The Divine Wisdom of Michelangelo in *The Creation of Adam*

The reemergence of long obscured details in Michelangelo’s newly cleaned frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel has prompted fresh interest in the ideological program as a whole. The focus of this article is one such detail in *The Creation of Adam* [Figs. 1-2]. This is a female figure surrounded by smaller figures enveloped in the windblown mantle of the Creator, and identifiable as putti or angels. They are shown with God the Father in all the scenes of Creation except the first. While their number and placement vary and their role is not quite clear, they are always boys. Here, however, in their midst is unmistakably a woman and a very lovely one at that. The Creator embraces her with his left arm. Only her head, breast, hand, and bent knee are visible. Her face is turned towards Adam with an expression of intense concentration [Fig. 3].

Most Michelangelo scholars have overlooked this figure. Some mention it only as a “beautiful female angel.” De Tolnay, on the other hand, writes, “It is very likely that the young woman who looks with fascination at Adam is a representative of Eve, or rather of the ‘idea’ of Eve.” He observes that God singles out one of the putti by touching its shoulder with the fingers of his left hand. The putto resembles the Infant Jesus from the *Doni Tondo*, de Tolnay says, and he concludes that just as the female figure is the idea of Eve, so the putto is the idea of Christ. Michelangelo thus intended to convey the Platonic view that these two ideas had already preexisted in God’s mind.

Another interpretation of the puzzling female figure has been offered by Jane Schuyler, who maintains that in the reading of the Sistine ceiling program, Neoplatonic elements should be supplemented by cabalistic ones. Her reasoning is as follows: “Cabala differs from traditional Judaism in the belief that God’s nature has male and female elements. The right is considered the male, active side of the tree of the Lord’s body, while the left is the female and passive side.” This left side is also associated with evil. The latter is likewise present in God himself, since God (*En Sof*, the Infinite, the Unknowable), encompasses all, including good and evil.

According to Schuyler, the female element, identified with the left, is illustrated on the Sistine ceiling three times, including the figure under discussion in *The Creation of Adam*. Schuyler believes the latter is the Shekhina, which emerges from God’s left side just as Eve emerged from Adam’s. In the Cabala, the Shekhina is the female component of the divine
nature, an element of God himself, whose nature is bisexual, constituting the hierogamous unity of contradictory elements—the male and the female. In the occult books based on the Cabala, God, identified with the sephirothic Tree of Life, was frequently represented by a diagram of ten interpenetrating circles denoting the ten sephiroth, or divine emanations. The ninth sephira was the Shekhina.

Schuyler writes:

As a result of her closeness to the Lord, the Shekhina is identified with the community of Israel, the nuptial Jewish Ecclesia, and the neshameh, the spiritus of the highest part of the tripartite soul. In Michelangelo’s scene she turns her head around to view Adam, who has just been imbued with the neshameh (herself). Her hand affectionately encircles the Lord’s left arm as if to suggest that she lovingly accepts a part in man’s redemption.

But Schuyler’s identification is not convincing. Judaic scholars point out the ambivalent character of the Shekhina. She is the sephira, but at the same time she possesses sinister features. In view of the “characterological” implications, it is improbable that Michelangelo would have had in mind this of all images when painting the female figure.

In any case, there is no indication of any interest on his part in the Cabala. David Summers includes on the list of what the artist is known with certainty to have read Dante’s Divine Comedy and Cristoforo Landino’s platonizing commentary on it, as well as Il convivio, Petrarch’s poetry, and the writings of Savonarola. It is clear from remarks cited by Michelangelo’s biographers that he also knew the work of Alberti, Pomponio Gaurico, Pliny, Vitruvius, and Marsilio Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s Symposium, but that he was first and foremost an avid reader of the Old and New Testaments—undoubtedly in the Vulgate, for it has been established that he knew Latin well. His biography and letters demonstrate that he was a deeply religious man and placed high value on the true Christian life.

