

THE PAINTER AND THE TREE: A BIBLICAL RATIONALE FOR VISUAL ART

MATTHEW ERIC RALEY*

ABSTRACT. American painter William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) exemplified devotion to high art as a spiritual cause. He saw painting as a discipline for transcending ordinary life, a discipline practiced in a holy place, the studio, by an illuminated devotee. Chase also exemplified the artistic problem created by this implicit Gnosticism. He saw that an artist needed ordinary life—the very thing he was trying to transcend—to refresh his vision. His pastel *Hall at Shinnecock* captures his family in a time of grief, giving a vision of domesticity unusual among Impressionists. The art world today has the same view of art and spirituality, and the same problem. How can art escape its temples and interact with ordinary life? A biblical rationale for visual art, grounded in the designs for the tabernacle, can equip the Anabaptist tradition to challenge the gnostic idolatry of high art. The menorah, an abstract sculpture of a tree that served as a lampstand in the holy place, provides a model of visual art as an apologetic for the living God against idols. It symbolizes Israel's life shining with the Lord's faithful blessing—all of ordinary life integrated for worship in *shalom*.

KEY WORDS: William Merritt Chase, menorah, tabernacle, Gnosticism, art, painting

Introduction

What dialogue could a Baptist possibly have had with William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)? The American painter was a flamboyant partisan for the cause of high art, a thriftless collector of bric-a-brac, and a teacher of painting not merely as a discipline but as a way of life. He gave no significant attention to religion. For any Baptist preacher, Chase's impeccably tailored, silk-hatted presentation, his European attitudes, his profession, to say nothing of his notoriously lavish studio on 10th Street in New York City, would have stigmatized him as an apostle of worldliness. One of Chase's domestic interiors, such as the 1892 pastel *Hall at Shinnecock*, would have seemed to be an advertisement for materialistic values, with its posh Long Island locale and luxurious decor. Confronted with such a personality, the Baptist's only message would likely have been, "Repent".

Alienation between the art world and the Anabaptist tradition is not substantially different today. The art world advances its cause almost to the ex-

* MATTHEW ERIC RALEY (M.Div.) is a Ph.D. candidate at Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY, and senior pastor at Chico Grace Brethren Church, NC. His research interests focus on abstraction in visual art and music. He is currently writing on the "Chaconne" for violin solo by J. S. Bach. E-mail: raleymatthew@gmail.com.

clusion of religion, as James Elkins has written (Elkins, 2004). For the most part, Anabaptists live in separate social, economic, and political worlds from visual artists, and judge artworks based on moral content.

However, the alienation from art goes deeper. Today, Anabaptists struggle with questions about the role of visual art in churches. William Dyrness has shown that Christians in iconoclastic traditions are often drawn to visual art, but at the same time distrust its use in worship (Dyrness, 2008). Some Anabaptists are tempted to discard their emphasis on the scriptural word and their iconoclasm, embracing the visually oriented spirituality of other traditions.

This paper will argue that the Anabaptist struggle with visual art is rooted in the Gnosticism, both implicit and explicit, that informs so much thought on art and worship. If Anabaptists will sharpen their response to the gnostic thinking of Chase's contemporary heirs, then they will be able to formulate a coherent theology for the visual arts. Such a rationale can be grounded in biblical history, as a survey of characteristics of the tabernacle menorah will show.

The Painter

To gain a more specific understanding of the issues Anabaptists need to address, we focus on Chase's *Hall at Shinnecock*. In what sense did art occupy the center of Chase's life?

Chase was a major figure on the American art scene when he died in 1916, and he attained that position in a typically American way. Chase's father was a Midwestern retail entrepreneur in Indianapolis and St. Louis who reluctantly permitted Chase to be trained as a painter. Through talent, skill, and iconoclasm, Chase distinguished himself under art teachers first in Indianapolis, then in New York, and eventually in Munich, Germany (Pisano, 1979). By the time he showed *Ready for a Ride* in 1878 at the Society of American Artists exhibit, he was noted as a young artist to watch and began to gain critical praise (Marling, 1978; Rensselaer, 1881a, 1881b). Upon his return to New York, he established his famous 10th Street Studio, making a publicity splash with his enormous collection of European art objects in the midst of which lounged his Russian wolfhounds (Cikovsky, 1976). Chase was a kind of missionary for art, challenging traditionalists and attempting to fuse European and American sensibilities (Mayer & Myers, 1993).

Chase's artistic reputation began to wane in the 1890s. By the time of his death, he was known mainly as a teacher. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the same issue of its bulletin announcing Chase's death ("Memorial Exhibition", 1916), published an account of one of his last lectures ("Chase as a Teacher", 1916). He taught not only in New York, but in Shinnecock and Europe, conducting his final seminar in California (Pisano, 1979). Among

his students were Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, and Georgia O’Keeffe (Ness, 1973). In a letter to Chase scholar Ronald Pisano, O’Keeffe recalled Chase’s charisma: “When he entered the building a rustle seemed to flow from the ground floor to the top that ‘Chase had arrived’” (Pisano, 1979: 13).

