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Bruegel, the Bible, and Christian Education

Carol J. Cook

This essay is submitted in honor of James I. Cook, my first and most formative teacher of the mysteries and joys of the Christian life. I am grateful that he will never retire from his vocation as father, nor as faithful witness to God's grace upon grace.

In his painting, *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, sixteenth-century Flemish painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, depicts the varied activities of common village life (see Appendix A). Even without knowing much about the time period, art, or Bruegel himself, twentieth-century onlookers are captivated by the exquisite detailing of the curiosities of daily life in another time and place. Art critic John Canaday gracefully leads the viewer through the various levels of experience in the painting.

A man butchers a hog while a woman holds a pan to catch blood from the slit throat; children tussle with one another, romp on the ice, spin tops, pull sleds; chickens peck in the snow; birds cut through the sky, and one perches on the tip of a ruined tree; people gossip, gather firewood, build a hut, work at their trades, enter a distant church. In the midst of these usual activities there is an exceptional one, which insistently claims our attention: in the doorway of a decaying building some men sit behind a table, two of them examining a record or dossier of some kind while another, in an opulent furred coat, fills in forms as the villagers crowd around to give the required information.

A villager or two leans against the tree; others jostle their neighbors and push their way toward the census takers, who have set up a table in front of the inn. Some forty people are gathered in this compact knot and all have come for the same reason. But each individual is characterized by his stance, by his features or expression, by the clothes he wears. One can almost hear the hubbub of voices; even the shuffling sound of feet is evoked by the trampled, once immaculate carpet of snow. We may not at first attach unusual importance to a woman mounted on a donkey who seems to protect something beneath her cloak while a man, bending forward under his burden, leads the way through the unnoticing village.
In this full pattern, each detail is a pattern in itself, sometimes curious, sometimes even grotesque, always charged with life. Each figure, each building, each tree, each of the wheels that are scattered from foreground to background in a pattern within-a-pattern, is a triumph of design when taken singly. But the artist’s staggering feat is to have unified so many hundreds of elements into a whole that fuses two apparently incompatible pictures: he tells us of the random bustle, the unplanned movement in a scattered and haphazard village landscape; at the same time, he fits these random elements into a composition so neatly constructed, so beautifully controlled, that the longer we examine it as an abstract arrangement the less we can imagine modifying any part without disrupting the whole.

A poor hut with a wicker basket for a chimney; on its roof, two birds beak to beak; around it, children playing. A man steps out of the shed; a peasant woman in a flat hat of woven straw hoes her tiny garden still half-hidden under the snow. A picture within a picture, telling its own story, this miniature universe is bound by a thousand ties, visible and psychological, to the rest of the composition.

Who is this fellow dragging a long sword and hurrying across a frozen pond? [right-hand bottom corner] Where is he going, and where has he come from? The story gives no clue, but the fact of his being placed so conspicuously in the forefront of the picture and in the right-hand corner, as if he had just this moment entered it, is too telling to be uncalculated. Perhaps the artist wanted to let us know that the scene we are looking in on is not limited to what he has shown us, but is all of a piece with the rest of a world that extends beyond the borders.

The dark, dominating trunk of the great tree standing like a barrier between us and the rest of the picture is first of all a vertical device to link earth and sky. It also accounts for much of the picture’s effect of depth; the naked branches enmeshing the scene beyond are painted with the boldness and clarity of objects seen at close range, thus exaggerating the distance of objects behind them. And at the same time the beautiful pattern of winter branches tells of the tenacious splendor of a living tree.

Another thing: since the picture is called The Numbering at Bethlehem, more than description and composition must be
involved. A story, surely; is there also a comment? The numbering was the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, and a prelude to the massacre of the innocents, when Herod ordered the murder of newborn boys in order to do away with the one who, by prophecy, was to be king of the Jews.

