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‘The Bosom of Abraham’ (Luke 16:22): Father Abraham in the Visual Imagination

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Abstract

The phrase ‘in the bosom of Abraham’ occurs just once in the Bible (Lk. 16:22) and yet has become one of the most powerful and intriguing visual metaphors in the entire repertoire of Christian iconography. As the focal point of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, it suggests a haven of protection and security to which all the (male) characters in the story aspire. The Greek term κόλπος, ‘bosom,’ is an ambiguous term that can be applied as much to a female figure as a male and indeed Abraham is often represented as if he were ‘mother of all nations’ rather than, or as well as, father. The iconography associated with the image of Abraham’s bosom is both extensive and complex, especially during the period of the Middle Ages, but in this article, I select a range of representative examples to illustrate how artists and iconographers appealed to other biblical texts to help illuminate the meaning and significance of the phrase in Luke: in particular, the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22; the infancy narrative of Luke including the presentation in the temple (Luke 1-2), and the woman who gives birth in Revelation 12. In interpreting the image, artists frequently followed the direction of the exegetes and Church Fathers but this does not seem always to have been the case, especially when it came to harmonizing the contrasting images of Abraham as sacrificial father of Isaac and protective father of Lazarus. Contrary to many biblical commentators, the iconographical tradition largely ignores any suggestion that the bosom of Abraham signifies Lazarus reclining at a heavenly banquet next to Abraham, preferring instead to concentrate on the challenges posed in conveying the somewhat incongruous notion of Abraham, the most venerated of patriarchs, holding a naked and vulnerable child in his bosom.

Keywords

New Testament, iconography, Abraham

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Introduction

Commentators on the Gospel of Luke have long emphasized how the author accords a special place of privilege to women: for example, Mary and Elizabeth in the infancy narrative (chapters 1-2), the women who follow Jesus to Calvary (23:27-31), and those who feature so prominently in the resurrection narrative (23:55-24:10). More recently, however, in the volume *The Feminist Companion to Luke*, two authors have questioned whether, simply because women appear more frequently in Luke-Acts than any other New Testament book, we can conclude that it is Luke's intention to bestow on them a special status and position, even to the extent of overshadowing some of their male counterparts. Mary Rose D'Angelo points out that while Luke does supply more stories about women than Mark and Q combined, these nearly always appear paired with stories about men, either in the immediate context or in the larger context of the gospel.¹ Luke-Acts is far more interested in maleness and masculinity, she argues, than other early texts. There is an unmistakable stress on masculinity: for example, some roles, specifically roles of communal leadership, are clearly marked off for men and Luke uses the divine title 'father' more frequently than Mark and Q combined. D'Angelo concludes that it is more accurate to say that Luke is concerned with gender (rather than specifically with women) and argues that her partial examination of masculinity in Luke-Acts illuminates some of the complex functions of gender diffused throughout the book. Turid Karlsen Seim, the second of the two authors in the volume, explores how women do not always fill the roles left vacant by men.² In Luke 1, Joseph (unlike the parallel story in Matthew) is given a much reduced role while Zechariah is muted: the author appears to empty the place of the father and negate the paternal order. The vacancy is not filled, however, by mothers (Mary and Elizabeth) but by God, since the Lukan infancy narrative is

¹ Mary Rose D'Angelo, 'The ANHR Question in Luke-Acts: Imperial Masculinity and The Deployment of Women in the Early Second Century', in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 44-69.

² Turid Karlsen Seim, 'The Virgin Mother: Mary and Ascetic Discipleship in Luke', in Levine and Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, pp. 89-105.



concerned not so much with Joseph's absence as with exploring what the divine fatherhood of Jesus actually means. In Luke 2, fathers are reintroduced at the cost of women: now they signal a spiritual fatherhood represented by the prophet Simeon who frames Mary as *mater dolorosa* in 2:35.³ Like D'Angelo, Karlsen Seim emphasises how Luke's interest lies in the subtle juxtapositioning of male and female characters, rather than in championing exclusively the role of women in the gospel story.

To my mind, it is disappointing that neither author extends her discussion to include an important and distinctively Lukan parable which focuses very specifically on fatherhood and which would have supported strongly the general thrust of their arguments (indeed, there is no reference to it at all in the biblical index to the volume). Nevertheless, the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31), centred as it is on the role of Abraham as father, must surely relate to the Lukan emphasis on the roles of fatherhood and motherhood in the infancy narrative that D'Angelo and Karlsen Seim draw attention to, a relationship that was certainly developed in the most interesting and remarkable of ways in Christian iconography, particularly during the Middle Ages.

The parable of Dives and Lazarus is particularly striking for three reasons. First, all nine characters in the story are male⁴ and two of them are portrayed specifically as father figures. Abraham is called father three times by Dives (vv. 24, 27, 30) and in turn Abraham calls Dives his child (v. 25). Dives's request to warn his father's five sons of their fate is based on the premise that, as a father, Abraham will understand the feelings and concerns of a parent (vv. 27-28). God is not mentioned in the parable but Abraham appears as a divine substitute, assuming a most venerable role that makes his fatherhood seem even more authoritative. Yet, the focal point of the story, the haven of pro-

³ Karlsen Seim follows the position of Brigitte Kahl, *Armenevangelium und Heiden-evangelium: 'Sola scriptura' und die ökumenische Traditionsproblematik im Lichte von Väterkonflikt und Väterkonsens bei Lukas* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987), pp. 1-6, 142-44.