The sources of his charisma were his challenging, nurturing pedagogy and his clear moral vision of art’s role in personal life. Katharine Roof wrote, “all of his life until his failing health forbade, Chase was tireless in the cause of art. If one asked of him in that name he gave to the full measure of his strength” (Roof, 1975: 274). His New York lecture published by the Metropolitan Museum is almost a devotional sermon:

You who are studying art have the most dignified profession in the world. Your opportunity to leave a record is wonderful and rare, and I plead with you to see to it that you leave a record of having been on this earth. What the people and the public and the world demand of you is that you will put yourself upon that canvas. What we really want to know is the personality of the painter, not the paint on the canvas (“William M. Chase as a Teacher”, 1916: 252).

An art student is to be devoted to the observation of masterpieces in museums, and Chase advises that a student “drink in” one favorite work until it yields nothing more, then move on to another (“William M. Chase as a Teacher”, 1916: 251). In his interactions with students at Shinnecock, he showed that painting was not mere personal expression, but was a kind of happy submission to the reality of the world. He challenged students to practice brushwork so that they would be able to paint freely, without anxiety, and to perceive light and color with greater precision. He also warned against mediocrity. “One must be wary, Chase stated, of doing something ‘pretty good’, for ‘destruction’ lies that way” (Ness, 1973: 10-12).

Amid the art world’s convulsions in the early 20th century, Chase’s artistic contributions and his *avant garde* status were largely forgotten until the 1970s. The biography published by Roof in 1918 remained the principal treatment of his life, while Chase’s reputation languished in the shadows of his friends John Singer Sargent (Fairbrother, 1982) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (Francis, 1965). In the 1970s, scholars such as Pisano and Nicolai Cikovsky renewed interest in Chase as a painter, and a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in 1987 reestablished his importance.

In the course of his life, two of Chase’s decisions surprised his friends and marked dramatic changes in his artistic focus.

The first was his marriage to Alice Gerson in 1886—the demise of a confirmed bachelor (Pisano, 1979). Their marriage of three decades became far more than an addition to Chase’s artistic life, but a central focus of his work. He was unusually devoted to his family, and traveling companions com-

plained that they came close to missing a steamer “because he would sit down to write to his wife at any and all spare moments” (Roof, 1975: 267). Chase employed Alice and the children as models almost exclusively, documenting the relationships and settings of his family with a fatherly eye. Several of these domestic works attracted critical recognition. Chase’s pastel portrait of Alice, *Meditation*, was widely exhibited and won a medal at the Crystal Palace International Exhibition in 1892, the same year Chase produced *Hall at Shinnecock* (Pisano, 1979).

Chase’s second surprising decision came in 1896: he sold his 10th Street studio and all its contents. Not only had Chase’s reputation been linked with the studio for nearly two decades, but it was a spatial embodiment of his aesthetic worldview, practically a temple to art. Cikovsky writes:

“Art atmosphere” was, like the more tangible properties of the studio which contributed to it, one of the artist’s “tools”, a professional necessity that, so to speak, kept him in esthetic trim. But it was, too, a kind of mystical aura that made of the studio a sacred and ideal space, a “Kultraum”, distinct and separate from the mundane world and conducive to the most lofty thoughts and refined feelings (Cikovsky, 1976: 8).

Chase’s decision to sell it was widely publicized, but the financial return was dismal. Chase realized less than \$21,000 from the auction (Pisano, 1979). It seemed that the American market did not have the same high view of art that Chase and his fellow missionaries had. It was after the sale that his attention shifted more to teaching. The sale was “an act of doubt and disillusionment, of eroded confidence and purpose, and, in a quite literal way, of disintegration” (Cikovsky, 1987: 42). By the early 1900s, “the artist seems to have become psychologically detached” from studios, and his “passion and inventiveness” waned (Gallati, 1995: 53).

These two decisions compose a useful frame for understanding *Hall at Shinnecock*, and for unlocking the sense in which art was the center of Chase’s life.

The principal subjects of the picture are Chase’s wife and two of his daughters, probably Alice and Koto. The scene is quiet and casual. Koto sits on the floor next to her mother’s armchair, her back turned to the viewer, absorbed in the prints that unfold across the foreground. Young Alice has looked up at the viewer from the floor, where she sits propped on her arm opposite Koto and their mother. The girls are dressed in white. Their mother sits above them in the white armchair, turned slightly away from the viewer, slouching into the cushions with her legs crossed, her hands folded on her stomach, her head resting against the back of the chair. Her downturned stare appears to lie on Koto, or perhaps at the page Koto is turning. Chase’s wife is dressed in black.

Alice is in mourning for her two-year-old son, William Merritt, Jr., who died the previous year. Her apparent languor, the absent-minded protectiveness of her hands, and her disengagement from the viewer all seem to emphasize the immediacy of her grief. Her emotional distance from her daughters is painful to observe. The casual scene seems not merely unguarded but awkward, a capture of the reality of mourning unfiltered by an awareness of others' gaze.

In the literature, there is little comment on Alice's grief and Chase's perspective on it. Pisano records the death of William, Jr., and discusses the domestic focus of Chase's art after his marriage (Pisano, 1979: 40). But he does not probe what impact the loss of a two-year-old boy might have had on Chase's art. Gallati, in expounding *Hall at Shinnecock*, does not mention the black dress (Gallati, 1995: 59, 62). Cikovsky gives many reasons why the interiors at Shinnecock are highly personal for Chase, developing Chase's artistic focus on his family and calling the interiors "of all his art the most inward" (Cikovsky, 1987: 40-41, 58). However, he does not comment on Alice's grief in this pastel.