Bruegel had an immediate reason for laying the scene in the kind of Flemish village he and contemporaries knew. Thus, as in the companion Massacre of the Innocents, he comments through the disguise of a Biblical subject on Spanish persecutions in Flanders. The officials and later the murdering soldiers enter the village with the foreign authority and the cruelty to which the country was subjected. But even if we forget the topical reference, the transference of locale from ancient Judea to Bruegel’s home ground brings the story into an area that was his own in more than a geographical sense.

Bruegel discovered for painting the zest and humor of the common man who shares the soil’s plainness but also its vitality and perpetual renewal. Mary and Joseph enter Bruegel’s village as anonymously as they entered Bethlehem. They are bound into the pattern of other common, anonymous people who go about their work unnoticed. But Bruegel points them out to us by placing them where, once we have seen them, we cannot forget them, and now we know what the treasure is that the woman protects not only beneath her cloak but within her body. We become secret participants in a story more miraculous for being invisible to other witnesses in the broad light and the commonplace surroundings of everyday. We realize, too, that everywhere the everyday is only a surface that conceals an eternal miracle.2

Even though visual art can deepen our understanding of what it means to learn and to teach, it remains an overlooked resource for theological education. As John Dillenberger emphasizes, "Protestantism has lived so long without the visual that the loss of that human and spiritual resource is seldom recognized as an issue."3 Yet, the purpose and strategies of the visual artist are akin to those of the authors of the Scriptures. In this article I shall explore that relationship, more specifically the ways in which the interpretation of reality in Bruegel’s The Numbering at Bethlehem complements that of the different genres in the Old and New Testament. In so doing, I indicate how the arts can be woven back into the life of the church and be recognized as intrinsic to its theological practice and reflection.
By way of this journey through Bruegel's painting and the biblical canon, I want to suggest two things. First, a creative energy is generated when both artistic mediums—literary and visual—are joined in announcing the reign of God. Each can help us learn about the other, and each can be a powerful resource in the practice of Christian education, helping us to see in new ways and leading us to a particular posture in the world. The use of the tradition's visual art may even function parabolically in Protestant circles and congregations by disrupting a set world of discourse and allowing in something fresh. Attending to paintings such as *The Numbering at Bethlehem* can "nurture people in an openness to alternative imagination which never quite perceives the world the way the dominant reality wants us to see it" in much the same way as the poetic speech of the prophets.

Second, while paintings do not have the same authoritative stature as Scripture, I would suggest that studying a painting such as Bruegel's is one of the practices of the church. As any such practice, it shares in the Bible's ability to cultivate a posture of centered-openness to the world. This includes an openness to perceiving the disclosure of God in the world, which is what Christian education is finally about. As Craig Dykstra and Freda Gardner have asserted: "Christian education is the activity of helping people attend to the presence of God in the world, including that part of the world each of us experiences directly: in our own community, family and work place, and in our own struggles, joys, questions and challenges."

In *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*, Walter Brueggemann discusses the Old Testament in terms of its three major divisions: Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom Literature. Regarding each section, he asks the process question: how does Israel know; and the substantive question: what does Israel know. He makes the claim that this how and what are closely linked and that educators "must attend to the correspondence between the two."

Brueggemann cites story as the primal mode of knowing in the Torah, and therefore suggests that story should be the primary method of learning and teaching this section of the Bible in church education. The Torah invites children to participate in a reliable life-world in which they can find coherence and assurance. It reverses the catechetical tradition, for here the child is encouraged to ask questions in a spirit of openness and wonder. Brueggemann shows that story, as a distinctive form of epistemology, possesses several characteristics. It is concrete, open-ended, imaginative, experiential, and "bottom line." "It is told and left, and not hedged about by other evidences . . . Israel has confidence in its stories, in and of themselves. Israel understands them not as instruments of something else, but as castings of reality." The ethos of the Torah is liberation and is constructed around the stories of Moses, Joshua, and the intervention of a new God. "The Torah is simple and unambiguous on the point; it is about newness, an underived, unextrapolated
discontinuity."\textsuperscript{11} Israel's narrative makes the identity of this new God available to each generation. The story of the Torah is thus one of "miracle and wonderment—a disruption, an inversion, an exposure of all conventional human relations."\textsuperscript{12} It includes a critique and dethronement of any who claim ultimate political or any other power for themselves.

