

## The Ox and the Donkey

O lux beata Trinitas!  
He lay between an ox and ass,  
Thou mother and maiden free;  
Gloria tibi, Domine.<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 1: Gherardo di Jacopo Sarna, “Adoration of the Magi,” c. 1405  
(Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Photo: R. Huggins)**

RONALD V. HUGGINS  
*Associate Professor of New Testament and Greek  
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Kansas City, MO 64118 rhuggins@mbts.edu*

The woman kitty-corner me across the table asked: “But where are the ox and the ass?” We were reading Matthew’s infancy narrative in Schuyler Brown’s doctoral seminar at Saint Michael’s College, Toronto. The questioner was doing her doctorate in Karl Barth. “That’s not Matthew, lady, that’s Luke!” I had felt like saying. But had I done so, had I given way to the impulse, I would have been putting my own

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<sup>1</sup>Anonymous fifteenth century English carol *We Make Joy Now In This Fest*.

ignorance on display alongside hers. Ever afterwards not *one* but *two* former doctoral candidates would have to look back on that day with a blush tinged round the gills with the ruddy hew of embarrassment. Luke does reference a manger, but says nothing about any ox or ass.

Nevertheless from the earliest times artistic representations of the nativity have invariably included both animals faithfully attending the crib of the Christ child. These go back to the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, roughly the same moment as our earliest literary reference to the celebration of Christmas on December 25, which comes from Rome in 336 AD. Gertrude Schiller remarks:

[W]e are struck by the fact that in the fourth century Joseph does not appear, even Mary may not appear, while the ox and the ass, which are not mentioned in the biblical text, are always in evidence.<sup>2</sup>

It is already there, in the fourth century, that we begin to find the two animals dotting over the Christ child on early Christian Sarcophagi,<sup>3</sup> just as they continue to do right down to the present, when they keeping time with the Little Drummer Boy in the carol, although some versions, such as the one on Bob Dylan's 2009 Christmas album, now say, "ox and lamb," instead of the more traditional "ox and ass," perhaps in deference to people who don't remember that an ass is a donkey.

However that may be, how, given that they are not mentioned in the New Testament, did the ox and ass become such a regular feature of the nativity scene, and why are they represented the way they are? Popular mythologist Joseph Campbell felt sure he knew. Describing an early depiction of the nativity scene Campbell writes that,

the ass, at that time, was the symbolic animal of Set, and the ox was the symbolic animal of Osiris. We recall the conflict of the Egyptian gods Set and Osiris and that Set killed his brother, Osiris.

There we see the animals of Set and Osiris, reconciled in the Christchild. These two powers, one of the light and one the dark, are united in him. They are giving Him their breath, just as God breathed His spirit. The older hero figures thereby concede their power to the younger...In that little Christmas scene, one

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<sup>2</sup>Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (2 vols.; trans. Janet Seligman; Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1971-72), 1:60.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, "A Lexicon of Christian Iconography," *Church History* 45.1 (March, 1976): 9.

reads the statement that the older savior figures, Osiris and his brother, Set...are recognizing Christ for who He is.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that Campbell claimed, in another work, that his identification of the ox and the ass would have been “perfectly obvious to all,”<sup>5</sup> there is really no chance whatever that he is correct.



**Fig. 2: Detail of the nativity scene from the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. Sarcophagus at the Lateran Museum in Rome reproduced by Joseph Campbell in *The Mythic Image* (p. 33), illustrating his claim that the ox and the ass represent the Egyptian gods Set and Osiris.**

As interesting and imaginative as Campbell’s interpretation is, it founders on the elementary methodological flaw of seeking more remote and dubious explanations when near-at-hand, more immediately plausible ones are ready to hand. Is Campbell really so clumsy a historian as to miss the fact that the iconography of the incarnation took shape against the backdrop of Christian theology not Egyptian mythology? The real reason for the presence of the ox and the ass at the nativity is to call to mind the prophetic words of Isaiah the Prophet: The ox and the ass reference what the early Church read as prophecy in the first chapter of Isaiah: “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his

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<sup>4</sup>Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* (ed. Eugene Kennedy; Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 65-66.

