, colossal, passionately striving" nature, of an "oppressive dream," of a "tense and superb arrogance," of one possessed of "unfathomable dissatisfaction with himself and the universe. . . ." And certainly the beauty allegorized and directly spoken for in the Sistine vault is not that of the human form alone, as Wölflin and so many others have declared. For the human form is, in general in the Sistine, surrogate for the human soul, and in particular in the configuration of the prophets, deputized to speak for the purpose, the order, and the design—no less—of creation. Far from torment, far from violence, arrogance, or oppression, what Michelangelo communicates in the Sistine Chapel is an understanding of that beauty _che dalla terra al ciel vivo conduce_, that leads living men from earth to high heaven.

Step by step, he moves in the Sistine to the direct contemplation of beauty in the Creator of beauty, uniting, as he does so, the pagan sibyls and the prophets of Israel, the Old and the New Testaments, bringing man from the events antecedent to his creation to the state of the universe when time shall cease and all that shall be shall be forever. And as we contemplate in turn, we are bound to be awed by the realization in time and space of an entity resembling, in some conceptual and plastic way, God the Father, and to be agonized and edified by turns by all the people and places and events that surround and surmount the Creation. The prophets, however, introduce a more personal note, personal to us as well as to the painter: mediators between God and us, mediators by virtue of Him whom they foretold, they bring not so much awe or agony or even edification, but—in all its most honorable meaning—_appeasement._