⁴ Abraham, Lazarus, Dives, his father and five brothers. The emphasis on fatherhood and sonship makes the absence of any female family member more noticeable.



tection and security to which all the (male) characters in the story aspire, is described as a bosom, κόλπος, an ambiguous term that can be applied as much to a female figure as to a male. (The richness of the imagery is lost entirely in those translations that do not preserve the word 'bosom': for example, the NRSV has 'to be with Abraham', the NIV 'Abraham's side', and the New Jerusalem Bible uses the term 'Abraham's embrace').⁵ Second, Luke, ever with an eye for the visual detail, puts into the mouth of Jesus in v. 23 what must be one of the most powerful visual metaphors in the entire Bible: the virtuous Lazarus is carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham while the rich man is prosaically and unceremoniously buried. The visual aspect is highlighted and repeated in v. 24 as Luke portrays the scene through the eyes of Dives, using two different terms for emphasis: 'raising up his eyes...he saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom'.⁶ The visual image of Abraham that Luke is so keen to register in the reader's mind is that of an authoritative but affectionate father holding his child closely and intimately to his person. What the reader of Luke 16 may find most puzzling, however, is not how we are meant to understand the gender implications of the term κόλπος, but rather, considering Abraham's treatment of Isaac in Genesis 22, how incongruous such a vivid and powerful image of Abraham as affectionate parent is in the first place. Third, if we look for a parallel female figure holding her child in her bosom, we will not find it in this gospel; Luke does not ever depict Mary or Elizabeth holding an infant and the closest parallel is to another male, Simeon, who 'took the child into his arms' (2:25) in the narrative of the presentation which, like the parable of Dives and Lazarus, is related only by Luke. Iconographers, as we shall see, seemed quite preoccupied with many of these associations and were quick to draw imaginative and often unexpected parallels between

⁵ The term 'Abraham's bosom' has a rich and imaginative reception history in English literature. See David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 11.

⁶ The same construction is found in Hebrew narrative. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 122, notes, 'The formulaic chain, "he raised his eyes and saw", occurs frequently in these stories [in Genesis] as a means of indicating a shift from the narrator's overview to the character's visual perspective'. The same technique is used by Luke.

Abraham as father and other biblical figures in order to draw out some of the ambiguities implicit in the term 'into the bosom of Abraham'.

The Bosom of Abraham

How should we interpret the phrase, 'into the bosom of Abraham' (εἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ) and what exactly does it denote? Generally speaking, the explanation given, up to the time of Maldonatus (1583 CE), was that its origins go back to the universal custom of parents taking their children into their arms or upon their knees when fatigued and offering them rest and security in the bosom of a loving parent. According to Maldonatus (*In Lucam*, xvi, 22), however, the term is derived from the custom of reclining on couches at a meal, a rabbinic custom in vogue during the time of Christ.⁷ But J. A. Fitzmyer and others have argued convincingly that the phrase 'in the bosom of Abraham' is unknown elsewhere in pre-Christian Jewish literature and that it found its way into the midrashim of the Babylonian Talmud only much later.⁸ In spite of this, several commentators still follow Maldonatus and draw a comparison between Lk. 16:22 and Jn 13:23 where the beloved disciple rests against the bosom of Jesus at the last supper; they deduce from this that we should imagine Lazarus reclining on Abraham's breast, enjoying a heavenly meal. As long ago as 1921, Paul Haupt vigorously contested such an interpretation on philological grounds, remarking 'we cannot suppose that when Lazarus died, Abraham was dining in a recumbent posture, and that the angels placed Lazarus on the dining-couch, so close that Lazarus' head was on Abraham's bosom', and concluded that the term must have the more gen-

⁷ Mt. 8:11, which suggests the idea of the righteous eating at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (echoing 4 Macc. 13:17), was used as additional evidence to support the image of reclining at a meal.

⁸ J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XVIV)* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 1132. Likewise, Howard Marshall (*The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978], p. 636) argues that the idea of angels accompanying the souls of the virtuous are not found in Rabbinic sources before 150 CE. Guy Williams ('Abraham in the Christian Tradition', *Scripture Bulletin* XXXVIII. 1 [2007], pp. 15-24 [p. 20]) notes the connection with the archangel Michael escorting the soul of Abraham to heaven in *The Testament of Abraham*.

eral meaning of 'lap'.⁹ Contemporary scholars have added nothing of substance to the debate and it would be true to say that explanations as to the origin and significance of the term in Luke 16:22 remain as vague and unsatisfactory now as ever.

The noun κόλπος occurs just six times in the New Testament (Lk. 6:38, 16:22, 23; Jn 1:18, 13:23 and Acts 27:39). It can mean 'lap', in the sense of a fold in a garment in which items may be held as in Luke 6:38; a reclining position at a meal in Jn 13:23 as has been noted above and a bay or inlet as in Acts 27:39. R. S. Brown translates Jn 1:18 as 'the one who is in the bosom of the father' and suggests that the term denotes affection.¹⁰ In the New Testament, the term generally reflects classical Greek usage where it has the same range of meanings and, in addition, is used frequently as a synonym for motherly love.¹¹ In Rabbinic literature there are several instances where the phrase occurs: an infant who dies before the age of three is carried to the grave in his mother's bosom; in the story of the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons, the mother assures her youngest son that 'he will be bright in the bosom of our father Abraham', and Adda bar Ahaba, a third century Rabbi, after his death, sits in Abraham's bosom.

As a brief aside, it is interesting to draw attention at this point to how κόλπος, meaning 'bay' or 'inlet' (as in Acts 27:39), one of the rarer meanings of the noun, was applied to Lk. 16:22 and represented visually. Characteristic of this interpretation is the comment of Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria (twelfth century) from his commentary on the parable of Dives and Lazarus:

The bosom of Abraham is the enclosure within which are stored up the good things that await the righteous, who after the storm have found the heavenly haven. We use the same word to name those bodies of water on the sea which are shaped liked harbors and havens.¹²

⁹ Paul Haupt, 'Abraham's Bosom', *American Journal of Philology* 42 (1921), pp. 162-67 (p. 167). He argues that Luther's translation 'in Abraham's schoss' is correct since the German noun *schoss* means not only 'lap' but also 'womb'.

¹⁰ R. S. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 17.

¹¹ See Rudolf Meyer, 'κόλπος', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Vol. 3; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 824-26.

¹² From the Orthodox Christian Information Center (www.orthodoxinfo.com).