<sup>5</sup>*The Mythic Image* (Bollingen Series C; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 33. Campbell, describing the images he was referring to in *Thou Art That*, writes: “The first carvings of the nativity scene are found on the sarcophagi of the second and third centuries. One of the earliest shows the little child in the crib, surrounded by the ass, the ox, and the Magi” (p. 65). Probably, however, Campbell has in mind the nativity scene on the fourth-century sarcophagus at the Lateran Museum in Rome discussed in *The Mythic Image* (pp. 32-33).

master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider" (Isaiah 1:3 KJV).<sup>6</sup>

Nor is our understanding of the symbolic meaning of these animals dependent on pictorial representations alone. Coterminous with the appearance of the earliest representations of the ox and the ass in nativity scenes come Christian theologians writing about them as well. "Isaiah calls to you to know your owner, like the ox," writes fourth-century Christian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus in his thirty-eighth Oration, "and to know the manger of your Lord, like the donkey."<sup>7</sup>

However, the early Church also added an additional symbolic embellishment that is much less obvious, but that has continued to be mentioned in scholarly discussions, sometimes even to the exclusion of the Isaiah reference. We see this for example in Alfredo Tradigo's *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, where it is stated without further explanation or elaboration that "the donkey and ox represent the Jews and pagans."<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion immediately raises sinister suspicions given ancient slanderous whisperings about how Jews, and later Christians, supposedly worshipped a god with the head of an ass: "...you have dreamed that our God is an ass's head," wrote the early third-century theologian Tertullian,

This sort of notion Cornelius Tacitus ... He tells how the Jews, liberated from Egypt, or, as he thought, exiled, were in the wilderness of Arabia utterly barren of water; and how, dying of thirst, they saw wild asses, which chanced to be returning from their pasture (it was thought) to slake their thirst; how they used them as guides to a fountain, and out of gratitude consecrated the likeness of a beast of the kind. Thence came, I think, the assumption that we too, standing so near Jewish religion, are devoted to worship of the same image.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce M. Metzger writes: "Old Testament derivation of the motif is certainly far more probable than the theory proposed by Joseph Campbell in his recently published *mélange* of art and Jungian depth psychology ... according to which the ass and the ox in such scenes represent the contending brothers [Set] and Osiris of ancient Egyptian mythology." (Metzger, "Lexicon," 9, n 2). (Brackets Metzger's)

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 38.17, in *Isaiah 1-39* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT X; ed. Steven A. McKinion; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Greek Orthodox Church* (trans. Stephan Sartarelli; Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), 105.

<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 16: 1-3 (ET: T. R. Glover, LCL); cf. Tacitus, *History* 5:3; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9:3, 28; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.10.6.

But such would be a wrong impression arising from the fact that Tradigo got the identification of the two animals turned around. It's not the donkey that the early Christians identified as the Jews, but the ox. The logic of it is given already in the early Christian reference to the ox and the ass at the manger of Jesus, which appears in the third-century theologian Origen of Alexandria (d. 251). Speaking of our Lord's manger, Origen exultantly writes:<sup>10</sup>

That was the manger of which the inspired prophet said, "The ox knows his owner and the ass his master's manger." The ox is a clean animal, the ass an unclean animal. The ass knows his master's manger." The people of Israel did not know their Lord's manger, but an unclean animal from among the Gentiles did. Scripture says, "Israel, indeed, did not know me, and my people did not understand me." Let us understand this manger. Let us endeavor to recognize the Lord and to be worthy of knowing him, and of taking on not only his birth and the resurrection of his flesh, but also his celebrated second coming in majesty, to whom is glory and power for ages and ages. Amen.

This understanding of the significance of the animals and their association with Isaiah 1:3 became standard in the iconography of the Eastern Church, and continue to be so right down to the present time. "Their place in the very center of the icon points to the importance given by the Church to this detail." Writes Russian Orthodox iconographer Léonide Ouspensky, "It is nothing less than the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah (i, 3) ... By the presence of the animals, the icon reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy and calls us to the knowledge and understanding of the mystery of the Divine Dispensation."<sup>11</sup>

Here as well Christian Iconography in the Western Church is influenced by the iconographic models of the East, but follows them more loosely.

Yet another powerful influence that would come into play in the way the Western Church represented the Nativity is the relatively late (8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> cent.?)<sup>12</sup> apocryphal gospel, *Pseudo-Matthew*, which again interprets

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<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Luke* 13.17 (ET: *Origen, Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke* [FC 94; trans.; Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J.; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996], 55).

<sup>11</sup> Léonide Ouspensky & Vladimir Lossky *The Meaning of Icons* (rev. ed.; Crestwood, NJ: St Vladimir's Seminary Press: 1982), 159.