Nor do the Neoplatonic elements which researchers have discovered in his paintings and sculptures contradict this in-
ference in the least. Summers rightly recalls that to be a Platonist in the Renaissance, one did not have to study Plato or even Plotinus directly. Platonism was kept alive and expanded upon down through the Middle Ages. Attempts to reconcile Plato and Aristotle with the Bible, and the philosophy of late antiquity with the Revelation, reached their apogee in the writings of the Florentine humanists of the Renaissance. But theologians also took for granted the study of ancient philosophers, poets, and rhetoricians alongside that of the Bible. For the clergy at the papal court the Old Testament served mainly as the prefiguration of the New Testament, and Messianic foreshadowing was read into various pagan prophecies and oracles. Therefore, the presence of the Sibyls on the Sistine ceiling not only caused no surprise but presumably met with the unreserved approval of the pope and his theological advisers. In this cultural context, the inclusion of pagan or Platonic elements in the story of the Creation is quite orthodox.

As for Michelangelo himself, contemporary records show that his faith was not only fervent but also wholly subordinate to the teachings of the Church. Letters written by the artist to his family during the painting of the Sistine Chapel contain no
reference to his artistic ideas, but he repeatedly asks for a prayer “that he may please the pope” and succeed in his work.\textsuperscript{16}

Knowing that Michelangelo was deeply religious and familiar with the Scriptures, Julius II must have had equal confidence in both the artist’s talent and his ideological program. This is clear from a letter of Michelangelo’s in 1523 in which he describes the commissioning of the Sistine ceiling. At first the pope proposed a scene with the twelve Apostles, but Michelangelo regarded the idea as “too modest.” Julius then changed his mind and gave Michelangelo free reign to do as he saw fit: “Allora mi dette nuova commissione ch’io facessi ciò ch’io volevo, e che mi contenterebbe, e ch’io dipignessi insino alle storie di sotto.”\textsuperscript{17} Not only did Michelangelo gain the freedom to choose his own subject matter but he also received permission to paint a much larger area. The “storie di sotto” refer to works by Quattrocento painters of episodes from the lives of Moses and Christ. So much trust shown by the head of the Church obligated Michelangelo to do his utmost; it is therefore understandable that he wanted his father to pray that his son might satisfy the pope in every respect.

In view of these circumstances, it is most unlikely that Michelangelo would have drawn his inspiration for the Creation scenes from any source other than the Bible, even if he did not strictly follow its chronology of events. (Even Vasari and Condivi were unsure of how to interpret some of the scenes.)

Thus, it is not necessary to refer to either the Cabalists or the Platonists to understand what Michelangelo wanted to show by painting a beautiful female figure at the side of the Lord. The following passage is from the Book of Proverbs (VIII:22-31):

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him: Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.

These are the words of Sophia, or Divine Wisdom, she who accompanied the Lord from the beginning of Creation, and who may well be portrayed here.\textsuperscript{18} She alone is so close to the Lord’s side, and her alert, intelligent face looks attentively at the first of the “sons of men” created by God, whose face is serene and joyful in this fresco only.

I believe that the identification of the female figure as Divine Wisdom is indeed the most probable, even if it may strike some as too simplistic. Corroboration appears to lie in recent studies by historians of religion, summed up by J. O’Malley. He rejects—perhaps too radically—the prevailing Neoplatonic interpretation of art historians in favor of the view that Michelangelo must have relied on a theologian or group of clergy for advice, a logical supposition in light of the importance of the commission. O’Malley acknowledges that careful examination of the archives produced nothing definitive, other than the proposal of such names as Egidio di Viterbo and Cardinal Marco Vigerio.\textsuperscript{19}

But despite the lack of established proof, it is unthinkable that the pope and his court would not have taken an interest in the orthodoxy of the fresco program during the more than four years of its execution. Moreover, both Vasari and Condivi refer solely to Biblical sources for the frescoes. The former says the scenes were drawn from the Book of Samuel, while the latter claims they represent “quasi tutto il Vecchio Testamento.” According to O’Malley, some episodes in the lower parts of the ceiling derive from the Book of Maccabees.\textsuperscript{20}