Drawing upon James Sanders and David Clines, Brueggemann makes a case for considering the central theological claim of the Torah that God is a God of promises, a God who makes them and keeps them.\textsuperscript{13} These promises are to be utterly trusted, yet remain unfulfilled. God's righteousness, the commands of obedience coupled with a call to freedom, the holiness of God and its relationship to the question of human justice are all aspects of attending (through education) to this God of promise. Israel keeps its distinctive identity by remembering its history of experiencing God's disclosure. The Torah is not an argument or proof of this, but simply an assertion of its experienced truth.

Bruegel's painting participates in and relies upon the Torah's mode of knowing. It tells the story of a coherent world, one in which God miraculously and wonderfully comes among common people in the midst of their everyday labor and play, sorrow and joy. Bruegel gives us a privileged perspective from which to see God's entrance into the world and an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of that unexpected presence among people who are oblivious to it. In so doing, he re-presents the coherence beneath the apparent randomness of our own world and creates a moment for us to ponder more deeply the ways in which God may be as quietly but undeniably active and present in our own daily occupations and preoccupations. As persons all too familiar with the biblical story, Bruegel reminds us of the unexpected newness and disruptive power contained in this easily overlooked entrance.

Attending to the painting's details, we are invited to participate in a story which is concrete, open-ended, imaginative, communally experiential, and moving towards a "bottom line," which Brueggemann describes as the Torah's narrative mode of knowing. The painting discloses the presence of God in our world. To the degree that the painting's story shares in that of the Torah, its depiction of reality is its claim. It is there to be viewed and reflected upon, but in and of itself its claim is paradoxically both modest and bold. Within a context of Christian education, the painting's degree of trustworthiness can be determined in light of the larger story of which it is a part.

Brueggemann analyzes the mode of knowing in the second portion of the Old Testament, the Prophets, in terms of psychology, mythology, and sociology. Psychologically, the prophets are persons whose lives are disrupted by what they experience as a live, direct word of God. They experience an intrusion of a power that lay "outside the rationality of their culture" which gives them a highly unconventional imagination.\textsuperscript{14} Mythologically the prophets are involved with the "divine council of the gods," are authorized by the Lord, and are
aligned with an alternative political claim. Sociologically, the prophets are both products and critics of their society and its institutions. In order to critique the dominant social structure, they live and preach from the margins and comprise a peripheral community of faith. Yet they remain bearers of the tradition and are related to the Torah in both continuous and discontinuous ways.

What most characterizes the prophetic epistemology for Brueggemann, however, is the fact that they were poets. He sees them less as social activists and reformers and more as nurturers of poetic imagination. As poets they have the capacity to draw new pictures, form new metaphors, and run bold risks of rhetoric; they create a new arena for Israel’s imagination and derivatively for Israel’s political actions. They seek to form an alternative context for humanness by creating a different presumptive world buoyed by different promises, served by different resources.

Prophetic poetry refuses reduction, and takes Israel inside the richness and textures of raw, historical experience.

This poetry refuses to let life be quantified, generalized, summarized. It insists on taking time to notice the human dimensions of pain and healing. It dares to give cosmic proportion to these aspects of life, claiming that the texture of human suffering and human healing is a match for what happens in the heart of God. The prophets believe and assert that the worse scandal is not to notice the grief and delight that are at the bottom of the world, in the heart of God.

The literary/rhetorical force of prophetic speech does not end in the realm of the aesthetics. Rather, its authority arises from its being informed by a "two-world construct, a tension of continuity and discontinuity between the present world and the promised world." Very often prophets speak on behalf of the have-nots, seeing the way their lives and present power structures contradict the promises and intent of God. Their language breaks through the rational constructs of the status quo and subverts existing political structures. Their radical speech is "a new revelation which surprises, shatters, violates, and offends."