<sup>12</sup> Date suggested by J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based*

their presence as a fulfillment of Isaiah 1:3, but sees an allusion as well to the Greek Septuagint's version of Habakkuk 3:2, a mistranslation of which was carried over into the Old Latin version of the Old Testament, from whence it influenced Western exegesis, liturgy, iconography, and hymnology:<sup>13</sup>

And on the third day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, Mary went out of the cave and, entering a stable, placed the child in the manger, and an ox and an ass adored him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by Isaiah the prophet, 'The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib [Isa. 3:1]' Therefore, the animals, the ox and the ass, with him in their midst, incessantly adored him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by Habakkuk the prophet, saying, 'Between two animals you are made manifest [Hab. 3:2 LXX].'<sup>14</sup>

The mistranslated line "between two animals you are made manifest"—in the Old Latin "In medio duorum animalium innotesceris"—is easily recognized in early depictions of the nativity where Christ's crib is placed between the ox on the ass, as in the detail from the 4<sup>th</sup> century sarcophagus now part of the pulpit in the Sant' Ambrogio Basilica in Milan (fig. 3) the early 6<sup>th</sup> century ivory now in the British Museum (fig. 4).

Iconographically depicting the crib *between* the ox and the ass is cumbersome, however, in that effectively blocks crib-side access to other, more important, players in the nativity scene such as Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, angels, and Magi. We see this already in the ivory from the British Museum, where Mary herself is separated from the child by the ox.

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on *M. R. James* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 86; with the caveat pointing out that the oldest extant manuscript of the work comes from the eleventh century.

<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Matthew 14 (ET: Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 94).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* An interesting side feature of this account is its attempts to harmonize the difference between the ancient tradition that Jesus was born in a cave (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 78; *Proto-Gospel of James* 18:1, 19:1-3; 21:3; Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.51, and Jerome, *Epistle* 108.10), and the later view that it took place in the sort of free standing stable arrangement we see depicted even today on Christmas cards. In this Pseudo-Matthew conflicts with Eastern depictions, which retain the cave as the birthplace of Jesus, and depict the ox and the ass *in* the cave with him.



**Fig 3: "Sarcophago di Stilicone" (detail), 4<sup>th</sup> cent., Sant' Ambrogio Basilica, Milan, Italy. (Photo: © Giovanni Dall' Orto)**



**Fig. 4: "Ivory Plaque With the Adoration of the Magi," (detail) Early Byzantine, Eastern Mediterranean, (early 6<sup>th</sup> cent.) (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).**

Attempts to compensate for this naturally become awkward. How cramped things can become when trying to bring these other figures closer to the crib while still placing it in some sense between the ox and the ass is seen in a 15<sup>th</sup> century window from the church at Loisy-en-Brie in north-east France (fig. 5).

This iconographic problem is resolved by adopting the convention of moving the two animals back behind the crib, as we see occurring already, for example, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus in Rome's Museo Nazionale Romano, which also appears to be our very earliest surviving depiction not only of the ox and the ass, but of the Nativity as such.



**Fig. 5: "The Nativity" 1460-80 (detail), Church at Loisy-en-Brie, north-eastern France, Nelson Atkins Museum (Photo: R. Huggins)**



**Fig. 6: Sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus (detail), c. 330-40, (Photo: Courtesy of Richard Stracke)**

Placing the ox and ass behind the crib allows a the great compactness of composition, seen in the following delightful examples, one from a 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century early Gothic stained glass window from Maria am Leech Church in Graz, Austria (fig. 7), and the other a diminutive ivory relief from an 11<sup>th</sup> century postable altar.

**Fig. 7: "Nativity," 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> cent. Stained Glass, Leech Church, Graz, Austria (Photo: R. Huggins)**

**Fig. 8: "Swanhilde's Portable Altar," Mid-11<sup>th</sup> cent., Melk Abbey, Lower Austria (Photo: R. Huggins)**





But to return once again to the subject of the identification of the ox with Israel (clean animal) and the ass with gentiles (unclean animal), as I thought of this I began to wonder whether this dual identification had in any way influenced the way these two animals were portrayed in paintings of the nativity. In connection with this question two nativity scenes in particular arrested my attention recently while I was making my way through the Alte Galerie in Eggenburg Castle in Graz, Austria, both of which contained features that might seem related to my question. The first was a very charming little nativity scene that was part of a 15<sup>th</sup> century altarpiece featuring the legend of St. Florian (fig. 9).