Even Roof gives relatively little attention to William, Jr.'s death. She includes a moving letter dated August 27, 1891 from Robert Blum, Chase's close friend: "It would be useless for me to try to tell you how very sorry I feel for your great loss... Although I don't believe in time being the healer of all things still I know that it makes us accustomed to the pain it cannot make us forget." Roof, a former student of Chase, worked on the biography with his widow, and presumably could have provided a closer view of the tragedy. Her relative silence may reflect an unwillingness on Alice's part to discuss it—an unwillingness that may be our best indication of the depth of her grief. Roof does choose this point in the biography to reproduce *Hall at Shinnecock* (Roof, 1975: 164–165). The pastel's atmosphere receives far more attention from scholars.

To be sure, the atmosphere is a high priority for Chase. There is, to begin with, his documentation of the objects in his home, characteristic of all his interiors. Chase's virtuosity in handling ceramic, metal, and lacquer is on display. The large vase in the right foreground is a marvel of economical brilliance, not only in Chase's rendering but also in his use of the vase to reinforce the sense of space by reflecting windows behind the viewer. He makes the red lacquer chair against the far wall gleam without becoming a distraction. Chase's quick strokes mark the presence of a brass sculpture crowning the banister of the stairs, a tapestry, lamps, mirrors, and close to a dozen pictures, some of which have sparkling gilt frames. Then there are the Japanese prints, spread like an open accordion over the rich wood floor. They are sketched as color compositions condensing the scheme of the entire pastel into a small space, evoking an exotic and important influ-

ence on Chase's work (Atkinson, 1987). With all these objects, the hall is like a studio, a space that inspires art through immersion in sensual richness.

The hall's atmosphere is also nurtured by Chase's use of color. This is a warm, bright interior. The yellows, golds, and reds glow in the light coming through the windows. Chase modulates these tones with blues, greys, greens, and black. The brightness of this interior is a departure from Chase's earlier work in the 10th Street Studio, which tended to be darker. This may be a reflection of the Long Island setting, with its open, rolling hills, as opposed to the urban canyons of New York. It may also reflect Chase's interaction with Impressionism (Atkinson, 1987).

Yet, because of the loss of William, Jr., this atmosphere is more important than scholars seem to appreciate.

Its emotional effect seems to balance the remoteness one feels from the grieving Alice. Where she is distant, the room is embracing. Chase's emphasis on art objects, the studio quality of the hall, almost offers a balm to Alice's grief, as if she is taking a cure in this sunny, sensuous environment. But *balance* may be the wrong word. Perhaps Chase simply lets the scene's emotional contradiction stand.

In whatever way one reads the picture, the juxtaposition of Alice's cold grief with art's warmth goes to the core of Chase's beliefs about human flourishing. In the Metropolitan Museum lecture, he says students should develop their pleasure in art regardless of their success as artists. "The added joy which they will get out of life and their surroundings will pay for any amount of failure. Their life will then be worth living." Chase contrasted the art student's life with that of a commuter "who will bury himself in a stupid newspaper in a railway train." Rather, "Everything that conduces to the happiness of existence coincides with just what [the students] are doing. That is absolutely so" ("William M. Chase as a Teacher", 1916: 251). The placement of Alice in this Shinnecock setting for the purpose of this pastel was an expression of the way Chase thought life should be lived. In his view, Shinnecock is indeed a kind of cure.

Besides the atmosphere of *Hall at Shinnecock*, scholars also comment on the influence of Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), whom Cikovsky calls "the ruling presence at Shinnecock", noting that Chase had made a trip to Madrid in 1881 to copy the master's work (Cikovsky, 1987: 52-53). *Hall at Shinnecock* makes striking references to *Las Meninas*, Velázquez's portrait of the Spanish princesses, with the king and queen reflected in a mirror and Velázquez himself in the scene. Cikovsky finds Chase's arrangement of Alice and his daughters similar to the arrangement in *Las Meninas*. The most striking similarity between the works is the appearance of Chase in *Hall at Shinnecock*, reflected in the mirrored doors of the black cabinet (Cikovsky, 1987: 53).

However, the significance of Chase's reference to *Las Meninas* seems not to have been fully explored. The two similarities—Chase the painter with Velázquez the painter appearing in the respective scenes, and the reflected image of Chase with the reflected image of the king and queen—have an important difference. In *Las Meninas*, the parents are reflected in the mirror, not the painter. Velázquez put himself in the middle ground, not as a reflection but as a visible and even prominent part of the painting. Chase's reflected image, by contrast, might be missed entirely. His insertion of himself into the scene is compositionally important, as we shall see, but far more subtle than the Spanish master's. Chase is both the painter and the parent.

Chase's allusion to Velázquez only heightens the personal nature of *Hall at Shinnecock*, placing him as a participant in this scene of grieving and healing. He identifies with his grieving wife by framing himself in black.

Literature also finds significance in Chase's pastel medium and his Impressionistic style.

Chase is usually classified among the American Impressionists (Preston, 1982). While his Impressionist style is clearest in his landscapes, *Hall at Shinnecock* shows the influence as well, with its sunny palette and loose strokes. The focus on casual, ordinary life is also an element of Chase's Impressionism, the determination to move art beyond the studio and put it in the middle of everyday existence, even to glorify the everyday. The very purpose of the Shinnecock art school, the largest in America to offer outdoor painting instruction (Atkinson, 1987), was to facilitate direct contact with nature. Chase's stylistic affinity with Impressionism indicates the personal nature of his Shinnecock work.

