

Jewish Christian Dialogue focuses on Jewish influenced Christian Art

By Perilla Wilson

Have you ever noticed that Mary seems to have been reading a book when the angel Gabriel appeared to her in various artists' portrayal of the Annunciation? The book is always open to Isaiah 7:14, according to Dr. Michael J. Cook, professor of Judaeo-Christian Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, OH, in a talk to the Mobile Area Jewish Christian Dialogue at the Mobile Museum of Art. Rabbi Cook presented a multitude of slides to demonstrate his lecture on "An Abiding Presence: Shades and shadows of Judaism in Christian Art."

His doctoral work focused on the Second Temple Period and concentrated on the New Testament. Although his area of expertise is not art history, he touched on core issues of Jewish-Christian relations as portrayed in an area of art that is unfamiliar to many art historians - how early Christianity saw Judaism.

Cook pointed out that in one major theme, Christian paintings of the Annunciation depicted the Hebrew scripture from Isaiah foretelling that "the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emanuel." (Books as we know them were not in existence in Mary's time.) Mary usually has her head tilted and the Word or the Spirit is shown, often as a shaft of light or dove, entering her ear, a reference to Psalm 45, "hear, O Daughter, and see; turn your ear." Gabriel is also frequently shown in the background banishing Adam and Eve from the garden, a reminder that Adam, representing Judaism, is going to be replaced by Christ and Christianity.

A second major theme is that of the Nativity. The stable is frequently seen as a Romanesque structure in ruins to symbolize Judaism crumbling. Often, Joseph (and Moses

in depictions of him and other historical characters in the background) are shown removing their shoes because they are on holy ground. Cook said he was bothered by the fact that Joseph is often shown in a yellow garment, as that was "the color of Jews" and is considered a negative color. In many pictures of the Nativity there is no Mary or Joseph but always an ox, representing the Jews who did accept Christ and an ass, representing the gentiles who accepted Christ. According to Cook, these symbols of ox and ass were more important to the painting than Mary and Joseph because of what they symbolized. The reference is from Isaiah 1:3 "an ox knows its owner, and an ass its manger; but Israel does not know," indicating that "Israel was stiff-necked." Joseph is sometimes making mousetraps and Cook said that Augustine felt they represented the Cross.

Balaam, in the book of Numbers 24:17, is the source for the Star of Bethlehem, "a star shall advance from Jacob." Other items in the major theme of the Adoration of the Magi are "the gospels never tell us they were Kings (or that there were three) but the Hebrew Bible does," Psalms 72:10-11, "The kings of Tharsis and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Saba shall come bearing gold and frankincense." These gifts are enumerated in the Hebrew Bible with the addition of myrrh from the gospel of Matthew. "There are three kings because there were three gifts," said Cook. Myrrh is also mentioned by Mark at the crucifixion.

"In the Middle Ages, art was the literature of the illiterate," he said. The medieval artists probably didn't recognize many of the symbols, only repeating what they had so often seen depicted. However, during Renaissance, the Franciscans wrote "how to" instructions on symbolism for artists.