Figure 1. Abraham, Jacob and Isaac in Paradise.
Fresco from the Narthex, Rila Monastery.
© Photo: Florentina Badalanova Geller

Several images depict the souls of the just in the bosoms of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob within the enclosure of paradise, as in this fresco from the Rila monastery in Bulgaria (fig. 1).¹³ Here, Abraham nurses Lazarus and is flanked by Isaac and Jacob on either side holding the souls of the just in the folds of a garment. The souls are thus sheltered in two senses: first by the patriarchs' intimate and fatherly protection and second by the walled enclosure of paradise which acts as a haven, a bay, from the stormy ocean of life.

Returning to the probable source of the phrase, the bosom of Abraham, as we find it in Lk. 16:22: in my opinion, the most likely source of the image can be found in the Septuagint where the noun κόλπος appears some thirty-six times to translate the Hebrew noun כֶּחֱיָ.¹⁴

¹³) This type of image is given the standardized name of *Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Paradise* in the Princeton Index of Christian Art.

¹⁴) See G. André, 'כֶּחֱיָ', in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. IV; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 356-58.

κόλπος can refer in the Septuagint to a sexual relationship (for example, Gen. 16:5 where Hagar is given into the bosom of Abraham, or Deut. 28:56 which refers to the sexual intimacy between man and wife), to one's innermost parts (for example, in the very personal prayers of the psalmist in Ps. 35:13 or 89:51) or, most commonly, to denote the relationship between mother and child. In 1 Kgs 3:20, in the story of the two women who come to Solomon for judgment, one claims that her son has been taken away from her bosom by the other; in 1 Kgs 17:19, Elijah takes the son from the bosom of his mother; in Ruth 4:16, Naomi takes the child and lays him in her bosom; in Lam. 2:12, the lives of the children are poured out on their mothers' bosoms. In two further instances, the word κόλπος is used to denote the caring and protective role of a male: in 2 Sam. 12:3, the poor man nurses the lamb, which is like a daughter to him, in his bosom, and in Num. 11:12, God tells Moses to carry the people to the promised holy land in his bosom as a nurse carries a sucking child. The use of κόλπος in the Septuagint denoting a protective parental role and used both of male and female figures provides the key, in my opinion, to understanding the significance of the phrase εἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ in Luke.¹⁵ Finally, since I have already made a comparison above between Abraham and Simeon, it is worth noting here that the phrase used by Luke to denote Simeon's holding of the child in his arms in 2:28, εἰς τὰς ἀγκάλας, is not found elsewhere in the New Testament, as is the case with the phrase εἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ in 16:22. Both phrases are distinctively Lukan. In the Old Testament, the arms and the bosom are sometimes found as synonyms: in the Septuagint translation of 1 Kgs 3:20 (where the woman takes the child from the bosom of the other), ἀγκάλαι is used as a synonym for κόλπος. In the Hebrew version of Isa 40:11, there is a clear parallel between 'arm' and 'bosom': (Yahweh) will gather the lambs in his arm (בְּזִרְעוֹ) and carry them in his bosom (בְּחִיקוֹ).¹⁶ The use of both terms as synonyms might suggest

¹⁵ Peter W. Van der Horst, 'Abraham's Bosom, the Place Where He Belonged: A Short Note on ἀπενεχθῆναι in Luke 16:22', *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006), pp. 142-44, argues that ἀπο in compound verbs has the connotation of 'back to where it belongs'. Here, Luke wanted to convey the sense of Abraham's bosom as the place where Lazarus, the child of Abraham, rightfully belonged.

¹⁶ The LXX translates בְּחִיקוֹ as ἐν γαστρὶ here and not as ἐν κόλπῳ.



that Luke wants to draw a parallel between Abraham and Simeon as compassionate father figures but, whether or not this is his intention, it is certainly the case that he never uses the same intimate terminology to convey the relationship between mother and child in his infancy narrative.

In terms of Western iconography, many artists would have followed the Vulgate translation of the phrase, *sinus Abrahae*, and especially the Church Fathers' interpretation of the word *sinus*. In classical Latin, one of its most common meanings was to denote the fold of the toga which effectively acted as a pocket in which various objects could be carried around (in Latin, this meaning was much more common than in the corresponding Greek usage of κόλπος.) *Sinus*, in some cases, could also be used as a euphemism for the female genital organs; but where *sinus* and *uterus* are used as parallel terms, *sinus* overwhelmingly refers to the inner organs of men (the space between the chest and the arms, according to Jérôme Baschet) while *uterus* refers to women.¹⁷ From these associations, Baschet underlines the notion of intimacy that the word *sinus* could suggest, with its ability to designate both the inside and outside parts of the body and the folds of the clothes that loosely covered them.¹⁸ Many of the Church Fathers were especially interested in the meaning of *sinus* as a cloth or garment and derived several metaphorical uses of *sinus* connected to various types of textiles: this accounts for the ubiquitous depictions of Abraham (often alongside Isaac and Jacob) holding Lazarus, or the souls of the just, within different kinds cloths and textiles, or tucked deep inside the mysterious folds of their garments.¹⁹

¹⁷ Exceptionally, however, the Vulgate uses *de utero tuo* of Abraham in Gen. 15:4 where God promises him 'no one but your own very issue shall be your heir'. See Jérôme Baschet, *Le Sein du père: Abraham et la paternité dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 206-08.

¹⁸ Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 207.

¹⁹ In iconography, the significance of the cloth went far beyond the folds of Abraham's garment. Baschet (*Le Sein du père*, p. 209) gives some fascinating examples where, in the Exodus story, the Israelite women are shown carrying their children in the folds of their garments in exactly the same way that Abraham holds Lazarus in the folds of his garment.





Figure 2. Abraham with the Souls of the Righteous in his Bosom.
Pamplona Bible, 108, f. 255 v.
Amiens Public Library

One of the main purposes pictorially of the cloth or fold of the garment was to act as a symbolic link uniting all the souls of the righteous and within which they could melt into a single mass.²⁰ The righteous could thus be represented in the bosom as a compact harmonious group. The brotherhood of the elect is shown by the uniformity of the figures gathered at Abraham's breast. All difference in age disappears and the elect are all the same age, whether little children or sometimes young people, and all either male or of indeterminate gender. There are only two generations: father Abraham and the community of his children, as this example from the 1197 Bible of Pamplona illustrates

²⁰ See Jérôme Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham: Between Fleshly Patriarch and Divine Father', *Modern Language Notes* 108 (1993), pp. 738-58 (pp. 753-54).