The pastel medium, however, may be the strongest signal that Chase intended *Hall at Shinnecock* to be a personal statement. The medium had long been treated as suitable only for sketches. But Impressionists used pastel precisely because of its more personal and subjective qualities. In Europe, Edgar Degas (1834-1917) brought pastel to prominence for finished works (Pilgrim, 1978). Whistler was influential in raising the medium's importance for Americans. It was the Italian Giuseppe de Nittis (1846-1884) who appears to have most directly influenced Chase in his use of pastel. In 1882, Chase and others formed the Society for American Painters in Pastel, which held its last exhibition in 1890. Their enthusiasm for pastel seems to have been a distinct phenomenon from Impressionism, since it pre-dated the movement's direct impact on Americans (Pilgrim, 1978).

Again, these aspects of *Hall at Shinnecock* are well-documented but seem under-examined in reading the work. Chase's embrace of Impressionistic style and use of pastel both emphasize the personal nature of his statement. He is documenting his family's emotional life in the summer of 1892.

Chase's personal statement comes most directly in the picture's intricate composition.

Chase entices the viewer to explore the hall interior thoroughly. By placing the viewer in front of the arch that frames the hall, Chase uses the half-wall and the blue vase as an obstruction (just as Velázquez uses the massive canvas in the foreground of *Las Meninas*). This arrangement plants the urge to look around the corner, just as the incomplete view of the upstairs in the upper middle, seductively red but blocked by another blue vase, and the incomplete staircase in the background both tease the eye with possibilities. In this way, Chase makes the composition express the richness of the interior, heightening the impact of his virtuosic rendering of the objects and underlining their emotional importance.

Chase's composition also creates an artificially strong vanishing point in the background. From the top and the right, the lines created by the lower ceiling and the picture- and window-frames foreshorten the distance to the far wall. From the left, the frames on the back wall function as arrows pointing to the cabinet. There is a triangle created by the grieving Alice, her older daughter, and the vanishing point in the cabinet. More subtly yet, the pastel strokes of red, brown, and gold that render the wood floor further emphasize the same point in the cabinet.

The vanishing point is Chase's reflected image. The viewer's perspective is explicitly Chase's own. He shows us what he sees not as a painter of models, but as a husband and father. Thus, it is to Chase that young Alice has looked. He shows us his daughter's wide-eyed gaze as a focal-point in the picture, which must be read in juxtaposition with her mother's inwardness. Thus, Chase conflates the two roles of father-participant and artist-participant, in this sense deploying the healing power of art in a fatherly way.

Hall at Shinnecock, therefore, is unusual. In the context of the traditions and methods of high art, it is an intimate and personal expression, choosing to employ finished painterly techniques in pastel. In the context of American culture, Chase continues to portray the atmosphere of high art as the gnosis of the flourishing life. But, at the same time, Chase participates in the Impressionist move to the ordinary: the exalted, the mythological, and the literary are far from this work.

Even within the international Impressionist context, Chase's *Hall at Shinnecock* is distinct. He is not portraying hired models, his mistress, or the family of a patron, as if his own concerns as a husband and father were too prosaic to become objects of contemplation. He portrays his own wife and his daughters at a point of emotional need. Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) had shown that the domestic life of a mother was a worthy subject of art. But one struggles to think of an Impressionist paint-

ing that so directly and personally portrays domestic concern from a man's point of view.

Chase's *Hall at Shinnecock* glorifies the husband-father as the providential center of the family. Furthermore, the work does not express a sentimentalized ideal, or even an aspiration, but a belief that Chase held and practiced. The work reaches far into the ordinary.

The Problem

Chase's life illustrates the problem of Gnosticism in high art. The sanctuaries in which art exerts its power also isolate art from nature, from ordinary life, and from audiences.

To experience the healing, illumination, and knowledge that art gives, a person must be initiated into the studio or the museum. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes:

One characteristic feature of our institution of high art is the important role played within it by special separated rooms and buildings—concert halls, art galleries, theaters, reading rooms. It is not difficult to discern the reason. If the action of perceptual contemplation is to be performed at all satisfactorily, particularly when its satisfactory practice requires mental concentration, rather special physical conditions are required (Wolterstorff, 1980: 25).

Elkins defines art institutionally as “whatever is exhibited in galleries in major cities, bought by museums of contemporary art, shown in biennales and the Documenta, and written about in periodicals such as *Artforum*, *October*, *Flash Art*, *Parkett*, or *Tema Celeste*” (Elkins, 2004: 1). As in Chase's time, art's holy places are central to its mission, even if the holy place is in print.

The artist whose work inhabits such spaces is a liberator, freeing human beings from the constrictions of the ordinary. Wolterstorff says:

The artist is a center of consciousness. His business is to bring forth an expression of himself in the form of a new creation. In distinction from God, however, that requires struggle. God creates in sovereign, untrammelled freedom. But confronting the artist is an actuality which exists apart from his will, threatening him with constriction: the constricting actuality of aesthetic norms, the constricting actuality of artistic and social traditions, the constricting actuality of the institution of high art itself, the constricting actuality of materials, the constricting actuality of the fact that unless the artist finds acceptance for his work he cannot live. Thus the obverse side of his urge to create is the artist's need to fight for liberation from the prime evil of constrictions on his freedom. We in the West are confident that the struggle for liberation can be won. We are confident that actuality will prove permeable by the will of the artist (Wolterstorff, 1980: 52).

