

# Die Bibel in der Kunst / Bible in the Arts

Online-Zeitschrift 5, 2021

## The Giant under the Feet of Mary as Thronus Salomonis from the Former Cistercian Monastery of Wormeln

Jeanne van Waadenoijen

# The Giant

## under the Feet of Mary as Thronus Salomonis

### from the Former Cistercian Monastery of Wormeln

Jeanne van Waadenoijen

Art historian, independent researcher

#### Abstract

Zur Sammlung der Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin gehört ein Marienbild, das aus dem ehemaligen Zisterzienserinnenkloster in Wormeln stammt. Es wurde in der zweiten Hälfte des 14. Jahrhunderts geschaffen und stellt die Gottesmutter stehend unter einer Art Baldachin dar, mit dem Kind auf dem Arm, umgeben von vielen Gestalten mit Spruchbändern sowie einem toten Riesen in einem offenen Grab unter ihren Füßen. Im 19. Jahrhundert hat Ferdinand Piper die Texte der Spruchbänder entziffert und die Gestalten identifiziert. Allerdings ist seine Interpretation des toten Riesen im offenen Grab wenig überzeugend. Unter Verweis auf Ps 19:6 (= Vulgate Ps 18:6) meint er, der Riese verweise auf Christus, der aus Marias Schoß kommt wie der Bräutigam aus seiner Brautkammer. Andere haben ebenso wenig überzeugend Nimrod oder Adam vorgeschlagen. Die Bedeutung des Riesen ist m.E. von Baruch 3,26–28 her zu verstehen. Hier ist von Riesen die Rede, die in ihrer Torheit untergegangen sind, weil sie die Weisheit nicht hatten. Damit verweist die Darstellung auf theologische Dispute über Wissen und Weisheit. Nicht die Dialektik, sondern die Liebe zu Gott und Kontemplation führen zur Weisheit, Christus und Gott.

## 1. Introduction

In 1810, during the turbulent years of the Napoleonic Wars, the Cistercian monastery of Wormeln near Warburg in Westphalia shared the fate of so many religious institutions in that period. The monastery was closed down and its belongings were dispersed. A large panel with the image of a standing Virgin with Child surrounded by numerous figures with scrolls by an unknown Westphalian painter active in the second half of the fourteenth century turned up in a private collection in Cologne and was subsequently donated to what is now the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Here the painting was restored and transferred from wood to canvas.<sup>1</sup> The composition, as well as the iconography, indicates that the painting, which measures 110 x 208 cm, was originally somewhat larger.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Eckhardt, Maria, 77–81.

<sup>2</sup> Eckhardt, Maria, 78.

## 2. The painting



Anonymous artist, ca. 1360-1380, Mary as Throne of Solomon (canvas transferred from panel, 110 x 208 cm). Staatliche Museen Berlin. © photo: Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin / Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Photographer: Jörg P. Anders.

The importance of the painting lies not so much in its artistic qualities as in its unique iconography. Mary with the Christ Child forms the centre of the composition. She is represented standing with the Child in her arms in front of a large golden disc under a kind of canopy, an architectural structure something between a tabernacle and the gateway to a castle or a town, with two angels making music on the ramparts. Mary looks at the Infant Jesus who is holding a finger to his lips. She wears a crown of twelve stars while her feet rest on a crescent. Below the crescent, in an open tomb, lies a corpse enveloped in a white shroud. The tomb bears the inscription TU(M)BA GYGA(N)TIS. On Mary's left, the Annunciation is represented, the angel of the Annunciation holding a scroll with the words AVE MARIA GRACIA PLENA D(OMI)NUS TECUM, while on her right side the Nativity is represented. Beneath both the Annunciation and the Nativity stands a bearded man with a scroll alongside a number of remarkable compartments; in each one there is a small lion with a scroll, six on either side. In addition we can see a series of figures with scrolls on pedestals in two rows of niches on either side of the tabernacle. The niches in the upper row contain male figures, the niches in the lower row female figures. Two women with scrolls sitting on either side of the tomb under Mary's feet complete the picture.