(fig. 2) with its large number of the elect, indistinguishable from one another, in the folds of the patriarch's body clothes.

The early Church Fathers were more concerned with the location and function of Abraham's bosom and with the number and identity of its occupants rather than focusing specifically on Luke's use of the word κόλπος.²¹ Nevertheless, their deliberations on the subject frequently found their way into the iconography of the bosom of Abraham in one way or another. For the early Church Fathers, the bosom of Abraham was, first and foremost, a region in the upper area of Hades. Augustine refuses to interpret it as a place in the material sense and stressed its 'mysterious' nature, associating it generally with idea of paradise. Tertullian, on the other hand, seems to have interpreted the parable as a real event; emphasising the corporeal nature of the soul after death, he points out that, in Luke 16, Dives in the afterlife has a real tongue, Lazarus a real finger and Abraham a real bosom. In Tertullian's view, therefore, Abraham's bosom had to be a physical attribute of his person, as well as a region. Consistent with his view of the corporeal nature of the soul, Tertullian emphasised Lazarus's constant need for refreshment and nourishment in the bosom. An aspect that apparently appealed greatly to him was the idea of a *refrigerium*, the refreshment of the dead in the afterlife, important in ancient Egypt and also widely disseminated in Rome. This ancient Egyptian concept became associated with the image of Abraham's bosom in early Christian times, according to Van der Lof.²² Thus, Lazarus experiences a delicious coolness in Abraham's bosom as opposed to the burning fires of hell experienced by Dives; Lazarus has an everlasting fresh water supply while Dives is eternally parched with thirst. The streams of water flowing from paradise can be seen in fig. 1 and the nourishment of Lazarus by Abraham in fig. 6.

Whatever the difficulties and ambiguities philologists may find in the phrase, the metaphor of Abraham's bosom clearly provided an opportunity for artists and iconographers to demonstrate Abraham's paternal function visually. Abraham is mentioned more often in Luke than in any other New Testament book and on almost all occasions in

²¹ L. J. van der Lof, 'Abraham's Bosom in the Writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian and Augustine', *Augustinian Studies* 26 (1995), pp. 109-123.

²² Van der Lof, 'Abraham's Bosom', p. 120.



vocabulary that indicates paternity: he is the only one of the ancestors (τοὺς πατέρας ἡμῶν) mentioned by name in Mary's magnificat (1:55); in Zechariah's speech, he is described as 'Abraham our ancestor', Ἀβραὰμ τὸν πατέρα ἡμῶν; he is the father of Jesus in the Lukan genealogy (3:34); the woman with the evil spirit is the daughter of Abraham (13:16) and Zacchaeus, the tax collector, is his son (19:9). So in expressing the fatherhood of Abraham visually, there was much more to incorporate than simply the cherishing of the soul of the dead Lazarus. Certainly the visual possibilities inherent in Luke's use of this rich metaphor, especially its terminology that appeared to blur gender boundaries with respect to the fatherhood of Abraham, were not lost on them.

The Bosom of Abraham as Visual Metaphor

In the 1990s, the medievalist Jérôme Baschet carried out a comprehensive study of the significance of the bosom of Abraham in the Western Christian world, basing his conclusions on a detailed analysis of some two hundred images from the Middle Ages.²³ According to his findings, depictions of the subject begin to appear around 1000 CE, develop considerably until the thirteenth century, and then decline in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They appear in manuscripts, in painted or carved monumental ornamentation, in stained glass, on plaques on tombs and on liturgical items. There are three distinct contexts in which the image occurs: in the Parable of Lazarus, the Last Judgment and independent images of heaven. Baschet's hypothesis is that the bosom of Abraham, insofar as it shows heavenly reward in terms of a reunion with the father, should be considered not in isolation but as part of the medieval system of kinship. Abraham fills a strategic position in that he is involved across three domains: fleshly, spiritual and divine kinship.²⁴

²³) Jérôme Baschet's study of the importance of the image of Abraham's bosom within the social and religious contexts of the Middle Ages is the only one that has been undertaken for this period. See his two comprehensive studies, 'Medieval Abraham' (1993) and *Le Sein du père* (2000).

²⁴) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 742.



Often visual images of Abraham's bosom reinforce his identity visually with the words 'Pater Abraham', but even when there are no scriptural quotations, it is the expression of the paternal relationship between Abraham and Lazarus, where Lazarus is shown as a child in his father's arms, that gives images of the bosom of Abraham their forcefulness. The close connection is sometimes reinforced by Abraham's beard which joins Lazarus pictorially to the head of the figure of Abraham. In an illustration from a fifteenth century Book of Hours, the cloth holding Lazarus is held at an angle to indicate a rocking movement and suggests that Abraham is concerned to give Lazarus an ever more perfect rest.²⁵



Figure 3. Abraham Rocking the Souls of the Just
Book of Hours, Utrecht, Wittert 3, f. 195 v.
Liège University Library

²⁵) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 746.



The image of the bosom of Abraham facilitated the notion of Abraham as spiritual father, promulgated by Paul (Rom. 4:1-25; 9:7-9 and Gal. 3:6-29) and developed by the Church Fathers, especially Augustine. The souls depicted in his bosom are to be imagined as his spiritual children.

There is a dense network of images that mirror the bosom of Abraham in the Middle Ages, sometimes in a very striking way: among these are the Virgin and Child, or the trinitarian version of divine fatherhood.²⁶ Clearly, therefore, the iconography associated with Abraham's bosom is vast (extending far beyond the medieval period to which Baschet restrict himself and including the early Christian monastic and Eastern orthodox traditions) but, for the purposes of this article, I want to focus chiefly on three aspects of the image that help illumine the significance of the phrase as we find it in Luke: the contrast between the image of Abraham as sacrificial and benevolent father; its associations with images of motherhood, and the parallel drawn between the spiritual fatherhood of Abraham and Simeon.