The substance of the prophetic literature can be summarized as a claim that God is bringing the old world to an end and a new world into being. Both of these activities are beyond human control, and God’s capacity for newness cannot be confined to our categories of what is possible. "The prophetic canon thus revolves around great movements of ending and beginning, of dying and
new life, of suffering and hope, of lament and doxology" of destroying and overthrowing, of building and planting. It also pictures God as One who moves among those who are marginalized and advocates on their behalf. The prophetic God is a God of pathos, a God who suffers with the suffering and hears the cries of those in need.

Through its education, the Christian community can encourage the expression and reception of prophetic speech. "The task of the second part of the canon is to bring the passion of God to speech—to speak in such ways of passion that the words will not be co-opted." It is a difficult educational task to nurture critical voices within the community, but as Brueggemann reminds, "any education which purports to be seriously biblical must explore this dangerous challenge." As he emphasizes, this is "the danger and the deepness of this part of the canon—the rhetorical freedom to imagine a world not shaped the way we experience its shape." This means teaching in such a way that people are open to a future beyond their present capacity to envision and expect. "The educational agenda is to teach and probe the authority of new revelation which flies in the face of old revelation, and to form a new community open to the claims of the new revelation."

While a single painting cannot encompass the breadth, depth, and inspired authority of prophetic speech, Bruegel’s *The Numbering at Bethlehem* reveals a similar message from other angles and allows viewers to participate in this prophetic grasp of reality. Bruegel experienced Spanish political oppression with its version of human cruelties and sharply critiqued it. The Spanish seat of the Holy Roman Empire exerted economic and religious control over a people who had become accustomed to ruling themselves and had felt the impact of the Reformation. Through heavy taxation and the tortures of the Inquisition, the people of the Netherlands experienced untold suffering. By giving his depictions of contemporary injustice biblical titles, Bruegel breaks through time and space. This move both deepens apprehension of the anguish of the biblical story and forces the viewer to confront the fact that such evil is not confined to the first century, or to sixteenth-century Flanders. The same presence judges and critiques similar forms of injustice throughout all centuries. In addition, many of the symbols in the painting work together to highlight Mary and Joseph’s hidden gift to the world, the One who will challenge this world’s powers and principalities in loving judgment.

Like the prophetic canon, the painting revolves around the great movements of ending and beginning, laughing and crying, tearing down and rebuilding. The powers of life and death, work and play, children and adults are juxtaposed throughout the painting. A hog is butchered, people are being counted and taxed, burdens bend over many of the adults, buildings crumble. Yet people garden and build, children play; life co-exists with death. The sun sets (on the old order) and a new Son is about to be born. Although marginalized, a church
stands unobtrusively in the upper left-hand corner. Wheels, which are omnipresent throughout the painting, connote rotating force, often a symbol of divine power and transcendence, of freedom, of hope in the midst of exile. The tree too bears much significance in Christian art. It recalls the genealogy of Christ, a family tree which springs from Jesse, the father of David and bears the ancestors of Christ as its fruit. Usually the tree culminates with the figure of the Virgin bearing her Divine Son in her arms. The representation of the Tree of Jesse is based upon the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1-2, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him . . . ." Bruegel’s placement of the tree next to the census booth highlights its genealogical significance. Through its intricate pattern of branches we see the sun setting. Its trunk divides the river in half, a river which winds through the painting, frozen on the surface, but still flowing beneath, an image also rich in connotations.

These various images suggest the promised reign of Christ. As in the poetic speech of the prophets, however, this presence is communicated through images which in and of themselves help break up and subvert rational and discursive constructs that sometimes confine and constrict. The juxtaposition of biblical times, themes, and symbols with an ordinary day for sixteenth-century peasants, who live on the margins of the existing power structures, points to the continuity and discontinuity between the present and promised world, a fault line upon which prophets inevitably stand. And through its detailed attention to individuals and patterns of social interaction, the painting draws the viewer inside the richness of life’s irreducible mixture of misery, boredom, and pleasure. Bruegel’s rugged, peasant faces can help us become more aware of "the grief and delight that are at the bottom of the world, in the heart of God." Thus the painting can be interpreted as reflecting the pathos of God which embraces and enters into the pathos of human life in all its forms, including a very real labor and delivery.