This power to transcend the actual is repeatedly ascribed to religious visual art. Herbert Kessler, for instance, concludes that Christians superseded the second commandment and embraced icons as objects of veneration less because of theological arguments and more because of the images themselves. “Pictures triumphed in Christian culture because of the magical facility of all art to transform stone and wood and pigments and glass and metal into living things” (Kessler, 1991: 64).

Transcendence through art is a gnostic spirituality. The physical world is a barrier to ultimate reality, which can only be found in the spiritual world. The secret things are opened only to the initiated, devotees who know how to cross the boundaries of the physical. Human beings seek sacred spaces in order to escape the oppression of the ordinary and connect with ultimate realities. Gnostic spirituality is often explicit in the art world. Elkins, for example, argues that contemporary artists could sincerely engage spiritual themes through “apophatic or negative theology”. He cites Gnosticism as one apophatic starting point, “and in particular the Gnostic concept of the ‘alien god’, the absent ‘Other’” (Elkins, 2004: 107).

Though Gnosticism is central to many of the claims of high art, the art world struggles against the isolation it imposes. The history of art is punctuated with forays into the ordinary, like Impressionism, producing works that are first shunned as too base for art to handle, only to be ushered into the temple later. Chase exemplifies the tension. He liquidated his 10th Street studio and embraced the Impressionist vision of art outdoors without discarding the principle that art must have a temple. He still believed his family could recover joy in an aesthetic atmosphere. In fact, the Shinnecock hall he documented was just his temple’s outer court. The house had a studio just down a flight of stairs from the hall, even more luxuriously decorated (Cikovsky, 1987). Chase never addressed the problem of whether art should leave its inner sanctum or remain. Because “his was essentially a nonintellectual approach to art” (Gallati, 1995: 130), he lived with the contradiction. But as he reached into the ordinary with his art and became disenchanted with the studio’s mystique, he did not seem able to retain his artistic vitality. The contradiction may have weakened the moral clarity of his mission.

The problem may be summed up this way: If art frees human beings from the ordinary, why does art need the ordinary to refresh its vision?

For Christians, the problem is of even greater importance, since it concerns the nature of worship. An implicitly gnostic view of spirituality can be found in many traditions. Consider the ambiguity of Dyrness’s use of the term *worship*. He is concerned with “the use Christian believers make of art and visual elements in their experience of worship” (Dyrness, 2008: xi). He consistently describes *worship* as *experienced* by human beings—a state of consciousness that is beyond the ordinary. He writes, “Protestants continue to

share a deeply held and broad consensus about the basic meaning of the worship experience. Worship, in whatever form it takes, has to do with the immediate and personal encounter with God” (Dyrness, 2008: 24). The inward experience for Protestants is sacred. Furthermore, their consciences seem to mandate that they experience this transcendence. Dyrness speculates that entering into this experience may be conceived by Protestants as an act of the will that rejects all outward stimulus (Dyrness, 2008: 42-43). What might Anabaptists have to say about this gnostic narrative both as an understanding of visual art and of worship?

The Tree

The ancient cultures from which Israel emerged assumed that human beings must have sacred spaces. The emotional bonds on which community depended could only be created by holy precincts, initiation into hidden realities, priestly classes, and physical objects that represented the unseen world. Whether the culture was Egyptian, Philistine, or Canaanite, the purpose of art was to bind people’s emotional world to their community.

In this context, the designs of the tabernacle and its furnishings recorded in the Mosaic Law have seemed inadequate. Scholars have argued that the Exodus designs were invented during Solomon’s reign to justify his temple (Cross, 1947). To be sure, the tabernacle has aesthetic elements that are contrary the prejudices of its time. To take just one example, holy places were regarded as fixed by definition, but the tabernacle was a holy place that travelled (Sommer, 2001). It did not enshrine a place where the Lord lived, but received his presence wherever he roved (Exod 40:34-38). Its transitory nature remained central to its design even after Israel was established in the land (2 Sam 7:1-7), and a permanent temple required explicit revelation from the Lord (1 Chr 28:9-19). If the tabernacle had been designed to impress Israelites with the sacred power of a particular spot, the design would have poor: the people could watch the tent being raised and dismantled.

The menorah is an example of how strange the Exodus designs were in their cultural context. Viewed as a functional lampstand, it is more elaborate than necessary. Viewed as an artwork for ritual practices, its symbolism is obscure. But as an expression of the purposes of the tabernacle, the menorah clarifies the nature of worship and embodies the biblical vision of human flourishing as only an artwork can.

In the vast literature on the menorah, one can find analyses of what Exodus 25:31-40 and 37:17-24 describe from Jewish and Christian scholars going back many centuries. There are abundant arguments for the menorah’s typology. In modern literature, there is considerable application of form and source criticism to the Exodus texts (*e.g.* Levine, 1965). One can

also find a large body of work focused on the menorah's significance in art history, with interest in the arch of Titus (Strauss, 1959), the Brescia casket (Watson, 1981), the Synagogue of Dura-Europos (Roth, 1953; Wischnitzer, 1971), and illuminated manuscripts (Gutmann, 1967; Willetts, 1979). However, relatively few scholars have focused on the menorah's original aesthetic properties. The inability to examine the tabernacle artifacts physically certainly hinders such an inquiry and snares it in controversy (Hurowitz, 1995). Erwin R. Goodenough and Carol L. Meyers have made valuable contributions to this focus from an archaeological perspective by developing methods for studying the symbolism of artifacts (Goodenough, 1953; C. Meyers, 1976). Still, the artistic implications of the Exodus passages remain unexplored.