Sacrificial and Benevolent Father

For the reader of Luke, the image of Abraham cradling Lazarus in his bosom must surely contrast dramatically with the image of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac in Genesis 22—the two scenes that feature most prominently in the iconography of the patriarch. Visual representations of the sacrifice of Isaac came into existence very early in the history of Christian iconography and quickly became one of the most frequently painted of biblical subjects. That Gregory of Nyssa should comment that he could not look at representations of the sacrifice of Isaac without being overcome with sadness suggests that such images were being used widely for contemplation by the sixth century.²⁷ Another popular, though later, subject in Western art was Abraham's dismissal of his son Ishmael (Gen. 21:14) that conveys yet another troubling incident in the patriarch's custodianship of his children. Artists and craftsmen, even from early Christian times, who depicted the

²⁶ Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 743.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, 'De deitate filii et spiritus sancti', *Patrologia Graeca*, 46.



parable of Lazarus and Dives would certainly have been familiar with at least a range of images of the Akedah, if not the dismissal of Ishmael as well. That Abraham should be depicted not only as the cruel and pitiless father of Isaac but also as the protector and cherisher of his son Lazarus must have conveyed to viewers through the centuries just how enigmatic and contradictory Abraham's modelling of fatherhood could be.

Jérôme Baschet provides three superb examples from the Middle Ages illustrating how the image of Abraham sacrificing Isaac and the image of Abraham's bosom were depicted alongside each other to suggest two contrasting facets of one and the same person.²⁸ The first example is taken from an illustrated Bible (early thirteenth century) where, under the initial G in Genesis 22, a depiction of Abraham holding three small figures on his lap is included alongside an image of the Akedah. Baschet notes the sheer unexpectedness of the image here since it appears so incongruous with the text it seeks to illustrate. His second example is taken from the entrance to the church of Saint-Michel-de-Lescure near Albi where the same two biblical scenes are featured as sculptures on facing capitals and presented in such a way that the viewer cannot fail to make a connection between them. On one capital, Abraham brandishes the knife and grasps Isaac by the hair while an angel raises his hand to prevent him killing Isaac. The opposite capital depicts an intense struggle as the devil drags Dives to hell while Abraham grasps Lazarus closely to his bosom. The figures are carved and positioned in such a way that the viewer associates Isaac with Lazarus, both sons of Abraham, but who receive different treatment at his hands.

In the first scene, Abraham, the sacrificing father, raises a murderous hand over his son while in the second, the protective father embraces his son Lazarus in his arms. The first sculpture expresses unambiguously the notion of paternal aggression against a son which the angel tries to prevent while the second portrays the aggression of the devil from which Abraham decisively snatches Lazarus. Baschet takes his third example from the altar of the church at Lisbjerg in Denmark. Here, on each side of the altar are two medallions depicting the sacri-

²⁸) Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, pp. 150-53.





fice of Isaac and Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. There is a direct and intentional rapport between the two medallions: Abraham is at the centre of both images, grasping Isaac tightly in one and nursing Lazarus on his knee in the other. Unusually, the first depicts Abraham grasping Isaac not by the hair but by his leg and depicts Isaac putting his foot on Abraham's lap as if he is about to climb onto his knee (where Lazarus is already firmly installed in the second medallion).

Apart from these examples where the viewer is presented with two contrasting biblical scenes side by side, Baschet also points out, as I have done above, that even when the parallel between the two scenes is not explicitly drawn out or is absent altogether, one image still calls the other to mind. Baschet attributes the importance given to the linking of the two scenes to Augustine who interpreted the second biblical passage in the light of the first: Abraham proved himself to be a worthy host to the souls of the virtuous, such as Lazarus, through his total obedience and faith in God, demonstrated by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.²⁹ Despite Augustine's explanation and assurance, however, we get the impression from the three examples above that the contrasting actions of Abraham portrayed in Genesis 22 and Luke 16 still remained difficult to reconcile and that the craftsmen and artists commissioned to represent the bosom of Abraham in the Middle ages felt the need to try to resolve the dichotomy that existed between the two images of Abraham's fatherhood. Their solution was to focus the viewer's attention on the final (and happy) fate of the two sons, Isaac and Lazarus, rather than on the ambiguous role played by their father Abraham in bringing that fate about.

Abraham's Bosom and Associations of Motherhood

There are several interesting visual examples where the bosom of Abraham (or images of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob collectively) are associated with female imagery. They do not depict Abraham as a mother figure in any explicit way but they do draw attention to

²⁹) Cited by Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 154.





the female connotations that the term κόλπος (or *sinus* in the Vulgate) in Lk. 16:22 was given in the iconographical history of the image.³⁰

The thirteenth-century roof painting of the church at Dädesjö, Sweden, shows how the image of Abraham's bosom was closely associated with images of motherhood that occur in the infancy narrative of the gospel of Luke. The paintings on the roof depict scenes from the life of Christ in six large panels. As E. W. Tristram notes,³¹ there is a clear sequence and orderliness in the arrangement of events that essentially follow the chronology of the Gospel, yet one particular episode seems quite out of place: in the panel relating to the infancy of Christ, there is an unexpected depiction of Abraham rocking a child. It occurs in the second medallion, next to that which shows an angel holding a scroll on which is written the name Luke. All the other medallions surrounding Abraham depict incidents referring to the announcement or birth of Jesus (the annunciation, visitation and nativity). The inclusion of the bosom of Abraham in the nativity sequence illustrates clearly the artist's intention to juxtapose Abraham, father of Lazarus, with Mary, mother of Jesus but it could also indicate that the artist, by explicitly naming Luke, is also making a statement that this juxtaposition was in fact the intention of the evangelist himself. It is interesting to note that while Abraham affectionately rocks the child, Mary remains more detached and aloof, giving the impression that, of the two, Abraham is viewed as the more important parental figure. In addition, it may be that Joseph, too, is contrasted with Abraham. The subject of the medallion directly above the scene of Abraham rocking the child is disputed: Tristram argues that it is most likely either an image of Joseph and Mary (with no specific biblical reference) or Joseph and Mary in the temple (Lk. 2:33).³² The artist may be drawing a clear distinction for

³⁰ In two illustrated manuscripts of the Septuagint (Vat. 746, fol.79v. and Vat. 747, fol.42 r.), Abraham (and not Sarah) nurses Isaac in his lap at a feast prepared for him after his circumcision. The image, which is identical to medieval images of Abraham holding Lazarus, illustrates Gen. 21:6-7. See Kurt Weitzmann and Massimo Bernadó *The Illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint* (Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 98.