Nothing is known about the history of the painting before it was removed from the monastery. Yet its subject, the Virgin Mary tenderly looking at the Christ Child in her arms, makes it likely that the painting was made as an altarpiece for the nunnery where it was found. The Order of Cistercians, the monastic order to which the nuns belonged, was a reformed Benedictine order. It followed the

Benedictine rule with its emphasis on simplicity, poverty, and manual work. Who entered a monastery forsook the world to dedicate his or her life entirely to God. The liturgies of Mass and Divine Office, the prayer service that ensures the praise of God at regular intervals throughout the day, defined the day of the community in prayers, reading and manual labour for their livelihood. The texts of the liturgies are composed of passages from the Bible, from the works of the Fathers of the Church, of antiphons, responsories, hymns and sequences composed in praise of God, Christ and Mary. Under the influence of its undoubtedly most famous abbot, the theologian and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153) noted for his devotion to the Virgin, all Cistercian monasteries were founded in honour of Mary, and their churches dedicated to the Virgin under the title of the Assumption, ‘Queen of Heaven and Earth’. Each church had an altar dedicated to the Virgin before which the community assembled for the daily recital of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The day started and ended with the praise of Mary.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The giant in the tomb

The painting from the Wormeln convent was subject of an extensive study by Ferdinand Piper, published in 1873.<sup>4</sup> He deciphered and traced the provenance of most of the texts on the scrolls. This permitted the identification of all the figures, except for the corpse in the open tomb. From the inscription on the tomb, we can deduce that the dead man is a giant, but who this giant is, and what he represents, remained obscure. Piper supposed a connection between the giant in the tomb and the giant from Psalm 19:6 (= Vulgate Ps 18:6).<sup>5</sup> The verse compares the sun to a bridegroom who, coming out of his bridal chamber, rejoices to run its course as a giant (*ut gigans*).<sup>6</sup> Piper interpreted the giant in the tomb as a prefiguration of Christ who came out of Mary’s womb as the bridegroom out of his chamber, whereas his lying in a tomb signifies his defeat of death. However, the place under the feet of the Virgin suggests that the giant is vanquished than victorious. Others connected the giant with Nimrod and identified him with the Antichrist.<sup>7</sup> Christoph Gerhardt suggested that the giant in the tomb represents Adam, type of Christ.<sup>8</sup> These interpretations are more compatible

---

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. J.A.F. Kronenburg, *Maria’s heerlijkheid in Nederland: geschiedkundige schets van de vereering der H. Maagd in ons vaderland, van de eerste tijden tot op onze dagen*, III, 193. St. Beissel, *Geschichte der Verehrung Marias in Deutschland während des Mittelalters*, 1909, 195–210.

<sup>4</sup> Piper, *Maria*, 97–137.

<sup>5</sup> Piper, *Maria*, 133–134.

<sup>6</sup> The Bible citations in this paper are from the Douay-Reims Catholic Bible, a translation of the Latin Vulgate, online version, <http://www.drbo.org>, accessed on March 15, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Eckhardt, *Maria*, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhardt, *Tumba*, 247–275.

with the place where the giant finds himself, but raises the question why, if he is supposed to represent Nimrod or Adam, the inscription does not mention him as such, the more so since all the other figures have their names inscribed on their scrolls. Evidently, the dead body is not that of a particular giant.

### 3.1. Towards a new interpretation of the giant

Psalm 19:6 (= Vulgate 18:6) is not the only scriptural passage that mentions a giant. Giants are mentioned in Genesis, Proverbs, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Isaiah, and in Baruch. This last book is a deuterocanonical book. This means that it is not included in the Hebrew Bible, but in the Septuagint and the Vulgate, the authoritative Bible of the Catholic Church. The passage in which Baruch mentions the giants, a eulogy of Wisdom, was incorporated into the text of the liturgy of Mass, and therefore will have been well known.<sup>9</sup> Baruch's prophecy opens with the words:

Hear, O Israel, the commandments of life: give ear, that thou mayst learn wisdom. How happeneth it, O Israel, that thou art in thy enemies' land? Thou art grown old in a strange country, thou art defiled with the dead: thou art counted with them that go into hell. Thou hast forsaken the fountain of wisdom: For if thou hadst walked in the way of God, thou hadst surely dwelt in peace forever. (Bar 3:9–14)

The prophet points out that many did not discover wisdom, among them the giants, of great stature, expert in war.