What was the Lord's purpose for the tabernacle, and what was the function of the menorah within that purpose?

The purpose of the tabernacle, as Hebrews 9:1-10 develops it, was to express the Lord's presence with Israel visually. The tent, its furnishings, and the activities of the priests all contributed to this visual expression. The Lord's presence was covered by the veil between the holy place (9:2) and the holy of holies (9:3-5), indicating a separation that the Mosaic covenant never offered to penetrate in a final way (9:8-10). The covenant only penetrated the holiest place once a year with animal blood (9:7). The sphere of daily priestly mediation was the first section, the holy place (9:6). This arrangement expressed the presence of the Lord in Israel in visual language, but without an image of God himself: the mercy seat, framed by two cherubim and their extended wings, holds no visible occupant (9:5).

The importance of these visual expressions cannot be overstated, since Hebrews 9:8 ascribes their content to the Holy Spirit himself. The writer alludes to biblical history. The Lord informed Moses that he had filled artists with his Spirit for all of the work of design and production for the tabernacle and the priestly service (Exod 31:1-11). The artists were not only endowed with the Spirit, but "with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship", meaning that the Lord placed value on the theological implications of the art and on the workmanship itself.

The strangeness of the tabernacle against the backdrop of ancient visual culture, therefore, is not due to anachronism. There are clear precedents from contemporaneous cultures for the elements of the tabernacle (C. L. Meyers, 1982). Still less is the strangeness due to aesthetic incompetence, or to a low priority assigned to visual artistry. Rather, the tabernacle was strange for its time because its theological and visual logic was countercultural, asserting the paradox of God's presence and inaccessibility in ways that undermined religious assumptions. First, the tabernacle asserted that God's presence was in all places and could be received within the territory

of any people. Second, the tabernacle asserted that the human priesthood was inadequate to mediate constant access to the holiest place.

Hebrews 9:2 places the menorah outside the veil covering the holy of holies. The menorah was described in Exodus 25:31-40, and its fabrication recounted in Exodus 37:17-24. It was made of hammered gold, and had six branches extended from a central shaft, each featuring three cups made to look like almond blossoms. Its shape was like an abstract tree (C. Meyers, 1976; Yarden, 1971). Its lamps were to be kept burning by the priests “from evening to morning” using pure olive oil (Exod 27:20-21; Lev 24:1-4). Of the many features of this design that illustrate its unusual character, consider three.

First, as Meyers points out, the term *hnq*, usually translated “branches” in reference to the menorah’s structure, actually denotes a plant, “a gigantic grass growing to a height of eight to eighteen feet and a diameter of two to three inches at its base. It is common throughout Syria, Palestine, and the Sinai Peninsula particularly along the margins of watercourses or bodies of water.” This reed is associated in Scripture with Egypt, coming to symbolize the whole nation (*e.g.* 2 Kgs 18:21; Isa 19:6; 36:6; Ezek 29:6-7) (see C. Meyers, 1976: 19). The reed-branches of the menorah, then, can be read as a reminder of Israel’s point of origin, its slavery in Egypt.

Second, the menorah’s plant reference is composite. The design calls for cups fashioned like almond blossoms, three of which sprout from each Egyptian reed. Scholars have noted what they take to be the odd choice of fruit for this symbol. Neither the Egyptians nor their Israelite slaves grew almonds (Trever, 1959). Why call for almond blossoms on the menorah when the first Levites who cared for it would never have seen them? The common hypothesis that the Exodus designs were written centuries after Moses serves as a sufficient explanation for some (Trever, 1959). From another point of view, some ancient cultures were fascinated with the almond tree because it was the first to bloom (C. Meyers, 1976). In the biblical context, the almond appears in three places. Jacob sends almonds to the then-unknown Joseph in Genesis 43:11 as a present to appease him. Almonds were likely associated with the land of Canaan just as reeds were associated with Egypt. In Numbers 17:8, Aaron’s rod produces almond blossoms as a proof that he is the Lord’s choice as high priest. Jeremiah 1:11-12 records a similar incident. A rod sprouts almond blossoms as a sign that the Lord watches over his word to perform it. The almond blossoms on the menorah, then, can be said to symbolize the Lord’s watchful performance of his word for Israel in the land.

Third, there is a marked shift in concept in the menorah from similar lampstands in contemporaneous cultures. It has a functional purpose: to give light for the priests in a tent that has no windows. This function is often

interpreted as a Messianic type that Christ will give light just as the menorah does (Owen, 1999: 295-297). While its function is symbolically important, Meyers argues that the menorah's overall design—the reed and blossom references with many other aspects—raises it to an artistic symbol. “Actually, it is not so much the actual detail of the decoration, such as the use of a triple floral form, which strikes us as most important. Rather it is the shift in conception of the stand from a simple and functional device to an object which assumes architectonic elements and thereby becomes important in and of itself” (C. Meyers, 1976: 83) Furthermore, as an artistic expression, it cannot be understood as a product of the cultures around Israel at the time. “Nothing in the realm of stands, cultic or otherwise, can be related to the branched form of the menorah” (Isbell, 1980: 221; C. Meyers, 1976: 84; Propp, 2006: 512).