³¹ E.W. Tristram, 'The Roof Paintings at Dädesjö, Sweden: A Note', *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 31 (1917), pp. 111-16.

³² Tristram, 'The Roof Paintings at Dädesjö', p. 115.



the viewer between Joseph, the earthly father, and Abraham, the spiritual heavenly father. Indeed, it is even possible that Abraham in this medallion may be a substitute for God the father, thus settling definitively the question of Jesus's paternity. That Abraham, the spiritual father, could substitute for God the father was a common theme in medieval art as Jérôme Baschet has amply demonstrated and which I discuss below.



Figure 4. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Paradise with the Virgin Mary
Monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi, Syria

The second example comes from a very different social and religious milieu. In a mural from the monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi in Syria from the thirteenth century (fig. 4), the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, gather the righteous souls in their bosom in paradise and sit alongside the figure of the Virgin Mary. The colour and design of the garments alternate between the four figures, those of Abraham and Mary being identical, indicating a particular association between Abraham and the Virgin. The depiction of the three patriarchs in this seated position is a frequent one but the addition of the Virgin changes the way we view the mural. The emphasis on maleness and fatherhood (intensified by having grandfather, son and grandson seated alongside each other) becomes less pronounced with the introduction of the Virgin who plays exactly the same role as the three males. The introduction of the mother figure and the fact that the righteous souls in her lap are depicted in exactly the same way as they are in the laps

of the three patriarchs raises the question as to whether the artist wanted intentionally to suggest a maternal role for the patriarchs too. The mural, coming from the Eastern tradition, clearly illustrates some of the implications with regard to gender that surrounded the image of the bosom of Abraham and shows that imaginative ways of expressing the image visually were not restricted merely to the Western artistic tradition.



Figure 5. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Paradise
Coptic Monastery of Deir al-Surian, Egypt
© Photo: Karel C. Innemée, Leiden University

An early eleventh-century wall painting in the Coptic monastery of Deir al-Surian in Egypt shows Abraham, Isaac and Jacob nursing the souls of the just (fig. 5). The painting reflects the prayer commonly found on eighth and ninth-century Coptic gravestones, 'May God repose his soul in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', a sentiment which accounts for the popularity of the image in Egypt.

Each patriarch holds one child in his arms and feeds him with the fruits of paradise while two other children sit on their lap. Abraham is in the centre, distinguished by his white tunic or apron, with his son and grandson on either side. The two children that sit on each of the patriarchs' laps have the appearance of embryos or unborn children in the womb; this must be the only explanation since they are depicted in

such an unnatural and artificial posture. It is clear that the folds of the garments would be unable to support or contain the children and so we must imagine that they are within the bosom of the male figures and not external to them. This gives the impression that not only do the patriarchs act as fathers to the children but they are also given a maternal role. There is also something artificial in the way the patriarchs stare straight out at the viewer rather than focusing on the children in their care; in fact, we would expect that their attention should focus all the more on the children, given the precarious position in which they are perched. This attitude of detachment might suggest that they are seen as 'spiritual' rather than 'fleshly fathers', as Baschet suggests is the case in several Western images, or it could simply mean that the artist wanted the viewer to concentrate on the bosoms of the patriarchs where the souls of the virtuous reside rather than on the patriarchs' facial expressions. The familial or genealogical aspect is brought out in the painting by the fact that the patriarchs are presented as stern old men, grandfather, father and grandson, who create and nourish their descendants, the souls of the virtuous, depicted as their children.



Figure 6. Detail of Abraham with One of the Souls of the Just
Coptic Monastery of Deir al-Surian, Egypt
© Photo: Karel C. Innemée, Leiden University

A fourth and final example of how the bosom of Abraham is closely associated with a female image can be found in the eleventh-century church of San Pietro al Monte at Civate in Italy.³³ In this church, murals of Abraham's bosom and the vision of the seventh trumpet (Rev. 11:15–12:17) stand above the entrance doors of the church on the inside, and are just two among the many biblical paintings that the church contains. They are in a prominent position and the fact that the faithful could see both of them simultaneously as they left the church may indicate that they were intentionally designed to serve as the main focus of the church's entire pictorial programme. The visual representation of the text from Revelation has been restricted to include only the confrontation of the woman and her son with the dragon, the raising up of the child to God and the war in heaven. Naomi Meiri-Dann argues that in the mural the woman should be interpreted as Ecclesia, rather than Mary, since pregnancy, labour and motherhood were associated as much with the Church as with the Virgin.³⁴ The medieval Church conceived itself as engendering, raising and nourishing penitents within its womb through sermons, preaching and the instruction of the believer's soul. Two of the tituli over the painting, Meiri-Dann argues, refer to the everlasting struggles and trials of the church: while Mary was free from the agonies of labour, Ecclesia never ceases to give agonizing daily birth to her spiritual offspring and to cry to God to deal kindly with humanity. It seems probable that the patron who commissioned the pictorial programme had relied on the *Explanatio Apocalypsis* of the venerable Bede (c. 673-735), a copy of which was kept in the scriptorium of the monastery. Bede viewed the woman of the Apocalypse as *Ecclesia Christi* which gives daily spiritual birth to the Christians whose souls will ascend to the divine presence.³⁵ The child, according to Meiri-Dann, should be interpreted as the soul who faces the danger of spiritual death but is reborn through baptism and who will be granted redemption and be brought close to God

³³) The church murals receive detailed treatment from Naomi Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics as Reflected in the Mural Paintings of San Pietro al Monte at Civate', *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 6 (2001), pp. 139-60.