The Lord chose not them, neither did they find the way of knowledge: therefore did they perish. And because they had not wisdom, they perished through their folly. (Bar 3:28)

This passage is likely to be the source of the dead giant under the feet of the Virgin.

To make my point it is necessary to return to the context in which the giant appears. Central to the representation is the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. Images rich in references to her part in God's plan of salvation surround the Virgin. The Christ Child, the incarnation of the Word, divine wisdom, holds a finger to his lips, the gesture of silence, silence before the profound and arcane mystery of the incarnation of the Word, of the birth of Christ the Redeemer from a virgin represented by the Annunciation and the Nativity left and right of Mary, a mystery that reason cannot understand and that no words can explain.<sup>10</sup> The female figures in the niches on either side of the Virgin Mother are the personifications

---

<sup>9</sup> Sixth prophecy of the Catholic liturgy of Holy Saturday and the fourth lesson of the Vigil of Pentecost in the Cistercian missal.

<sup>10</sup> See Bonaventura, *De Annuntiatione B. Virginis Mariae, Sermo I*, in *Opera*, IX, 657: 'Quia mysterium dominicae incarnationis ita est arcanum et profundum, ut nullus intellectus valeat hoc capere, nulla lingua valeat explicare;....'

of the virtues Mary possessed the moment of her immaculate conception. Because of these virtues she found favour in the eyes of the Lord, evident from the texts on their scrolls taken from Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:28–38).

### 3.2. The virtues of Mary

From left to right the following virtues are represented with their words:

**Discretio** (discernment): DISCRECIO . COGITABAT Q(UA)LIS EST ISTA SALUTATIO (she thought within herself what manner of salutation this should be),

**Verecundia** (modesty): VERECU(N)DIA . QU(A)E CU(M) AUDISSET TURBATA (EST) IN SERMONE EIUS (who having heard, was troubled at his saying),

**Virginitas** (virginity): VIRGI(NI)TAS . (Q)ONIA(M) VIRUM NON CO(G)NOSCO (because I do not know a man),

**Humilitas** (humility): HU(M)ILITAS . ECCE ANCILLA D(OMI)NI (behold the handmaid of the Lord) and

**Oboedientia** (obedience): OBEDE(N)CIA . FIAT MICH I (!) SECU(N)DU(M) (VERBUM TUUM) (be it done to me according to thy word).

Over each Virtue stands a male figure carrying a scroll with the name of a Church Father and a quotation from the work that refers to the Virtue over which he stands. At the extreme left a fragment of a scroll with the words ...VIRGO (?) IP(S)A ET MAT(ER) D(OMINI) is still visible, indicating that the panel originally was larger on that side and would have shown a sixth virtue with Church Father. The words on the scroll stems from a homily of Origen who, therefore, would be the sixth Father, but from the text it cannot be deduced who could have been the sixth Virtue and which words from the Gospel she represented.<sup>11</sup> Since the homily addresses Mary's purity and the miracle of the virgin birth, it is plausible that she was *Castitas* (chastity). The texts on the scrolls of the Church Fathers read (from left to right):

over *Discretio*: **FULGENIUS** . MARIA CO(N)STA(N)TER ELOQUITUR PRUDE(N)T(ER) INTERROGAT (how firmly Mary expressed herself, how prudently she spoke),

over *Verecundia*: **BEDA** . DISCE VIRGINE(M) MORIBUS DISCE VERICU(N)DIAM (!) (hear what virginal manners, hear what modesty),

over *Virginitas*: **GREGORIUS** . NES (.....VIR)G0 VIRUM PEPERIT SI..NE DOLORE SALUTARE (the Virgin, not knowing man, brought forth the Saviour without pain),

over *Humilitas*: **BERNHARDUS** . MATER DOMI(NI) ELEGIT(UR) ET ANCILLA(M) [NUNCUPAT] (she is the chosen Mother of the Lord, and she calls herself His handmaid), finally

---

<sup>11</sup> Origen, In diversos, Homilia I, in: Tertius Et Quartus Tomi Operum Origenis Adamantii : quorum Tertius complectitur, post Apologiam explicanda venundantur Ioanni Paruo, Iodoco Badio, et Conrado Resch, 1522, fo. CXVv

over *Oboedientia* (obedience) **AUGUSTINUS** (!). O FELIX OB(EDIENC)IA Q(UAE) DU(M) HU(M)ILIT(ER) (FIDEM) DEDIT DEU(M) I(N)SE (?) CO(N)CEPIT (O happy obedience, who humbly believing conceived God.)<sup>12</sup> Most of the texts on the scrolls form part of the Cistercian breviary.