The three features we have surveyed, together with the overall design of the tabernacle, make clear that the menorah was a unique artistic statement in the ancient world. If we consider the layers of scriptural allusion in the menorah, we can see how it embodied the countercultural mission of the tabernacle. Consider several ways in which the larger biblical narrative is harnessed to the menorah's design.

The tabernacle was where the Lord dwelt with human beings, just as the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:4-3:24). The tree of life was the focus of the garden as the created source of renewed life, and it was from this tree that human beings were exiled. The reappearance of the tree of life in the New Jerusalem closes the story of redemption, with human beings restored to God's dwelling place (Rev 22:1-5). The menorah as a tree within God's dwelling yet outside the holy of holies is a natural, even necessary, furnishing. It expresses the problem of separation from God, promises the blessing of God across that separation, and anticipates the ultimate reunification of human beings with God.

Another connection with biblical narrative is the menorah's references to Israel's point of origin, Egypt (the reed-branches), and to Israel's destination, the land of Canaan (almond blossoms). Its mixture of plant references might have several purposes. For instance, it might portray the emergence of Israel out of Egypt like almond blossoms out of reeds. It might also serve to recall the Lord's promise that Israel's new land will be fruitful. Meyers comments, “There is no question but that the Lord is the divine power behind the flourishing or non-flourishing of vegetation, and there is no appeal to any natural aspect of God's being as a force to be confronted or dealt with in order to secure fertility. In other words, God has been completely separated from nature” (C. Meyers, 1976: 135). Regardless of how one reads the composite design, the menorah brings the narrative of the Lord's loyal love upon Israel and its land into the tabernacle.

Still another connection with biblical narrative can be found in a motif that describes the Lord's redemptive work for Israel both before and after the menorah's fabrication. The song at the Red Sea closes with the picture of the Lord planting Israel on his mountain (Exod 15:17). The Lord promises David that he will "plant" Israel securely (2 Sam 7:10; 1 Chr 17:9). The image of Israel as a vine or tree planted by the Lord recurs in Psalm 80:9-11 and Isaiah 61:3, *et al.* Meyers believes that the menorah is a symbol of the planted nation, and that it "can be seen as the ultimate challenge to the pagan fertility and immortality themes" (C. Meyers, 1976: 156).

The menorah, then, asserts that the Lord alone is the source of Israel's flourishing. It gleams in the Lord's presence to represent the fruitfulness and security of the nation, the entire scope of the people's life symbolized as witness and worship.

The Rationale

The Lord's commands about the design, fabrication, and use of the menorah equip Anabaptists with a rationale for visual artistry. This rationale is distinctively biblical, mobilizing soteriological truths to free visual art from idolatry—specifically from the Gnosticism of Western high art.

A helpful way to see this rationale is to relate the menorah to its three original audiences: the people of Israel, the Levites, and the Lord himself.

In relation to the people, the menorah was a furnishing of the tabernacle that they only knew from the outside. They never saw the menorah in the setting God designed, since they had no access to the holy place. Conceivably, they may have seen it at points in transit. But, assuming usage that conformed to the law, the menorah's function was not to grant the people access to God, nor even to be an object of their contemplation. They knew of the menorah from Moses's commands, understood it as part of the apparatus of the Lord's presence, and gave the gold from which it was made (Exod 35:4-36:7). Thus, the menorah was not the Lord's expression to the people, but the people's expression to the Lord. It was not a prompt to worship—the inducement of some state of spiritual consciousness—but an act of worship.

In relation to the Levites, the menorah was designed for contemplation in service (C. Meyers, 2008). The artwork itself was to serve in the Lord's presence, and the Levites (specifically the Kohathites) were charged with transporting, maintaining, setting up, and dismantling it (Num 3:27-32; 4:1-15). As they handled the menorah, its layered symbolism could continually refresh their appreciation of God, reminding them of his power in bringing the nation out of Egypt, his faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in giving the land to the people, and his blessing year after year in making the land fruitful. It would also exhort them to be the pastoral stew-

ards of the nation's worship, who teach the covenant so that the people would continue to flourish before the Lord, gleaming as his light to the nations (Deut 4:5-8). The menorah daily reinforced for the Levites that the whole life of the nation was to be integrated in service to the Lord. Put differently, the menorah asserted that the most significant worship was not taking place in the shrine at all, but in the fields, on the roads, in the homes and the city gates throughout the whole land.

On this analysis, the primary audience for the menorah was the Lord. He was the recipient of the people's offerings. The menorah stood in his presence. As a symbol of his blessing upon Israel, its foremost purpose seems to have been to reflect his pleasure in the flourishing of human beings.

Therefore, a biblical rationale for the visual arts has at least the following principles. First, visual art should express human gratitude to God for his blessings, especially as the outworking of covenant relationship with him. Second, visual art should express the integration of all life under God's rule. Third, visual art should empower specific actions of serving God, whether those actions are the proclamation of his goodness, godly ethical behavior, or even the raising of children. These principles can be inferred readily from the example of the menorah.

A fourth biblical principle needs more explanation. Visual art should subvert the domination of the human mind by idolatry. This was a key function of the tabernacle and all its artistry. It was an anti-shrine, a visual apologetic against idols in favor of the living, covenant-keeping God. Just as the Lord commanded visual artists to engage the surrounding idolatrous cultures in visual debate, so we are mandated to do today.