**Fig. 7: "Legend of St. Florian and Childhood of Christ Altarpiece" (detail), Styrian Master (?), c. 1490. Alte Galerie, Schloss Eggenburg, Graz, Austria (Photo: R. Huggins)**

Here the presentation is Bridgittine, that is to say, it follows the influential vision of Saint Bridget of Sweden (c. 1303-1373) by having the baby Jesus lying naked on the ground in front of a kneeling, worshipping Mary, rather than in his traditional crib. This new way of depicting the nativity scene apparently make's its first appearance in art history in Naples just before 1380.<sup>15</sup>

In this particular painting we are struck by the fact that although the ass stands over the Christ child, immediately behind Mary, the ox looks on from behind a wall, actually outside the building. Is this to be regarded as simply a compositional decision, or did the artist intend something more, did he have in mind, for example, the “dividing wall of hostility” that Paul spoke about, which separated Jew and Gentile, but which was done away in Christ? If he did have this in mind, he certainly does not include any obvious additional pictorial clues in that direction, nothing that could be read as in any way disparaging toward the Jews. Both the ass and the ox look upon the child Jesus in quiet adoration. In addition, one is hard pressed to find an example of a more charmingly and affectionately rendered ox.

The situation is different with a nativity (again in the Bridgittine style) on the opposite wall of the same room in the Alte Galerie. In this second painting, also produced in Styria, and only a decade or two earlier than the one just discussed, the animals are rendered in a striking way I had never encountered before. In this picture neither animal has its gaze focused on the Christ child, a fact that by itself is scarcely unprecedented. Commonly, in more realistic representations, the animals *are* often present naturalistically, and as such we see them staring dumbly and happily into space in a way we expect a real ox and ass might do (fig. 10).

**Fig. 10: Martin Johann Schmidt , (Kremser Schmidt), “Adoration of the Shepherds,” 1790, Graz, Austria, Diözesanmuseum (Photo: R. Huggins)**

This is not the case here, however, where each of the animals has its gaze fixed somewhere, just not on Christ.



<sup>15</sup>*Bridget of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations* (Classics of Western Spirituality; ed. Marguerite Tjader Harris, trans. Albert Ryle Kezel, intro, Tore Nyberg; New York, NY, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press), 306, nt. 779. The text of the vision itself (Revelations 7.21.8-13) is found in the same volume on p. 203.

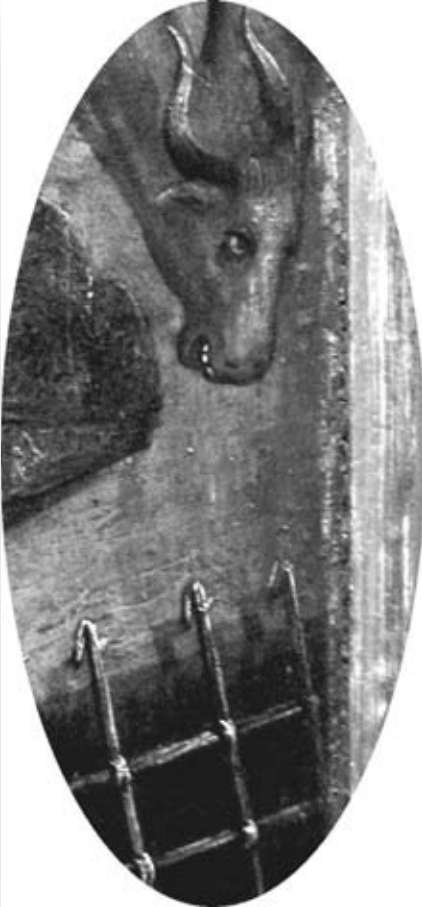


**Fig. 11: Master of the Divisio Apostolorum, "Adoration of the Child" (1470-80), Styrian, from Admont Monastery, now in the Altes Gallerie, Schloss Eggenberg (Photo R. Huggins)**

The donkey is looking up at Mary, while the ox cranes its neck to look down into a grate of sorts (a barred window?) in the floor of the stable. The significance of the donkey's gaze seems clear enough, simply another example of the medieval tendency to exalt Mary to a point that is

theologically problematic, as in this case, where it could only be accomplished by having the ass take its eyes *off* Jesus! (fig. 11)

More strikingly disturbing is the gaze of the ox down the hole. How is one to understand the symbolism there? Does the grate depict the hole down which manure is shoveled, in order to be removed later from below? Are we to look for an allusion here to Paul's description of all his former advantages as a Jew as "dung" in Philippians 3:8.