### 3.3. The heathen witnesses

The prominence given to the Virtues indicates that the virginal Mother of God is the protagonist. This is stressed by the presence of pagan writers and prophetesses who all refer to the miracle of the virgin birth. The bearded man beneath the Annunciation holds a scroll with the words: VERGILI(US) . ULTIMA CU(M)MEI IAM VE(N)IT CARMINIS A(E)TAS MAGNUS AB ETERNO SA(N)[U]TORUM <?> NA(S)CITUR ORDO. (Now is come the final era of the Cumaean song; The great order of the ages is born afresh). He represents the Latin poet Virgil (70 BC-19 BC), and the words on the scroll derive from his Fourth Eclogue where he speaks, referring to the sayings of Cumae, of the dawning of the Golden Age with the return of the Virgin and the birth of a child.<sup>13</sup> The sayings of Cuma, the Cumaean song, is the oracle of the Cumaean sibyl. Sibyls were female seers from the ancient world. Their oracles were handed down in verses of difficult interpretation. Early Christian writers thought their oracles foretold the coming of Christ. Augustine (345–430) saw in Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue the prophecy of the coming of Christ’s reign, dictated by the Cumaean sibyl.<sup>14</sup> Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), referring to Augustine, mentions the sibyls as examples of pagans who clearly prophesied Christ because of revelations given to them by angels.<sup>15</sup> On the authority of Augustine’s works, the sibyls found their way to the liturgy where they find their place beside the Old Testament prophets.<sup>16</sup>

The bearded man beneath the Nativity holds a scroll with the words: ALBUMASAR . IN PRIMA FACIE VIRGINIS ASCE(N)DET VIRGO PULCHERRIMA HO(N)ESTA (ET) MU(NDA) ? ET SEQ(UITUR) NUTRET PUERUM Q(AE)DAM GENS VOCAT IH(ESU)M. (In the first face of the Virgin [in the first decan of the sign of the Virgin] arises a most beautiful, honest and pure ? virgin and it follows: she nurtures a child called by some people Jesus.) Albumasar, the Latin corruption of the Arab Abu Ma’shar, was an astrologer who lived from ca. 805–885 in Mesopotamia. The words on the scroll derive from his *Introductorium maius in*

<sup>12</sup> The text on Fulgentius’s scroll derives from a sermon by Fulbert (Sermo IV De Nativitate Beatissimae Mariae Virginis, PL 141, 322C). The full text of the much damaged verse on Gregor’s scroll (Piper, 109), the first verse of an antiphon, should read Nesciens Mater Virgo virum, peperit sine dolore: Salvatorem saeculorum.

<sup>13</sup> Virgil, Ecloga 4, 4–5.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, De civitate Dei, X, 27. See for Virgil Wlosok, Rollen, 263–266.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, Sententiae, Libr. III Dist XXV. Quaest. II, art. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Sequences *Laetabundus* (Come rejoicing) and *Dies Irae* (the Day of Wrath).

*astrologiam*, or *astronomiam* (the two disciplines were synonymous at that time), translated from Arab into Latin in the twelfth century both by Juan of Seville, better known by his Latin name Johannes Hispanus or Hispalensis, and Herman of Carinthia. It is an introduction to astrology, in which the author tries to give astrology a scientific basis with the help of Aristotelian ideas and concepts. Abu Ma'shar was the most influential authority on astrology during the Middle Ages in Europe.<sup>17</sup>

