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## IT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO

My talk tonight is in two parts. The first part focuses on a painting by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Flemish painter, Roger van der Weyden. The second part deals with the biblical and historical context of three of the themes depicted in the painting.

Roger's descent from the cross was perhaps one of the most famous paintings in Europe for at least two centuries after it was completed around 1435. It became known as a result of many prints that were made of it and circulated throughout Europe. In 1551, a courtier of Philip II, future king of Spain, who accompanied Philip on his tour of the Spanish possessions in the Netherlands called it "the best picture in the whole world." Not surprisingly, Philip took it with him when he returned to Spain. It currently is in the Prado in Madrid in a basement gallery that houses some of the most significant Northern paintings in Western art. Besides Roger, there are paintings by Bosch and Bruegel.

What distinguishes the feeling of Northern Painting from Italian painting of the same period is the medieval spirit which dominated Northern Painting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Life in Northern Europe at that time was in the words of Hobbes "poor, nasty, brutish and short." Deep pessimism was the dominant mood of the times. Not surprisingly, one focus of this pessimism was death. As the Dutch historian Huiziga noted "no other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death." To take one example, the story of Lazarus in

modern times is generally viewed in a positive light as showing the power of Jesus over death. Lazarus was resurrected so that he could once again enjoy the pleasures of life. Not so in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The view then was that after Lazarus was resurrected, he lived in continual misery and horror at the thought that he should once again have to pass through the gate of death.

Visually, the theme of death depicted in popular woodcuts emphasized the frailty of all earthly glory and beauty. The fear of one's own death dominated any other views of death which cast death in a less threatening light such as providing the rest long wished for or bringing an end to suffering. Even the impact of death on the bereaved was subordinated to the theme of fear of one's own death. The theme of decay popularized in the World War I children's song, the worms crawl in, the worms crawl out typifies the 15<sup>th</sup> century attitude toward death.

The passion was one exception to the medieval view of death. The passion was viewed not in terms of the frailty of life but the "divine depth of sorrow." But Roger's painting is not about the elegiac sphere where the bitter taste of suffering has passed away. He does not process the idea of death from on high but looks at death as it is experienced by the survivors. He examines the very human emotion of grief. What gives the painting its power is Roger's concentration on the "bitter taste of suffering."

The painting is relatively small but large in the context of Northern Painting. There is a Roger in the Art Institute, a portrait of Jean de Gros, which is small and more typical of the size used by Northern artists. The figures in our painting are

large but not life size. The individuals depicted are Mary's two half sisters, John the evangelist, Mary mother of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, a servant removing the body from the cross, Jesus, Nicodemeus, a servant of Nicodemus holding a jar of ointments to clean the body and Mary Magdalene. All of the figures are handsome. The skull and bone define the location as Golgotha. The skull is that of Adam who is looking up at Jesus in keeping with Paul's teaching that Jesus brought with him the new creation. The plants are associated with the passion.

Roger, following the footsteps of his teacher, Robert Campin, also known as the Master of Flemalle, combined oil paints with opaque tempera. Opaque tempera is permanent, fast-drying paint which consists of a colored pigment mixed with a water-soluble binder such as egg yokes. Tempera was commonly used in frescos but it is non-reflective and produces a flat appearing painting. Oil paint was applied in thin layers of glaze which resulted in vibrant and colorful paintings and also allowed for a high level of detail. Roger, like his teacher, Robert Campin, exploited the new medium to the utmost. We read the garment that Nicodemeus is wearing as having a brocade and fur. We read John's garment has being made of wool. Joseph's garment has a border made up of metallic threads. The attention to detail, a characteristic of Northern Painting in the late Middle Ages, is not found only in the clothing but also in the blood from Christ's wounds. As the body is taken down, the stream of blood from the wounds shifts 90° and flows downward towards the ground. This attention to detail and the need for scrupulous realism so that natural details would be rendered exactly is characteristic of the end of the Middle Ages in

Northern Europe. Again, as Huzinga, notes, it was the Renaissance that replaced this meticulous realism by breadth and simplicity.

The reason for the popularity of this painting is its emotional impact which still resonates centuries after it was made. The corpse of Jesus is shown as a heavy lifeless weight which the elderly Joseph of Arimathea attempts to support on his knee. Mary collapses. Her face appears to be drained of any blood and is almost a ghost like white. The tears on her face reflect the intensity of her suffering. The faces of the men are notable because of the restraint they show. They are grief stricken but still able to function. Even the other women who are in tears do not appear to be incapacitated like Mary. The reaction of the other figures to the death of Jesus only highlights the desolation Mary who experiences the full brunt of the death of Jesus.

