BRUEGEL’S BIBLICAL KINGS

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Old Testament Kings

Discussing Pieter Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* in 2008, Margaret Carroll discerned contemporary allusions to oppressive Spanish imperial regency, especially to some extraordinary recent expenditures on civic fortifications by the artist’s hometown of Antwerp.¹ Her approach remained largely political and topical, even for a religious painting, and although more subtle, her interpretation still echoed earlier, more vulgar claims for political currency in later Bruegel paintings, such as when Stanley Ferber discerned local political tribulations of the nascent Dutch Revolt within the artist’s *Massacre of the Innocents*, represented in a wintry Flemish village (see below).² This essay will make a broader claim for a consistent spiritual outlook by the artist, one which can be considered collectively as a kind of pictorial exegesis. In short, Bruegel clearly contrasts Old Testament kingship with the advent of a new age of peace under Christ in the Gospels. While this outlook does not deny the artist a clear and current response to increasing threats of local warfare in the Spanish Netherlands,³ it does take seriously the religious content of his pictures as well as an intertextual – or, better, intervisual – relationship among them. Indeed, Bruegel’s expressly pacifist outlook harmonized fully with his spiritual conviction: that during the tumultuous Roman imperial rule

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of the Holy Land under Herod and Pontius Pilate, the advent of Christ as Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) fundamentally altered, even reversed, the prevailing culture of warfare. Jesus ushered in the new era of grace, to fulfill the promise of prophecy: to turn ‘swords into plowshares’ (Isaiah 2:4).

Bruegel’s fullest representation of armies shows a battlefield conflict in another, smaller panel, The Suicide of Saul (1562; Vienna) [Fig. 1]. This Old Testament event depicts an episode from 1 Samuel (31:1–6; inscribed on the panel itself ‘Saul xxxi. Capit’), when the army of the Israelites, led by King Saul into battle against the Philistines at Mount Gilboa, stands on the verge of being conquered. According to the Bible, the sons of Saul were slain by the foe, whose archers even threatened King Saul himself. The king then falls upon his own sword to avoid being humiliated in defeat. Bruegel’s image places the suicide alone with his armor-bearer in the lower left corner of the composition, while below them across the remainder of the panel teems the crowded conflict of miniature armies in the Jezreel Valley. In the distance, crossing the river, the Israelites retreat along with their animals, including visible camels.

For his visual model of the battle, Bruegel almost certainly relied upon south German images of important battles, such as the Battle of Pavia (1525; woodcut prints by Hans Schäufelein and Jörg Breu the Elder).4 Within the high viewpoint and expansive landscape, he presents dense, ant-like clusters of soldiers: armored cavalry breaking lances from horseback and turbaned bowmen, again redolent of the contemporary nemesis of Islam as well as Near Eastern authenticity for the biblical narrative. This primal conflict, appropriate to sixteenth-century struggles between the Christian Holy Roman Empire and the Muslim Ottoman Empire, already had found its way into German paintings, such as the historic Battle of Issus between Alexander the Great and Persian Emperor Darius (333 BCE), as depicted by Albrecht Altdorfer (1529; Munich).5 That work, located in the Munich Wittelsbach palace of Duke Albrecht IV, would have been accessible to Bruegel only en route to Italy; however, except for the use of Turkish uniforms, prints alone could have sufficed to convey the Germanic model of battle scenes for the Suicide of Saul.

Conventional wisdom about the choice to depict this highly unusual subject relies upon medieval commentaries about Saul as the epitome

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