Certainly such an interpretation is possible, given the fact that the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek *skybala* is the Latin *stercora* which was understood in the sense of dung, or excrement. That such identifications were around at roughly the time this painting was produced can be seen as well in a work on the New Testament written toward the end of the 15th century at the Monastery of San Benedetto Po, and used by the monks of Santa Giustina at Padua. We read in its preface to the book of Philippians that Paul "showed the Law to be as dung [*stecora*] and no value to salvation."<sup>16</sup>

Or is it intended suggest a dungeon, perhaps hell itself? In either case given the

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<sup>16</sup> Bibl. Comunale, Mantua, MS 280, fol. 63<sup>v</sup> quoted in Barry Collett, *Italian Benedictine Scholars and the Reformation: The Congregation of Santa Giustina of Padua* (Oxford Historical Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 46.

traditional identification of the ox with Israel, one is hard pressed to imagine how either of the options mentioned can be construed as anything but disparaging towards Judaism.

On a more positive note, a final motif that invites our attention is one that represents a peculiar but theologically significant variant of the motif of the ox and/or ass eating the straw from the manger in which the baby Jesus lay, illustrated with considerable delicacy, for example, in a 15<sup>th</sup> century terra cotta by Italian artist Luca della Robbia, entitled *Nativity with Gloria in Excelsis* (fig. 12). This motif is extremely common and echoed perhaps in the famous line from the familiar carol *What Child is This?*: “Why lies he in such low estate where *ox and ass are feeding?*”



**Fig. 12: Luca Della Robbia, Italian, “Nativity with Gloria in Excelsis,” 1470 Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Photo: R. Huggins)**

In some nativity scenes, however, it is not the straw under Christ child upon which the ox and ass are feeding, but the Christ child himself, thus bringing to mind John 6, where Jesus calls himself the “bread of life” and promises that anyone who eats of this bread will live forever (6:35, 48, 51).

Two particularly charming examples of this come from twelfth-century illuminated manuscripts. The first originating in Germany, but presently in the British Library (fig. 13).



**Fig 13: "Miniature of the Nativity, prefacing the reading for Christmas" (detail), Gospel Lectionary, Imperfect, Germany, S. (Swabia, possibly Hirsau); 1st quarter of the 12th cent. (Photo © The British Library Board) (Egerton 809 f. 1v)**

The second, my favorite, comes from the Albani Psalter (St. Alban's Psalter), also known as the "Psalter of Christina of Markyate," which now belonging to the Cathedral library at Hildesheim, Germany..



**Fig. 14. "The Birth of Christ, "Psalter of Christina of Markyate," (St Albans Cathedral Psalter" 12<sup>th</sup> cent. (Photo: Courtesy the Cathedral library of Hildesheim, Germany).**

For me one of the most moving exposition of the role of the ox and the ass at the manger of Jesus comes from a sermon the great Latin Father Augustine of Hippo preached on the Feast of Epiphany, the day on which the arrival of the Magi was celebrated:

In the persons of the shepherds and of the Magi, the ox began to recognize his owner and the ass his Master's crib. From the Jews came the horned ox, since among them the horns of the cross were prepared for Christ; from the Gentiles came the long-eared ass, since it was concerning them that the prophecy had been made: "A people, which I knew not, hath served me: at the hearing of the ear they have obeyed me." For the Owner of the ox and the Master of the ass lay in a manger, yet He was furnishing common sustenance to both creatures. Therefore, because peace had come to those who were afar and to those who were near, Israelite shepherds, as those found nearby, came to Christ on the day of His birth, saw Him, and rejoiced; but the Magi Gentiles, as those found at a distance, came at an interval of several days after His birth, found, and adored Him on this day. It was quite appropriate, then, that we, the Church made up of converts gathered from the Gentiles, should join the celebration of this day on which Christ was manifested to the first-fruits of the Gentiles to the observance of that day on which Christ was born of the Jewish race, and that we should preserve the memory of so great a mystery by a twofold solemnity.<sup>17</sup>

Let us, then, like the ox, know that God is our maker and our owner—recognizing that we are not our own, but were bought with a price (1 Cor 6:19-20)—and, like the "long-eared" ass, hear and receive the Gospel from afar, and come and feed on Jesus., "the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). Amen.

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<sup>17</sup>Augustine, *Sermon 204* (ET: Saint Augustine, *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* [FC 38; trans. Sister Mary Sarah Muldowney, R. S. M.; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959], 79-80).