But the painting depicts all of its subjects as contemporaries. It is devoid of any historical context. Nicodemus and Joseph were historical figures mentioned not only in John but also Josephus. They were members of the aristocracy in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus and both were also members of the Sanhedrin, the religious court that had jurisdiction over religious and to some extent political life in Judea. Roger has them dressed as aristocrats but aristocrats of Burgundy, not Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. The women all wear headdresses typical of medieval Europe not the age of Augustus. As the painting proves, there was no sense of history when it was made. Jesus and his followers all appeared as a contemporaries of Roger. It was not until two centuries later with the French

Baroque painter Nicolas Poussin that the visual arts developed an historical setting. Poussin lived in Rome for 30 years and studied the dress of the Romans depicted in the ruins. He consciously painted biblical and classical scenes with figures who wore togas and the dress of the time period in which they were depicted. You can see this in the Poussin at the Art Institute, St. John on Patmos.

In Northern painting many figures are identified by symbols. In this case, Roger identifies Nicodemeus by his servant who is carrying a jar, presumably of aloe to prepare the body for burial, as described in John. Mary Magdalene is identified by less conservative clothing even though there is nothing in the text of any of the gospels suggesting she is a prostitute or even sexually licentious. In fact the notion she was a prostitute comes from a homily made by Pope Gregory I in 591 and not from the gospels. But in Roger's painting, it is Nicodemeus, not Mary, who is identified by the jar of ointments to prepare the corpse of Jesus for burial as John describes in his gospel. But many other artists traditionally identify Mary with a jar of ointments because in the gospels, including John, she is described as using a jar of ointments to wash Jesus's feet. Symbols, such as the jar of ointments, were frequently used in Northern painting as the means of identifying saints. Many saints are identified by the way they were martyred. Catherine was killed on the wheel and is shown with a wheel. Barbara was thrown from her father's tower and is shown with a small tower.

Joseph of Arimathea plays a critical role in the story of the resurrection. To appreciate his role, a little background in first century Jewish burial practices is in

order. Jerusalem Jews at the time of Jesus first placed the corpse in a cave on a slab. The body was allowed to rot. After 6 months to a year, an attendant would go to the site and clean the bones of any remaining flesh. The bones were then deposited in a stone container called an ossuary.

According to John, Joseph petitioned Pilate to allow Jesus's body to be placed in his family's cave. Pilate granted the petition. A stone was placed at the opening of the cave. When the stone was removed the next day, the tomb was empty. The empty tomb became evidence of the resurrection. If the body had not been placed in Joseph's tomb, it would have been placed in a common grave for criminals and clear evidence for the resurrection would be missing.

#### Historical Context of Themes

Much of what Roger has depicted in the painting corresponds to how the passion in particular and the gospels in general are conventionally understood even now. John's gospel is taken at face value. John the evangelist is seen as a historical figure. Mary's "swoon" at the death of her son confirms the deep intimacy she shared with Jesus. And the central subject, the crucifixion, depicts Jesus as the suffering servant. When we look at the painting, we accept what Roger has depicted as accurate.

Once we look at the historical record, the assumptions we have when we look at the painting begin to unravel. That is why I titled my talk "It ain't necessarily so." I would like to look at three issues. First, whether the evangelist John, depicted in the painting was an historical figure. Second, whether the gospels

support the close and deep relationship Mary had with Jesus as shown by Roger. Finally, whether the crucifixion, the dominant theme of the painting, was always the symbol of hope and salvation.

### John as a Historical Figure

Let's start with the question of whether the figure Roger painted and identified as John was actually an historical figure who wrote the gospel that bears his name. To Roger and to many of our contemporaries today, there is no question that the figure of John he depicted in the painting was a living person who wrote the gospel which bears his name. Today most scholars reject the possibility that any of the evangelists were the actual historical figures who wrote the gospels. All of the gospels make historical references to events such as the fall of Jerusalem which took place decades after the crucifixion. In John's case, (16:2) he refers to the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue. Tradition links the gospel of John to Alexandria. Historically, there was an event at the beginning of the second century when the Jews of Alexandria expelled Christian followers from the synagogue. Since the expulsion was an event that took place decades after the crucifixion, John could not have been a contemporary of Jesus.