The woman sitting down at the side of Virgil holds a scroll with the text IAM REDIT (ET) VIRGO REDEU(N)T SAC(UR)NIA REGNA ET NOVA PROGENIES ECEL OMITTITUR ALTO. FELIX ILLE DEUS LIGNO QUI PE(N)DET AB ALTO. (Now returns the Virgin, returns the age of Saturn and the new generation comes down from heaven. Blessed is that god who hangs on high from the tree). Since the first part of the phrase derives from the Cumaean song quoted by Virgil, the woman will represent the Cumaean sibyl. The text on the scroll of the woman at the side of Albumasar identifies her as the Samian sibyl: SIBILLA SAMIA (SANYA?) . VENIET AGNUS DEI CELESTUS(!) HU(M)ILIAVITUR (!) DEUS IUNGET(UR) (!) DI(VI)NIATI HU(M)ANITAS (ET) PUELLARI OFFICIO EDUCABIT(UR) DEU(S) DEU(S) ET HOMO. (The heavenly lamb will come, the god will be humiliated, humanity will be joined with divinity, the god will be raised to human duty, god and man.)<sup>18</sup> Familiarity with Virgil, the sibyls and Albumasar was not limited to scholars like Albert the Great (d. 1280) and Thomas Aquinas. In the widely read *Roman de la Rose*, an allegory of love life, its author, Jean le Meun (d. 1305), has Nature refer to Virgil and Albumasar, pagans who predicted the birth of Christ from a virgin, a miracle beyond Nature's possibilities.<sup>19</sup> The texts on the scrolls of the Virtues, the Church Fathers, Virgil, Albumasar and the sibyls all refer to the incarnation of Christ, to the realisation of God's Plan of Salvation with the cooperation of the virtuous and pure Virgin Mary, predicted even by pagans, who by their prophecies bear witness to the universality of Christ's truth.

### 3.4. The throne of Solomon

The twelve small lions with their scrolls in the compartments at either side of the Virgin refer also to the Mother of God and her part in the divine plan of salvation. Both the lions and the Virtues can form part, as Piper pointed out, of representations of Mary as Throne of Solomon.<sup>20</sup> Mary is the wondrous throne made by King Solomon referred to in the Book of Kings, according to a sermon attributed to Nicolas of Clairvaux (d. ca. 1176), delivered on the occasion of the feast of

<sup>17</sup> See for Abu Ma'shar García Avilés, Alfonso, 189–200.

<sup>18</sup> Virgil, *Ecloga* 4, 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Roman de la Rose*, Jean Danielou (ed.), 1972, vs. 19169–19190.

<sup>20</sup> Piper, *Maria*, 112; Wormald, *Throne*, 532–539.

the Nativity of the Holy Virgin.<sup>21</sup> The wise Solomon, in a typological sense, is the Wisdom of God, Christ, who made a throne, that is, the womb of the immaculate Virgin. According to the description in the Book of Kings, Solomon's throne had six steps. 'And twelve little lions stood upon the six steps on the one side and on the other.' (1Kgs. 10:20) Nicolas compares in his sermon the twelve small lions on the steps with the Twelve Apostles, and indeed, the scrolls of the small lions of the painting from Wormeln bear each the name of an apostle followed by a verse from the Credo. From left to right and from top to bottom are represented