The third portion of the canon which Brueggemann discusses is that of Wisdom Literature. The mode of knowing characterizing this genre is patient observation, an expectant uncertainty.

We are not dealing with a settled consensus nor with a radical break from the consensus. We are rather in touch with a mystery that cannot be too closely shepherded, as in the Torah, or protested against, as in the prophets. There is here a not-knowing, a waiting to know, a patience about what is yet to be discerned, and a respect for not knowing that must be honored and not crowded. This way does not seek conclusions for immediate resolutions. It works at a different pace because it understands that the secrets cannot be forced. . . . This requires fascination, imagination, patience, attentiveness to detail, and
finally, observation of the regularities which seem to govern. Wisdom is found in the experience of the specific, concrete experiences which individuals discern for themselves. As a Jew or a Christian raised in community, one deals with the interaction between a tradition of experience and an immediacy of experience. To the degree that the wisdom literature is instructional, a dialogue occurs between the teacher and learner, and between the learners and the stuff of life. This includes a fascination with and attention to the shape, order, regularity, and reliability of the created world, and a recognition that God alone holds all wisdom; not everything can be known.

Wisdom yields yet another dimension of the church’s educational task:

Education is nurturing people into the practice of discernment, of watching slowly, patiently, enduringly, to see what will be given us. . . . The educational task, then, is to discern and to teach to discern, to attend to the gifts given in experience, to attend to the world around us. It is to read ourselves and that world in its playfulness, to know that what immediately meets the eye is not all there is. It is to know that as we touch the dailyness of our lives, we are in touch also with something precious beyond us that draws close to the holiness of God. . . . [T]rue discernment or genuine wisdom is to stay with God in the seasons, to move in and out on the giving which lets us understand, and on to the taking away which places us always in new perspective.

Brueggemann claims that the central substance of wisdom teaching is "the discovery, premise, assumption, and conviction of the interconnectedness of life." Thus, attentiveness to new information will lead teachers and learners into deeper relationships.

The providential ordering of life portrayed in the wisdom literature involves a strong ethical dimension, for God has given the world a moral coherence as well. Yet access to this coherence is never complete. As Brueggemann makes clear, "the wisdom teachers worked continually with the dialectic of world-experience and Yahweh-experience." The process of discernment is always provisional, playful, exploratory, and tentative, yet grounded in the non-negotiable sovereign rule of God. "Wisdom is to fear God, to let God be God, to let mystery be definitional for life."

Bruegel’s The Numbering at Bethlehem embodies many of the characteristics of Wisdom Literature. Only through patient observation can the surprise elements and underlying pattern of the painting be discerned and appreciated.
Through its vivid and concrete details, the painting draws us more deeply into its, and in turn our, world. Studying a painting like this requires the same "fascination, imagination, patience, attentiveness to detail, and finally, observation of the regularities" which Brueggemann attributes to wisdom literature. Bruegel’s painting attempts to capture the stuff of life in its mysterious simplicity and complexity, randomness and order. There is an underlying rationality, shape, and meaning to its intent and existence. It can be both enjoyable and humbling to work at the gradual discernment of these qualities. Furthermore, the artwork holds together the paradoxical relationship between the solid ethos of the Torah and the disruptive pathos of the Prophets. Considering this painting in light of the larger corpus of his work, we discover that much of Bruegel’s art had a didactic and socially critical, ethically-oriented dimension. He was intent on exposing the evils of his times and their destructive impact on his society. And he reminded his audience that a humane alternative was possible.

Bruegel’s artistic interpretation of reality also corresponds to that of the parables, an important genre for Christian educators. As one educator observes, "If, as New Testament studies show, Jesus characteristically taught in parables, then they seem constitutive of Christianity and, hence, basic to religious education in that tradition." The parables gather up in an intensified, microcosmic fashion, the modes of knowing fundamental to the Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom.