In fact, there is a broad consensus that all of the gospels were originally circulated anonymously and continued to be anonymous for almost a century after they were first introduced. As an aside, the early Christian communities used a new technology which many scholars consider to be a significant factor in the growth of the church. That new technology was the codex, which is Latin for book,

and which replaced the scroll as the medium for writings. Anonymity was believed by many in antiquity to enhance the authority of the writing. But by the second century there were scores of gospels that were circulated among different Christian communities. The communities that favored the four gospels that eventually entered the canon changed course and decided that giving names to the authors of the writings would enhance their authority make them more credible over other gospels. The names selected were either apostles such as Matthew and John or close associates of Peter and Paul, namely Mark and Luke. Scholars now believe the gospels reflect the liturgy and oral traditions of different communities and were not written by a single individual. One must also keep in mind that an analysis of the earliest codices show that the gospels were fluid and changes were made. The parable of the adulterous woman which appears in John first appeared in Luke. The earliest codices of Mark end with Mary the Mother and Mary Magdalene seeing a vision of Jesus and being “very afraid” as if they saw a ghost. The last 12 verses of Mark were a subsequent addition to make the ending much more upbeat. In addition, the last 12 verses also downplay the role of women, who, afterall were the first to see Jesus after the resurrection, in a misogynist culture.

As to the historical person of John the evangelist, most scholars believe there was a historical figure by the name of John, an apostle of Jesus, who was also known as the Beloved Disciple. John, the Beloved Disciple, founded a school based on the teachings of Jesus. But the writing of the actual gospel was done not by John, but a talented member of his school who wrote the first edition of the gospel



based on the preaching of John, the Beloved Disciple. Sometime later a redactor added teachings left out by the writer of the first edition including ideas from the Logos literature drawn from Jewish Wisdom writings, not Platonic philosophy. So the John depicted by Roger was not the same person who wrote the gospel that bears his name.

### Relationship Between Jesus and Mary

The two central characters in the painting are Jesus and Mary. In the painting, Mary's devastation at the death of Jesus reflects the deep love she shared with Jesus. The gospels depict a much different relationship. In John's gospel, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is not even identified by her name, "Mary," but only as the mother of Jesus. In the Cana episode described in John, Jesus hardly speaks to her in a respectful, let alone loving manner. When she tells Jesus there is no more wine, he tells her sharply: "O woman, what have you to do with me." Mary, somewhat taken aback, tells the servants to do whatever he says. John's description of the interaction between Jesus and Mary at the crucifixion is somewhat more sympathetic. When Jesus sees Mary after he is on the cross, he tells a disciple to take her away and bring her home. This means that the very scene Roger depicts in his painting did not take place. Mary was home and not a witness to the deposition. John's description of the relationship between Jesus and Mary, while not loving, is an improvement over Mark's treatment of the family. In Mark, Jesus's family rejects him as "being beside himself" which has been more bluntly translated as "being out of his mind." Jesus responds to his family's

rejection by repudiating his family and telling his followers that they are his true brothers and sisters.

The source for Roger's depiction of the relationship between Mary and Jesus is definitely not the gospels. In fact, 20 years before the painting was completed, Thomas a Kempis published his devotional book, *The Imitation of Christ*, which had a deep and vast impact on Western Europe. Its popularity was immediate and was printed more than 740 times before 1650. It describes Mary's reaction to the death of Jesus as a "swoon." A "swoon" accurately describes the emotionally distressed condition that Roger has depicted. So popular was the notion of the "swoon" throughout Europe as that a petition was made before Pope Julius II, immortalized by Michelangelo in the *Last Judgement*, to declare the "swoon" a feast day. The petition was rejected.

If the relationship between Jesus and Mary was a reflection of how that relationship was viewed at the time Roger completed his work, why do the gospels of Mark and John have such a negative view of Mary? In answering this question, one must also take into account Mark's negative treatment not only of Mary but also her another of her sons, James, and even the disciples. Peter is singled out not only for being obtuse but also for his disloyalty. After the arrest of Jesus, Peter famously denies knowing him not once but three times. According to Mark, the apostles were totally clueless. Although Peter recognized Jesus as the messiah, none of the apostles even guessed that Jesus was the son of God. That insight was given to the Roman centurion who was present at the execution. He was the first

person who recognized that Jesus was the son of God. The centurion's insight and the apostles' blindness discredits the apostles who only become aware of the divinity of Jesus when Jesus appears to them after the resurrection.