³⁴) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 143.

³⁵) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 146.



through faith and penitence. That the child alludes to the Christian believer is also supported by his visual appearance. He is an anonymous representative of the common people: his diminutive size and his nakedness, being conventional medieval artistic elements to characterise the soul of the believer destined for redemption, reinforces the claim that he represents the faithful soul. There is no hell represented in this image, only small devils depicted as shadows but God is shown in the centre of the composition, reigning in heaven. The child is shown twice in order to represent the chronological development from danger to deliverance. He is placed beside God, within the realm of the same huge mandorla. In this vision of the seventh trumpet, the catastrophic elements disappear or are subdued and replaced by a more optimistic spirit in order to stress the victory of the righteous rather than the fate of the damned.³⁶ In the mural on the parallel portal, Abraham is depicted clasping to his bosom the three tiny figures of the righteous souls.

Meiri-Dann explains that the focus here lies firmly on the reward of the righteous whose sins have been forgiven. Abraham does not appear among the trees of paradise or within an architectural framework. Rather he is shown against a neutral background, explained by the fact that in several medieval exegeses, Abraham's bosom is not considered as paradise but as the temporal abode of restorative repose for the righteous souls between their bodily death and their final resurrection.³⁷ Here, Abraham's bosom is a place half way between hell and heaven, thus the neutral background; it accentuates the fact that Abraham's bosom is but a half way stage for the righteous soul and that the ultimate and final destination is, as depicted in the first painting, the Heavenly Jerusalem. San Pietro al Monte was a pilgrimage church and both images visually unfold the long road of the pilgrim from sin to salvation. Their purpose was to remind the viewer on leaving the church the final reward that awaits the virtuous soul.

Meiri-Dann does not discuss the correspondence in these two images between the figures of Abraham and God the father nor how the two biblical texts are used here to interpret one another. The fact

³⁶) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 150.

³⁷) Meiri-Dann, 'Ecclesiastical Politics', p. 152.





that Abraham in the mural is given the title 'father of many nations' invites the viewer to make a comparison with God the father in the parallel image. In particular, the verse 'her child was snatched away and taken to God and his throne' may relate to Lk. 16:22, 'The poor man died and was carried away to the bosom of Abraham', and provide the key to the interpretation of the two images. There is also, most probably, an intentional comparison between Abraham and the woman of Revelation 12. Bede interprets the woman as Ecclesia who gives birth daily to spiritual offspring; it may be that the viewer is expected to see in Abraham a kind of spiritual mother who, like Ecclesia, gives birth to spiritual children prepared to follow his example of faith. The comparison between the life-giving and life-nurturing role of Ecclesia, personified by the woman of Revelation 12, and Abraham would suggest that those responsible for the murals at the church of San Pietro al Monte were aware of an important visual tradition that interpreted the bosom of Abraham as akin to a womb with the ability to create and nurture life.³⁸

Abraham and Simeon

As I mentioned in my introduction, Karlsen Seim makes the interesting point that in the infancy narrative the role of fathers, diminished in the case of Joseph and Zechariah, is reintroduced in Luke 2 where it now signals a spiritual fatherhood represented by the prophet Simeon who frames Mary as *mater dolorosa* in 2:35.³⁹ Does Luke intentionally draw a comparison between Abraham the spiritual father holding Lazarus in his bosom and Simeon holding the infant Jesus? As I pointed out earlier, both stories are unique to Luke and the fact that the two parallel phrases used (εἰς τὰς ἀγκάλας in 2:28 and εἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ in 16:22) appear similar and are not found elsewhere in the

³⁸ Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 755, notes: 'The bosom of Abraham, one could say, is a masculine equivalent of the Ecclesia, a body to which all Christians belong. The Mater Ecclesia includes all the righteous from the moment they are baptised until their entry into the triumphant community of heavenly Jerusalem'.

³⁹ Karlsen Seim, 'The Virgin Mother: Mary and Ascetic Discipleship in Luke', pp. 89-105.



New Testament suggests, to me, a link between the two stories. At any rate, this was certainly the case in Christian iconography.



Figure 7. Simeon Holding the Infant Jesus
Early Roman wall painting

As in the case of the Akedah, the history of the iconography of Simeon in the temple goes back a very long way and would certainly have been a well known image to iconographers from the early Christian centuries. The presentation is one of the great feasts of the Orthodox liturgical calendar and is known from at least the fourth century while its iconographic tradition was fully established by the ninth. The prominence given to Simeon stems from ancient liturgical texts where he is described as one of the greatest of the prophets, more important than Moses, 'who has seen God', because Simeon actually 'received' God in his arms. For this reason he is known in Orthodox tradition as the 'God-Receiver'.⁴⁰ There are numerous versions and adaptations of the presentation scene through the centuries, especially in the history of manuscript painting: while some focus on Mary holding the child or the ceremony of the presentation itself, the main focus tends to be on Simeon holding the child in his arms. The scene continued to remain popular in art during the period of the Renaissance as detailed by Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons in their analysis of Lorenzetti's *The Presentation in the Temple* (1342)⁴¹ and right up to seventeenth-century

⁴⁰) See the Orthodox website (www.orthodoxworld.ru) for Simeon's importance as the God-Receiver in Orthodox tradition: in Greek, *Hypapante*; in Russian *Sretenie Gospodne* and *Bogoprinyets* in Old Slavonic.

⁴¹) Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (London and NY: Trinity Press International, 2003).

Holland where Simeon holding the child in his arms became one of Rembrandt's favourite subjects.⁴²

Depictions of Simeon, in general, tend to portray a more sympathetic and kindly father figure than Abraham: for example, in this early Roman wall painting in fig. 7.

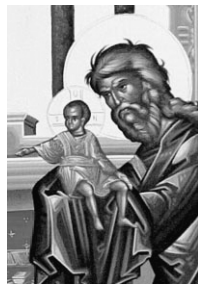


Figure 8. Icon of the Presentation of Christ
Written by Athanasios Clark
© Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America



Figure 9. Simeon Holds the Child Jesus
St. Mary's Church, Snettisham, Norfolk, England
© Photo: Simon Knott, www.norfolkchurches.co.uk

⁴² In his version of the subject, now in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Rembrandt famously conveys the gravitas of Simeon as a spiritual father and the vulnerability of the child.