**PETRUS** . CREDO I(N) DEU(M) PATRE(M) OMNIPOTE(N)TEM. (I believe in God the Father Almighty),

**JOHANNES** . QUI CO(N)CEPT(US) (!) EST DE SPIRITU S(AN)CTO. (who was conceived by the Holy Spirit),

**ANDREAS** . E..(..JESUM) XPM ( and in Jesus Christ),

**JACOB(US)** . PASSUS SUB PONCIO PILATO. (suffered under Pontius Pilate),

**THOMAS** . DESCE(N)DIT AD INFER(OS) (?). (descended into hell),

**JACOB(US)** . DESCENDIT(!) AD CELOS. (ascended into heaven),

**PHYLIPP(US)** . INDE VENTURUS EST ET C... .. (whence He will come ...),

**BARTOLOMEU(S)** . CREDO I(N) SPIRI(TUM) S(AN)C(T)M. (I believe in the Holy Spirit),

**MATHEUS** . S(AN)C(T)AM ECCLESIA(M) CATOLI(CAM) (in the Holy Catholic Church),

**SYMON** . REMI(SIONE)M. (forgiveness of sin),

**JUDAS** . CARNIS RESURREXIONE(M). (resurrection of the body),

**MATHIAS** . ET VITA(M) ETERNA(M) AMEN. (and life everlasting amen).

The six steps to Solomon's throne on which the Apostles stand in the guise of small lions lead to Christ, the incarnated Word, the wisdom of God, God in the heavenly Jerusalem. According to the Franciscan theologian and mystic Bonaventura (c1221–1274), in *Itinerarium mentis in deum* (The mind's road to God), a small, but widely read treatise in which he describes the way to union with God, the six steps to the throne of Solomon are the symbol of the six stages of illumination in the mystic's ascension to God.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Forsyth, 24–30. See for the attribution of the sermon J. Leclercq, Les collections de sermons de Nicolas de Clairvaux, *Revue Bénédictine*, 66 (1956), 275.

<sup>22</sup> Bonaventura, *The mind's road*, 18: 'so the microcosm by six successive stages of illumination is led in the most orderly fashion to the repose of contemplation. As a symbol of this we have the six steps to the throne of Solomon [III Kings, 10, 19]'; and 41: 'Now that these six considerations have been studied as the six steps of the true throne of Solomon by which one ascends to peace, where the truly peaceful man reposes in peace of mind as if in the inner Jerusalem; ....'

### 3.5. Mary the portal of Heaven

The virtuous and pure Virgin Mary stands with her Son in her arms under a canopy with music making angels, an architectural structure something between the gateway of a castle or town and a tabernacle. It symbolizes the celestial city, but at the same time Mary. She is, in addition to being the seat of wisdom, the tabernacle where He who her created rested (Ecclus 24:11–13), she is also the *castellum* that Jesus entered (Luke 10:38). The Virgin is the closed gate of the new temple through which God passed (Ezek 44:2). The gate in the picture is a reference to Mary's virginal motherhood, but symbolizes also the entrance to heaven, the heavenly city suggested by the angels on the ramparts. Mary is the 'portal to the life immortal' from the famous hymn *Ave Maris Stella*, (Hail, Sea-Star), she is the 'ever accessible portal of heaven' from the hymn *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (O Loving Mother of the Redeemer). She is the 'Queen of Heaven, Lady of the Angels', 'gate of morn, whence the true Light was born' from the hymn *Ave Regina Caelorum*, (Hail, O Queen of Heaven). These Marian hymns all formed (and form) part of the Cistercian liturgy of the hours.<sup>23</sup> They were recited or sung daily at the end of the day and therefore will have been well known to the nuns who gathered in prayer before the image of the Virgin.

The golden disc, the sun, the crescent and the stars, moreover, denote Mary as the appearance described by John in Revelation 12:1 'And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars'. This woman was initially identified with the Church, but the Cistercians close to Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153) preferred to see in the woman above all Mary taken up into Heaven.<sup>24</sup> In a famous sermon, delivered on the octave of Ascension Day, which opens with the words from Revelation 12:1, Bernard points out that nothing prevents us from seeing in the woman in the heaven Mary, 'clothed in the garment of the sun, since she has penetrated the boundless abyss of divine wisdom', while 'all foolishness is far below her feet'.<sup>25</sup> For the moon below her feet 'represents not only corruption because of its waning but also a foolish way of thinking'.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.6. The identity of the giant

The waning moon brings us to the giant in the tomb below the feet of Mary. From the several scriptural passages that deal with giants, it is not very clear

---

<sup>23</sup> The English translations are from Matthew Britt (ed), *Hymns of the Breviary and Missal*, 1922.

<sup>24</sup> Piper, *Maria*, 128.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard, *Sermons*, 57. See also Bonaventura in a sermon on occasion of the feast of the Annunciation (*Opera*, Vol. IX, 659): 'Mulier amicta sole, scilicet ornata Divinitatis claritate; lunam, temporalium mutabilitatem, habens sub pedibus.' Mary is adorned with the clarity of the divine nature, the moon under her feet signifies the precariousness of the temporal existence.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard, *Sermons*, 57.