But the negative view of Mary, James and the apostles, especially Peter, has its roots in the conflict between Paul and the leaders of the Jerusalem Church. The Jerusalem Church was founded shortly after the death of Christ and was the principal institution that carried on the teachings of Jesus. Its leaders were members of the immediate family of Jesus; namely James, the brother of Jesus, and Mary, his mother, and Peter.

The founders of the Jerusalem church were not the only followers of Jesus. There was also Paul and his mission to the gentiles. Paul believed that Mosaic law, particularly circumcision and dietary rules, was not necessary for salvation. According to Paul, Jesus offered a path to salvation which made the law irrelevant. Paul's view was anathema to the Jerusalem Church which insisted on the fundamental importance of compliance with Mosaic law. Both Paul and the Jerusalem Church believed in the resurrection and also believed when Jesus returned he would usher in the kingdom of God. But the kingdom of God had different meanings to each. To Paul, the second coming would bring a new kingdom of universal justice that would apply to both Jews and gentiles. To the Jerusalem Church, Jesus would return to overthrow the hated Romans, restore the Davidic kingdom and re-unite the 12 tribes of Israel.

The tension between Paul and the Jerusalem Church is clearly evident in the

book of Acts, which describes Paul's ministry and Paul's epistles. Paul warns his followers in both Galitians and Corinthians that others are teaching another gospel and another Jesus. Most scholars believe the "others" refers to the Jerusalem Church. James, the brother of Jesus, was the leader of the Jerusalem Church. He shows his control over other members of the Church and his rejection of Paul's mission by admonishing Peter for eating with Gentiles. Paul responds to James' directive by rebuking Peter for complying with the direction of James.

Eventually, Paul decides to seek approval from James for Paul's outreach to the Gentiles by meeting him in Jerusalem. The meeting is a disaster. Paul brings with him a disciple, Titus, who is uncircumsized. James asks Paul to prove his faithfulness to Mosaic law by taking him to the Temple. When Paul brings Titus with him, followers of James accuse Paul of defiling the Temple which leads to Paul's arrest.

After Paul's arrest, around the year 50, Paul's movement stalls. Evidence that his standing is diminished comes from the fact that not all of his writings are preserved. The Letter of Tears and the Epistle to the Laodiceans referred to in other epistles are lost. Scholars now believe Second Corinthians appears to be a compilation of three separate letters, none of which was saved in their entirety. With Paul's arrest, the Jerusalem Church is triumphant. But then comes the reversal of fortunes. In 70, the Romans destroy Jerusalem, the Temple and with it the Jerusalem Church and all of its archives. The Jerusalem Church which was founded after the death of Jesus in 30 and lasted for 40 years is no more. Jewish

followers of Jesus disappear. Only Paul's movement remained. The followers of Paul were free to develop their own narratives. In order to prove the supremacy of Paul's movement over the Jerusalem church, narratives were developed which reflected poorly on the leaders of the Jerusalem church who were members of Jesus's family, Mary and James, as well as Peter. Mark and John showed an estrangement between Jesus, his family and his disciples which reflects the tensions between the Jerusalem Church and Paul's movement.

The attacks on the leaders of the Jerusalem church did not result in a wholesale abandonment of the teachings of the Jerusalem church. The sacred writings, which is the name given by the members of the early church to the Hebrew bible, retained its position of prominence. But the gospel writers also incorporated ideas that appealed to Gentiles in the Hellenistic world. The most striking example of the incorporation of both teachings from the Hebrew bible and Hellenistic beliefs can be seen in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. The Jewish followers of Jesus believed that if Jesus was the messiah, he had to descend from the House of David. Both gospels give detailed genealogies for Joseph which trace his ancestors back to David. Luke goes even further back to Abraham and Adam. In addition, the fact Jesus was born in Bethlehem was also very significant. Bethlehem was the birthplace of David. The connection of Jesus to David is reinforced by identifying Bethlehem as the birthplace for Jesus.

To Paul's Gentile followers, Joseph's ancestors were irrelevant since he did not father Jesus. Moreover, a virgin birth from a divine father and a mortal mother

were hardly unusual in Hellenistic culture. Zeus fathered Hercules, Dionysus and Perseus with mortal mothers. Gentiles living in a Hellenistic culture would find the annunciation described in both gospels as consistent with how they believed gods operated. The virgin birth would be readily understood by a Hellenistic audience.