Notwithstanding the presumable participation of members of the clergy in the program, because Michelangelo had full or nearly full freedom to select the episodes to be included, it may be supposed that it was his own idea to use a passage from the Book of Proverbs in The Creation of Adam. Perhaps it fascinated the artist—himself a poet—with its rare beauty, and in his ravishing portrayal of Divine Wisdom on the Sistine ceiling, he created a worthy equivalent.
1 The predominant tendency in the past was to interpret the program in the spirit of Neoplatonism, as did C. de Tolnay, Michelangelo, Princeton, 1969, I (with bibliography). M. A. Hettner, *Italienische Studien zur Geschichte der Renaissance*, Braunschweig, 1879, was the first to indicate Platonic elements.


3 De Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, pp. 6-44. It is not clear whether it is indeed the prefiguration of Christ that is meant here. De Tolnay ignores the fact that the discussed putto clasps the woman’s knee with its hand, which is quite inexplicable if she is either Eve or the idea of her.

4 In support of his thesis, de Tolnay quotes a fragment of Cristoforo Landino’s commentary to Book XII of Dante’s *Il paradiso*: “Nella divina mente e sapientia pongono le cognizioni di tutte le cose, e queste Platone chiama ‘idee.’” Another source was to be provided by Pico della Mirandola’s *Heptapalos*, a Platonic interpretation of the Book of Genesis. De Tolnay makes clear that it is not certain whether it was these texts which Michelangelo used, but the artist’s rendering of the act of Creation is close to the Neoplatonic concept found in them. As we know, Michelangelo lived in the Medici palace in the Via Larga from 1490 to April 8, 1492 (the date of Lorenzo’s death), and in this period may have become acquainted with elements of Platonism which pervaded humanist thought at the Careggi Academy and the Medici court.


6 In Jewish mysticism, God as the giver of all encompasses both darkness and light. This idea found expression in magic, alchemy, and art at the turn of the sixteenth century; see M. Rzepeńska, “Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and Its Ideological Background,” *Artibus et Historiae VII*, no. 13 (1986), pp. 91-112.

7 Eve emerges from the left side of Adam, and the serpent, which has a woman’s head and upper body, is handing Adam the apple with the left hand. Schuyler identifies the serpent with Lilith, the embodiment of temptation, the “left-side,” wicked companion of Adam, contrasted with Eve, whom the Church saw as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary.

8 For such a diagram, see the title page of Andrea Riccio’s occult book *Portae lucis*, Amsterdam, 1560.

9 In the Book of Zohar we read that the Shekhina is often rendered as the personification of sin, judgment, and expulsion, and that her face is then dark; see G. Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, Zürich, 1960, p. 143. She is also sometimes identified with the Tree of Death and with demonic powers. Scholem, *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, ch. IV, pp. 135-87, says the concept of the Shekhina cannot be traced directly back to the Bible but only to the Apocrypha. It occurs in the Talmud and in rabbinical writings, which treat it as the personification of the light created by the Lord, without always defining its female character. It is only in the mystical doctrines of the Cabala formulated in the early thirteenth century that the Shekhina becomes the ninth *sephira*: “als einer unter mythischer Fixation erscheinenden Hypostase der Immanenz Gottes in der Welt.... ihre weiblicher Charakter hatte schon stark passive und rezeptive Züge.” She is presented in this way in the Book of Zohar and the Book of Bahir. Her dark, demonic features are given particular emphasis in the Zohar, where she also appears most frequently, usually as the “eternal feminine” in the sexual meaning, as the complement and opposition to the male element, and as passivity related to the demonic “left side.” Scholem remarks that the left side is not consistently identified with evil. It is certain, however, that in the image of the Shekhina from cabalistic writings, ambivalent as it is, dark, demonic features predominate, sometimes making it resemble “eastern monsters,” while it also echoes very ancient cosmic lunar symbolism; see Scholem, *Von der mystischen Gestalt*, p. 186.