who the giants were. Yet the exegetes agree that they were punished for their pride, their lack of fear of God, for their leanings towards all earthly things, and this prevented them from finding the way of wisdom, and so they perished.<sup>27</sup> In a sermon of Bernard of Clairvaux which has as its introductory passage the verse 'Thou hast made known to me the ways of life, thou shalt fill me with joy with thy countenance: at thy right hand are delights even to the end' (Ps 16:11 = Vulgate Ps 15:11), we encounter both Piper's *gigas* (giant) and Baruch's *gigantes* (giants).<sup>28</sup> In the sermon *gigas* is Christ, rejoicing to run the way, what is more, to climb mountains, to cross hills. The *gigantes* are philosophers rejoicing to run not Christ's way but to seek vainglory with their vacuous ideas. Bernard's cynicism with regard to the philosophers has to be viewed in the light of the academic disputes of his time about the relation between reason and faith, the fight between mystics and dialecticians. To the mystics, usually monks who studied within the walls of a monastery, faith leads to understanding of the truth of Revelation, whereas the dialecticians, those who studied philosophy at what later became the University of Paris, had above all confidence in human intellectual capacity. By applying the method of the newly discovered Aristotelian dialectic based on the principles of logic to the Holy Scriptures, they hoped to come to a deeper understanding of the Word. According to Bernard of Clairvaux, it is pride of the philosophers to think that dialectics will enable them to get to the bottom of the divine mysteries. The only possible way is by love of God and contemplation. 'I have said that to meditate on these things [Christ's life, passion and resurrection] is wisdom.'<sup>29</sup>

The gesture of the Child refers to *silentium*, silence, to a secret knowledge, but silence is also a stage in the mystic's ascent to God, the only possible way to wisdom, described by the great Dominican scholar and mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) in one of his sermons as follows.

If a man will work an inward work, he must pour all his powers into himself as into a corner of the soul, and must hide himself from all images and forms, and then he can work. Then he must come into a forgetting and not-knowing. He must be in stillness and silence, where the Word may be heard. One cannot draw near to this Word better than by stillness and silence: then it is heard and understood in utter ignorance. When one knows nothing, it is opened and revealed. Then we shall be-

<sup>27</sup> See Jerome, *Commentarii in Isaiam*, VIII, 26 (Migne, PL XXIV, col. 299); Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, XVII, 21 (Migne, PL 76, cols. 24–25); Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XV, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard, *Sermones* III, 235: 'Exsultas enim ut gigas ad currendam viam: et non solum currens, sed et saliens in montibus et transiliens colles. Exsultaverunt gigantes philosophi non ad currendam viam tuam, sed ad quaerendam gloriam vanam, evanescentes in cogitationibus suis, non in humilitate in virtutibus tuis, sed suis. *Viam enim sapientiae nescierunt neque meminerunt semitarum ejus. Non est audita in Chanaan, neque visa est in Theman*'. See for wisdom and philosophers also *Sermo* 2, 83, *Sermo* 5, 102f, *Sermo* 7, 108 in the same volume.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo de Aquaeductu*, in: Bernard, *Sermones* II, 282.

come aware of the Divine Ignorance, and our knowledge will be ennobled and adorned with supernatural knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

To obtain such an experience, to hear and understand the Word in utmost ignorance (in the state of forgetting and not-knowing), one needs exercise, according to Bonaventura in his *Breviloquium*, exercise of grace in the truths to believe, such as there are the articles of faith.<sup>31</sup> For theological science in contrast to philosophical science is based on faith, the science of Scripture on the articles of faith which are the twelve foundations of the city, a reference to Revelation 21:14.<sup>32</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

The painting from Wormeln presents Mary, the by God predestined immaculate recipient of the Word, the seat of Wisdom, as mediator, the door through which who believes in Christ may enter into the Kingdom of God. It was inspired by the teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux who in his famous homily on the Assumption mentioned above asserts that Christ's divinity renders him frightening to approach, hence 'the need of a mediator to the Mediator, and there is none more expedient for us than Mary', the merciful Mother of God. 'The woman set between the sun and the moon' is 'Mary between Christ and the church.' She is crowned with twelve stars by which we may understand 'twelve singular graces', Mary's prerogatives and virtues Bernard recommends to meditate upon and to imitate. He ends his sermon with the prayer:

Now, Mother of mercy, through this very affection of your most pure mind, the moon [the church], lying prone at your feet, sets you as a mediator between herself and the sun of justice [Christ] and supplicates you that in your light she may see light and win the grace of the Sun by your invocation, for he has loved you above all and honored you, clothing you with the garment of glory and placing the crown of beauty on your head.<sup>33</sup>

By meditating on Mary, her prerogatives and virtues one comes to Christ, the Mediator between God and man, by meditating on Christ, his birth, passion and resurrection, one comes to God, to Him 'Who is above all essence and knowledge',<sup>34</sup> to the beatific vision (seeing God face to face), and peace in the heavenly Jerusalem. The giant below the feet of the Virgin represents the fate of him who pretends that reason suffices to understand the mysteries of faith. He will not find the way of knowledge and will perish through his folly. 'Him the Lord chose not'.

---

<sup>30</sup> Cited after Underhill, *Mysticism*, 319.

<sup>31</sup> Bonaventura, *Opera*, V, 260.

<sup>32</sup> Bonaventura, *Opera*, V, 476.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard, *Sermons*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Bonaventura, *The mind's road*, 42.

## Bibliography

- Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermones, II, in: Sancti Bernardi Opera, Jean Leclercq / Henri M. Rochais (eds.), Vol. 5, 1968.
- Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermones, III, in: Sancti Bernardi Opera, Jean Leclercq / Henri M. Rochais (eds.), Vol. 6, part 2, 1970.
- Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermons for the Autumn Season (trans. Irene Edmonds / Marc A. Scott), 2016 <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46612>.
- Bonaventura, The mind's road to God (trans. Georg Boas), 1953.
- Bonaventura, Opera omnia S. Bonaventurae, Vol. V, 1891.
- Eckhardt, Wolfgang, Maria als Thron Salomonis, in: Ausstellungskatalog, Die Westfälische Malerei des 14. Jahrhunderts, 1964, 77–81.
- Forsyth, Ilene H., The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France, 1972.
- García Avilés, Alejandro, Alfonso X, Albumasar y la profecía del nacimiento de Cristo, *Imafronte* 8–9 (1992–1993), 189–200.
- Gerhardt, Christoph, Die *tumba gygantis* auf dem Wormelner Tafelbild „Maria als Thron Salomons“, *Westfälische Zeitschrift* 142 (1992), 247–275.
- Migne, Jacques-Paul (ed.), *Patrologia Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, 1844–1855.
- Piper, Ferdinand, Maria als Thron Salomos und ihre Tugenden bei der Verkündigung, *Zahn's Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 5 (1873), 97–137.
- Poppi, Antonino, The Gifts of the Holy Spirit according to Bonaventure (trans. Solanus M. Benfatti), *The Dunwoodie Review* 35 (2012), 154–172.
- Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism*, 1955.
- Wlosok, Antonie, Rollen Vergils im Mittelalter, 2008, 253–269, esp. 263–266. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110196764.253> | Published online 16.04.2010.
- Wormald, Francis, The Throne of Solomon and St. Edward's Chair, in: Millard Meiss (ed.), *De Artibus Opuscula XL (Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky)*, 1961, 532–539.

## Impressum

Herausgeber / Editors:

Prof. Dr. Régis Burnet, [regis.burnet@uclouvain.be](mailto:regis.burnet@uclouvain.be)

Prof. Dr. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, [s.gillmayr-bucher@ku-linz.at](mailto:s.gillmayr-bucher@ku-linz.at)

Prof. Dr. Klaus Koenen, [koenen@arcor.de](mailto:koenen@arcor.de)

Prof. Dr. Martin O’Kane, [m.okane@tsd.ac.uk](mailto:m.okane@tsd.ac.uk)

Prof. Dr. Caroline Vander Stichele, [C.H.C.M.VanderStichele@uvt.nl](mailto:C.H.C.M.VanderStichele@uvt.nl)

„Bible in the Arts“ is a project of the German Bible Society.

„Die Bibel in der Kunst“ ist ein Projekt der Deutschen Bibelgesellschaft

Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft

Balinger Straße 31 A

70567 Stuttgart

Deutschland

[www.bibelwissenschaft.de](http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de)