### The Crucifixion as Symbol of Sedition and Salvation

Finally we come to the dominant theme in Roger's painting, the crucifixion itself. The earliest visual depictions of the Christian community can be found in the catacombs of Rome. Despite the universalism of the symbol of the cross in European culture, what is striking about the catacomb drawings is the absence of any depiction of the crucifixion. Instead, visual representations are from the sacred writings, or Hebrew bible. Jonah and the whale was popular perhaps because Jonah remained in the whale for three days which may have been the basis for the three day period between the crucifixion and the resurrection. In addition, there were depictions of the Sacrifice of Isaac, Noah praying in the Ark, Moses striking the rock, Daniel in the lion's den but nothing of the crucifixion. In fact, the cross was first used as a symbol of Christianity some three centuries later when Constantine fought to become emperor. Before a climatic battle in which Constantine was badly outnumbered, he was advised in a dream to mark the heavenly sign of God, the cross, on the shields of his soldiers before he entered battle. He instructed his soldiers to mark a slanted letter "X" on their shields, marched into the battle and was victorious.

When Jesus was executed, the cross had a far different meaning. Crucifixion

was the punishment for sedition. Anyone punished by crucifixion was guilty of rebellion to Rome. Followers of Jesus were stigmatized for following a rebel against Rome. Tacitus begins his condemnation of the Christian movement with a reference to death penalty imposed on Jesus by Pilate: “Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.” Christ died as a political rebel to Roman rule. It would be difficult to convince Roman Gentiles to become followers of Jesus once they knew how he died.

There were many factors that led to the transformation of the cross from the symbol of sedition to that of salvation. But perhaps the most significant factor was the revolt by the Jews in 66. Before the revolt, Jews were given significant privileges not given to other ethnic groups. They were exempt from the requirement of worshipping Roman gods and allowed to observe the Sabbath. They also had access to the highest levels of power. Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, played an important role in making Claudius emperor for which he was richly rewarded. That all changed with the revolt in 66.

The revolt coincided with a very unstable period in Rome. In 18 months, there were 5 emperors who succeeded Nero. The last of these was Vespasian, who was the head of the legion in Judea. Before the revolt, he had no victories to

demonstrate his military prowess and he came from an undistinguished family. Putting down the Jewish revolt was an opportunity for him to burnish his qualifications to serve as emperor and use his military success to compensate for his lack of a pedigree. Vespasian used foreign affairs to bolster his domestic political standing, a phenomenon not unknown in our own time. The Senate awarded him a triumph which ended with the public execution of Simon, the leader of the revolt.

The Jews never recovered their pre-revolt status in Rome. Vespasian, in fact, imposed a tax on all members of the Jewish community living in the Empire. Vespasian was followed by his son Titus who actually led the battle which destroyed Jerusalem and viewed the Jews as rebels. Trajan, a subsequent emperor was actually an officer in the legion which was used to put down the revolt. In 135, the Jews once again revolted against Rome under Bar Kokbar only to be crushed yet again this time by Hadrian. Hadrian extinguished any hope that Jews may have had to restore Jerusalem as the cultic center for the Jews. He leveled what was left of the city, renamed it Aelia Capitolina and barred Jews from taking residence there.

It was in this environment that the Christian movement took advantage of the split between Rome and the Jews by aligning themselves with Rome and against the Jews. In Mark, Jesus affirms his allegiance to Rome by telling his hearers to give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and give unto God what is God's and returns the coin to his questioner. His act of returning the coin affirms his support of giving tribute to Caesar. This affirmation would appeal to a law bidding Roman.



In addition, according to Mark, it was the Roman centurion, not any of the Jewish disciples or family members, who first recognized that Jesus was the son of God. The antisemitic statements in the gospels reflected, in part, the broader antisemitic attitudes in Roman society arising out of the Jewish wars. Blaming the already discredited Jews for the death of Jesus and absolving Pilate of responsibility for the execution of Jesus allowed the early church to further distance itself from the Jews and attract Romans to the movement. While the Christian community was persecuted by Rome, it was not for believing in Christ but for failing to support Roman gods. This may be a distinction without a difference. As awful as the persecutions were, they had the effect of strengthening the Christian community. Belief in Christ was worthy enough to die for. By the time of Constantine, the Christian communities may have been small but they were highly organized and spread throughout the empire. The focus of Christians on a moral commitment with a strong belief in an afterlife made it much easier to spread their doctrine than other religious beliefs that arose in the Empire. According to Burckhardt, the success of the church was not the result of a victory over paganism. Instead, Christianity merely filled a spiritual vacuum left by the death of paganism. Whatever the cause, by the time Constantine made Christianity a state religion, the meaning of the cross no longer was sedition but salvation. It became the symbol, par excellence, of Christianity and the subject of Western art.