

This photo is available in
the print version of *Suffering*.

Job is very prominent in fifteenth-century Venetian painting as an intercessor, suffering servant, and redeemer-prophet during the horrific plagues and famines of the day. So it is not at all surprising to meet him in Carpaccio's "Meditation on the Passion."

Vittore Carpaccio (ca. 1455-1525), THE MEDITATION ON THE PASSION, ca. 1510. Oil and tempera on wood, 27 3/4" x 34 1/8". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1911.(11.118).

My Redeemer Lives

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

In the center of Carpaccio's striking image, the dead Christ sits on a deteriorated throne of red and cream marble. With his eyes closed, he appears to be sleeping. This iconographic reference to the resurrection, or the reawakening, of the Man of Sorrows derives from *pieta*, the images that depict the Virgin Mary mourning over the dead body of Christ.

The throne divides the background. On the left side, which is rocky and void of vegetation, is a cave, a doe, a wolf, and a female leopard leaping upon a male leopard. The right side, by contrast, depicts the verdant, gently rolling hills near the village of Veneto, and a stag escaping from a leopard. The colors throughout the painting are warm earth tones.

The stigmata of Christ are noticeable in his hands and side; his crown of thorns, fallen to the ground, leans on its side against the throne. As Christ slumps towards the figure on the right, the Hebrew characters for "Israel" are revealed on the throne. Some scholars interpret him as sitting on the shattered throne of Israel while his faithful servants contemplate his sacrificial death and resurrection. Two birds are placed strategically in the composition: one perches between Christ and Job, the figure on the right; the other flies from the top of the throne. They may be symbols not only of new life, but also of Christ's resurrected life as prefigured in Job 19:25.

The hermit on the left is Jerome (c. 347-420), the great biblical scholar of the ancient Church. He is identified by the iconography of the books, rosary, and lion figurine behind him. Jerome was one of the first, through his several commentaries and an interlinear exposition of the entire book of Job, to give a Christian symbolic interpretation of Job's suffering. In an often-quoted passage in a letter to Paulinus, he sums up his interpretation:

Then, as for Job, that pattern of patience, what mysteries are there not contained in his discourses? ... To say nothing of other topics, it prophesies the resurrection of men's bodies at once with more clearness and with more caution than any one has yet shown. "I know," Job says, "that my redeemer liveth, and that at the last day I shall rise again from the earth; and I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh shall I see God. Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another. This my hope is stored up in my own bosom" [Job 19:25-26].¹

Job, who is seated on the right, supports his weary head with his left hand. He stares not at the Christ figure, but to his left and towards the viewer. His indirect glance expresses the subject of this painting—it is a meditation that leaves the eyes of the contemplator glazed. Some interpreters suggest that the odd positioning of the left side of Job’s body—recalling the iconographic tradition of the Middle Ages that the left is sinister (from the Latin, *sinister*, for “on the left side”)—signals his association with disease. Job’s right hand points to his sandaled feet. The nearby skull and human bones link him, more convincingly than the left orientation, with death and disease. Job’s feet, unlike those of Christ and Jerome, remain covered to reflect the stigmata of ritual impurity—compare the biblical images that Job’s “feet are unstable” (Job 12:5), a sign that his stricken life is slipping totally out of balance and control, and that his feet are bound “in the stocks” and marked by God (13:27; 33:11).

On the marble slab on which Job sits, the Hebrew inscription is “My redeemer lives 19,” which refers to Job 19:25, the hopeful passage that Jerome interprets above. Even the location of the inscription is meaningful, for Fredrick Hartt reminds us that the preceding verse is: “Who will grant me that my words may be written? Who will grant me that they be marked down in a book? With an iron pen and in a plate of lead, or else be graven with an instrument on a flint stone?” (Job 19: 23-24).²

Notice that the inscription is on the side of the block that faces toward Jerome, who has so strongly influenced our interpreting Job as a paradigm of patience, a believer whose suffering compares with Christ’s, and a prophet who foretold Christ’s resurrection.³

NOTES

1 Jerome, Letter LIII (to Paulinus) in *The Principle Works of St. Jerome*, translated by Philip Schaff (online at www.ccel.org/s/schaff/npnf206).

2 For a discussion of this inscription, see Frederick Hartt, “Carpaccio’s Meditation on the Passion,” *Art Bulletin*, XXII.1 (1940), 25-35. The Douay translation used here is noticeably different from the King James Version.

3 See my “Job as Intercessor or Prophet? The Venetian Images by Bellini and Carpaccio,” *Review and Expositor*, Theme Issue: “Have you Considered My Servant Job?” 99:4 (Fall 2002): 541-68. I thank Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Managing Editor, for allowing me to express ideas that I originally developed in the *Review and Expositor* article.



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