In The Dark Interval, John Dominic Crossan contrasts parable with myth. Drawing from the work of Claude Levi-Strauss and his analysis of the structure of myth, Crossan explains how myth performs the specific task of mediating irreducible objects and reconciling them. The role of myth is similar in this sense to the role of the Torah, which also establishes a safe world, a reliable ethos in which to dwell. In contrast to myth, however, parable challenges and disrupts the false senses of security we create, and shows us the "seams and edges of myth," especially when myth becomes static, worn out, idolatrous. Like the prophetic literature in particular, parables intend to shatter the easy security of the hearer’s world and in so doing disclose and make room for the kingdom of God. For Crossan, parabolic religion is one that "continually and deliberately subverts final words about 'reality' and thereby introduces the possibility of transcendence." Thus, among other things, parables have the capacity to put the listener in a posture of centered-openness that enables the perception of the world in new ways, including God’s self-disclosure of alternative ways of knowing and being. Parables crack open closed worlds, constricted ways of knowing, and oppressive political structures. But they do so in such a way that leads the listener toward the word made flesh, the logos incarnate, the Christ, to participation in a new wisdom. Communion with Christ, in the fellowship of koinonia, allows one to cultivate the life of wisdom,
mature ethical living and reflection, and deeper participation in Christ's spirit and truth.

Similarly, Paul Lehmann asserts that the parabolic images which Jesus employed juxtapose "inconfusedly and inseparably" the ways of God and of humanity. For him, the formative biblical images partake in this parabolic power. These images point to the realness of God and the mature responsiveness of humanity. Higher biblical criticism has set these biblical images free from confinement by the text and free for broader literary and historical contexts. This enables the biblical images to express more fully what God is doing in the world. For Lehmann, the formative images which point to and describe the divine activity in the world are political images. The messianic theme constitutes the principal content of Israel's faith. The crucial political image is the image of the Messiah, the one who comes to inaugurate and consummate the kingship of God.

Finally, then, I propose that the interpretation of reality in Bruegel's painting complements that of the different genres in the Old and New Testament: Torah, Prophets, Wisdom, and Parable. The Numbering at Bethlehem depicts a stable, coherent mythos of village life. Yet the disclosure of Christ's entrance into the world disrupts this village scene, and other symbols reinforce this revolutionary presence in the painting. In educational contexts, Christians can be nurtured to develop the eyes to see this juxtaposition of worlds and the hearts to reflect upon its significance. Quietly and evocatively, the painting embodies the central messianic image of the biblical witness, the crucial political image to which Lehmann points. Attending to the rich realities in the painting can thus put viewers in a posture of openness where they can discover and respond in "free obedience" to the significance of that reality which has broken into and redefines human existence. If this is indeed fundamental to the practice of Christian education, we must draw upon the untapped richness of artistic resources and practices in our tradition to assist us in teaching more parabolically, more faithfully.

A painting such as Bruegel's that functions parabolically disrupts the very order it depicts. What lies beneath Mary's cloak opposes the idolatrous use of art as much as it opposes any other form of idolatry and abuse of power. In this sense, the cultivation of religious imagination through attending to visual art in a context of Christian education, can enable us to become more faithful witnesses to the One who parabolically and imagistically taught us what it means to be created and to live in the image of God.

ENDNOTES


8. Brueggemann, 10.


10. Ibid., 26.

11. Ibid., 28.

12. Ibid., 30.

13. Ibid., 32.

14. Ibid., 47.

15. Ibid., 48.

16. Ibid., 50-51.

17. Ibid., 52.
In paintings such as *Justice* and *Massacre of the Innocents* Bruegel depicts an even more explicit range of human atrocities, both biblical and contemporary.

Zupnick, 12ff.


39. Ibid., 38.

40. Ibid., 105.


42. Ibid.
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