10 Schuyler assumes that Michelangelo came to know the Cabala through indirect means, primarily via della Mirandola. The latter’s *Conclusiones Philosophiae, Cabalisticae et Theologiae*, published in 1486, and *Heptapalos*, which appeared three years later, contained both cabalistic and Platonic elements. In Schuyler’s view, Michelangelo may have read these works during his stay in the Via Larga, as well as translations of some of the books of the Cabala owned by Pico himself and which were also to be found in Lorenzo’s library. Schuyler says that her interpretation is based on cabalistic elements in Pico’s writings and on works quoted or mentioned by him, and she refers to Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York, 1965. (Not having access to that edition, I rely in this article on the earlier German one; see n. 9, above.)


12 Ibidem, p. 15.


14 See J. O’Malley, “Il mistero della volta. Gli affreschi di Michelangelo alla luce del pensiero teologico del Rinascimento,” in *La capella Sistina. I primi restauri: La scoperta del colore*, Novara, 1986, pp. 92-148. He points out that the Sibyls had appeared in art before—in the pavement of the cathedral of Siena, for example—but that this is the first time they were represented in such a prominent place.

15 But as far as cabalistic doctrines are concerned, even if one assumes that Michelangelo learned of them through secondary sources, as is probable, it is hard to imagine that he would have expressed them on the vault of the papal chapel, in the very heart of Christianity. It should be remembered that thirteen of the theses in Pico’s *Conclusiones* were censured by Pope Innocent VIII and their author was imprisoned at Vincennes. After his release—due in large part to the intervention of Lorenzo de’ Medici—Pico continued to publish works which enjoyed great popularity among Florentine humanists, but it is unlikely that the Vatican would have forgotten about the charges of heresy previously brought against him. Despite the then very liberal attitude of the Church authorities towards various manifestations of religious syncretism, the Cabala Jewish gnosia came in for repeated criticism and was even condemned by lay scholars as well. An ample literature *adversos Judaeos* developed; see S. Świętoński, *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej XV wieku*, IV, Warsaw, 1979, pp. 140-43.


17 Ibidem, I, 249, Appendix. Michelangelo wrote the letter to Florence to Giovanni Francesco Fattucci in Rome.

18 J. Klauck, *Jules II, Röm und die Renaissance* (Paris, 1898), advanced the theory that she is “Sapientia, identified by the Church with Mary, to whom the Sistine Chapel was dedicated” (p. 355). This was rejected, however, by W. Thode, *Michelangelo, Kritische Untersuchungen über seine Werke I* (Berlin, 1908). Since then, no one has pursued the idea and it was quite forgotten, having been superceded by the view of the figure as “the Platonic idea of Eve.”

19 See O’Malley, “Il mistero della volta,” pp. 92-148; and also Hartt, *Michelangelo*, p. 31, who also emphasizes the possibility that Cardinal
Vigerio, a Franciscan like Julius II and particularly close to him, may have played an advisory role. However, Hartt writes, "The theological expert is forgotten in the dazzling light of the artist’s imagination."

O’Malley regards the female figure simply as an angel (p. 142): “La bellissima figura di adolescente, su cui resta un lieve sospetto d’androginia, si distingue dagli altri putti per una vibrante vitalità....” F. Hartt, “La creazione dell’uomo,” in Capella Sistina. La storia della Creazione, Tokyo, 1989, p. 254, also considers the figure male: “Spesso e in modo incomprensibile caratterizzato come femina e come rappresentazione della non ancora nata, incarnata anima di Eva, o perfino della Vergine Maria, contrariamente alla teologia cattolica che sostiene che l’anima è creata sul momento della concezione. La linea del petto non suggerisce il modo caratteristico di Michelangelo di render il petto femminile, ed è perfettamente coerente con quello degli ignudi; i riccioli dei capelli inoltre sono più corti di quelli di molti nudi.” One can hardly agree with these claims. Michelangelo painted and sculpted the female breast in various ways; a comparison of the Sibyls from the Sistine ceiling with the female figures on the tomb of the Medici is sufficient. As for the hair, the style worn by the figure here—a cluster of long curls bound on top of the head—is typically feminine and is never found on a man in any painting or sculpture by Michelangelo.