Consider how deeply idolatry and true worship clash. Idolatry restricts the presence of a god to a locality. True worship assumes God's omnipresence (2 Chr 6:18). Idolatry restricts access to God to physical images and to the temples in which those images are housed. True worship opens access to God in all places through covenant relationship, affirming God's paradoxical nearness and separateness (2 Chr 6:18-21). Idolatry focuses on a human audience, before whom it claims to represent the spiritual world. True worship mobilizes human beings to focus on God himself, represented all-sufficiently to the world by his promises (2 Chr 6:22-40). The menorah's example calls visual art to engage this conflict energetically.

These four principles open every conceivable subject to artistic scrutiny. If the goal of visual art is to express the integration of all life under God's rule, then artists have a warrant to explore the varieties of human flourishing. The rationale also opens the complete visual toolbox, from folk to high art, from old media to new, from conceptions that affirm a worldview to the

confrontational techniques of subversion. Such a biblical rationale addresses three issues in particular.

First, it puts the second commandment in proper perspective. The prohibition of idols does not apply broadly to all images for all purposes. The Lord validated the visual arts emphatically, empowering artists to elevate their skills for a countercultural task. This validation crosses into the New Testament, where symbols from the tabernacle and temple are affirmed (Acts 2:46; Heb 9:1-5), and churches are represented by menorahs (Rev 1:12-20).

At the same time, the rationale highlights the Bible's own application of the second commandment, which is sweeping indeed. Any system that makes images the objects rather than the expressions of worship is false to the character of God and degrading to human beings. God does not live in temples (Acts 7:38-50; 14:11-18; 17:22-31). It is a lie to serve created things instead of the Creator (Rom 1:18-25).

Second, the rationale clarifies the theological grounds for visual art. In the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the ground for legitimizing visual art (Dyrness, 2001). Kessler summarizes, "[The icon] re-enacts the central Christian mystery. Christ brought mankind a life-giving spirit that abrogated the law; the holy image does the same. And just as in Jesus Christ a true man is united with God, in the icon, matter acquires Grace when it is impressed with the sacred form" (Kessler, 1991: 64).

Anabaptists can recognize and reject the Platonic categories in such formulations as gnostic presuppositions. Christ is the sole image of the invisible God in whom the entire created order, visible and invisible, holds together (Col 1:15-17). Matter *per se* was never the barrier between human beings and God. The barrier is sin, and in the covenant relationship we have in Christ that barrier is torn down (Col 1:19-20). There is no other image than Christ that we may venerate. Indeed, we anticipate the day when we will see him as he is, and so become like him (1 John 3:1-3).

The proper ground for legitimizing the visual arts is the doctrine of general revelation. God has expressed his glory in the created order (Rom 1:19-20). Human creativity itself is part of God's revealed glory. Therefore, no less than Bezalel, we glorify God by exercising our visual creativity to shape and imitate the created order.

Third, this rationale for visual art helps to focus the artist on the biblical vision of human flourishing. Dyrness writes, "In the biblical view... life is viewed holistically—aesthetic and ethical (even economic) questions are constantly interrelated. Moreover, none of these important areas can be properly considered apart from their connection to the Creator and his purposes for the earth and its people" (Dyrness, 2001: 70). Human beings

flourish in all aspects of life by faith in God's promises in Christ. Using the menorah, the Lord expressed to the Levites the power of his promises, and reminded them to integrate all aspects of the nation's life in service to him. Wolterstorff articulates the mission of art for contemplation within the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, or wholeness:

Aesthetic delight is a component within and a species of that joy which belongs to the shalom God has ordained as the goal of human existence, and which here already, in this broken and fallen world of ours, is to be sought and experienced. That is why you and I are to pursue aesthetic delight, for ourselves and others, along with a multitude of other goals: justice, peace, community. Since it belongs to the shalom that God intends for each of us, it becomes a matter of responsible action to help make available, to ourselves and others, the experience of aesthetic delight. It becomes a norm for action—not of course the only norm, but certainly one among others (Wolterstorff, 1980: 169).

With this rationale for the visual arts, Anabaptists can assert their distinctive biblical message. In Christ, there is no separation between sacred and secular. When he purchased us out of sin, he claimed lordship of over all aspects of our lives. Worship, therefore, is not an experience that is distinct from the ordinary but is the action of uniting all the ordinary in service to Christ.

Anabaptists can also embrace visual art as indispensable for this action of worship. If they will raise their artistic skills to meet the demands of a countercultural task, they will find a formidable set of tools for proclaiming *shalom* in Christ. They will find, for example, that high art offers methods for affirming morally right actions without the degradations of crusading or sentimentalizing propaganda. Chase's affirmation of the husband-father's role in *Hall at Shinnecock* resounds emotionally because he combined subject, composition, medium, style, allusion, and perspective to focus the viewer's attention. Beyond merely exciting sympathy for a grieving family, the work rewards contemplation of all the issues it raises.

The Anabaptist tradition has much to discuss with Chase's heirs today. How might the art world leave its shrines? Is Gnosticism the art world's only spiritual option? Why not embrace the spirituality of mobilizing the ordinary for *shalom*? Anabaptists have a covenant-keeping God to proclaim at the center of this mandate, who calls us to worship him with gratitude in whatever we do, whether word or deed (Col 3:17).

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