Father Abraham in the Visual Imagination

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Abstract

The phrase ‘in the bosom of Abraham’ occurs just once in the Bible (Lk. 16:22) and yet has become one of the most powerful and intriguing visual metaphors in the entire repertoire of Christian iconography. As the focal point of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, it suggests a haven of protection and security to which all the (male) characters in the story aspire. The Greek term κόλπος, ‘bosom,’ is an ambiguous term that can be applied as much to a female figure as a male and indeed Abraham is often represented as if he were ‘mother of all nations’ rather than, or as well as, father. The iconography associated with the image of Abraham’s bosom is both extensive and complex, especially during the period of the Middle Ages, but in this article, I select a range of representative examples to illustrate how artists and iconographers appealed to other biblical texts to help illuminate the meaning and significance of the phrase in Luke: in particular, the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22; the infancy narrative of Luke including the presentation in the temple (Luke 1-2), and the woman who gives birth in Revelation 12. In interpreting the image, artists frequently followed the direction of the exeges and Church Fathers but this does not seem always to have been the case, especially when it came to harmonizing the contrasting images of Abraham as sacrificial father of Isaac and protective father of Lazarus. Contrary to many biblical commentators, the iconographical tradition largely ignores any suggestion that the bosom of Abraham signifies Lazarus reclining at a heavenly banquet next to Abraham, preferring instead to concentrate on the challenges posed in conveying the somewhat incongruous notion of Abraham, the most venerated of patriarchs, holding a naked and vulnerable child in his bosom.

Keywords

New Testament, iconography, Abraham
Introduction

Commentators on the Gospel of Luke have long emphasized how the author accords a special place of privilege to women: for example, Mary and Elizabeth in the infancy narrative (chapters 1-2), the women who follow Jesus to Calvary (23:27-31), and those who feature so prominently in the resurrection narrative (23:55-24:10). More recently, however, in the volume *The Feminist Companion to Luke*, two authors have questioned whether, simply because women appear more frequently in Luke-Acts than any other New Testament book, we can conclude that it is Luke’s intention to bestow on them a special status and position, even to the extent of overshadowing some of their male counterparts. Mary Rose D’Angelo points out that while Luke does supply more stories about women than Mark and Q combined, these nearly always appear paired with stories about men, either in the immediate context or in the larger context of the gospel.¹ Luke-Acts is far more interested in maleness and masculinity, she argues, than other early texts. There is an unmistakable stress on masculinity: for example, some roles, specifically roles of communal leadership, are clearly marked off for men and Luke uses the divine title ‘father’ more frequently than Mark and Q combined. D’Angelo concludes that it is more accurate to say that Luke is concerned with gender (rather than specifically with women) and argues that her partial examination of masculinity in Luke-Acts illuminates some of the complex functions of gender diffused throughout the book. Turid Karlsen Seim, the second of the two authors in the volume, explores how women do not always fill the roles left vacant by men.² In Luke 1, Joseph (unlike the parallel story in Matthew) is given a much reduced role while Zechariah is muted: the author appears to empty the place of the father and negate the paternal order. The vacancy is not filled, however, by mothers (Mary and Elizabeth) but by God, since the Lukan infancy narrative is

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