He continues to display a similar affectionate disposition in contemporary representations, whether in the Orthodox (fig. 8) or Western tradition (fig. 9) and it is this aspect that makes Simeon instantly recognizable even when detached from the biblical narrative of the presentation. Given the iconic status of the image of father and child represented by Simeon, it is not surprising, then, that in Christian iconography, he should be closely associated with the figure of Abraham and Lazarus. One of the finest examples of this association can be found in the abbey church at Moissac in France.

As medievalists point out,⁴³ the porch of this medieval abbey church contains one of the most extraordinary examples where the image of the bosom of Abraham mirrors intentionally an image of Simeon holding the child Jesus. Two depictions of the patriarch and Simeon are shown opposite each other but they differ substantially in some details. Simon's bodily gestures are full of tenderness and the closeness of his face with the child's expresses affectionate intimacy. In Abraham's case, the affectionate sensitive aspect is missing and the stiffness and impassiveness of Abraham's posture dominate while the geometric designs of his cloak gives him an abstract, almost disembodied quality.



Figure 10. Lazarus in the Bosom of Abraham
Detail from the west wall of the abbey of St. Peter, Moissac, France

⁴³ See Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 751.



Figure 11. Simeon Holds the Child Jesus at the Presentation
Detail from the west wall of the abbey of St. Peter, Moissac, France

In the presentation scene in which Simeon with the child appears, the sculptors deliberately inverted the nearest figure, Anna, and made her the shortest figure so that she appears less important while Simeon who is the most remote is made the tallest in order that he can stand out in sharp profile.⁴⁴ The heads of the characters in the presentation scene are carved with a peculiar expression of excitement: the brows are lifted up, the eyes are wide open and the mouths turned at the corners in a faint smile. On the opposite side, the scene depicting Abraham and Lazarus is, by contrast, serious and subdued.⁴⁵ Baschet suggests the reason for this is to demonstrate how Abraham exemplifies spiritual fatherhood in a detached, other-worldly manner while Simeon's more human gestures draw attention not only to his own humanity, but more importantly, to the humanity of Jesus, the child in his arms.⁴⁶ But, there may be more to it than this. To the visually literate of the Middle Ages, the presentation scene might well have called to mind various representations of the Akedah: from a distance, Simeon placing the child on the altar of the temple is not dissimilar to representations

⁴⁴) Meyer Schapiro, 'The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac', *The Art Bulletin*, 13.4 (1931) pp. 464-531.

⁴⁵) Schapiro, 'The Romanesque Sculpture of Moissac', p. 518.

⁴⁶) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 751.



of Abraham building an altar and laying his son Isaac on top of it (Gen. 22:9). The joy, expressed on the faces of the characters, however, clearly indicates that this is an altogether happier scene. Yet the iconographers may have used the setting of the temple altar in the presentation scene to allude to the sacrifice of Isaac; the image of the distant, remote Abraham, now cradling Lazarus impassively, and situated right opposite the scene of the presentation, serves to remind the viewer of another, more sinister, aspect of Abraham's fatherhood. In some cases, especially in the late Middle Ages, the figures of Abraham and Simeon become almost interchangeable, as in an image in the Metropolitan Art Gallery, New York, in which it is Abraham who holds the infant Jesus, identifiable by his cruciferous halo which is usually exclusively reserved for deity, and not Simeon.⁴⁷

Following on from Abraham and Simeon, and before drawing together my conclusions, I want to make some final points regarding the similarities in iconography between figures of Abraham and God the father, who in several instances appear indistinguishable. The patriarch is sometimes shown with a cruciferous halo as in fig. 3;⁴⁸ yet this figure is not God the father as an inscription usually recalls that it is indeed an image of the bosom of Abraham. There are many examples where Abraham and God the father are combined into a single image, which Baschet refers to as the God-Abraham figure. Part of the reason, at least, why this is so is that in traditional Christian exegesis Abraham sacrificing Isaac is compared with God the father sacrificing his son. In Augustine's exegesis of the parable of Lazarus and Dives, Lazarus at the door of the rich man is the figure of Christ suffering the passion while Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham is Christ reunited with his father after his resurrection.⁴⁹ As the image of Abraham blended with that of God the father, iconographers also drew parallels with another text where *κόλπος* appears, namely Jn. 1:18 which pictures Christ in the bosom of God the father. The trinitarian expression of the image where God the father holds the crucified Christ with the dove representing the Holy Spirit resting between them, frequently resembles the posture

⁴⁷) Displayed on the Biblical Art website, www.biblical-art.com.

⁴⁸) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 755.

⁴⁹) Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham', p. 756.



and attitude displayed by Abraham as he holds Lazarus in his bosom. A fine example of this is the fresco by Masaccio in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. In a more recent example from the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, the traditional image of the three patriarchs holding the souls of the just is now interpreted as the trinity, each figure clasping the world as a globe to his bosom, as in this painting from 1973, now hanging in the Ethiopian chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.



Figure 12: The Trinity Holds the World in their Bosom
Azeka Mezmour Zed-Awit, Ethiopia (1973)
The Ethiopian Chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem

Finally, one begins to wonder just how pervasive the influence of the image of the bosom of Abraham in iconography actually was. For example, in an image from the medieval St. Albans Psalter, illustrating Ps. 61 (62 in English) where David in anguish pours out his soul to God, God bends down graciously either to bless or to take his soul, represented as a vulnerable and naked child, to himself. Granted, the soul is generally depicted in medieval times in this way, but the depiction of God as a benevolent father figure in this psalter and in many

other illuminated manuscripts, may have been at least partly inspired by the ubiquitous image of the bosom of Abraham.



Figure 13. David Offers his Soul to God (Psalm 61)
St. Albans Psalter

Conclusion

In conclusion, the first point to make is that, despite the view of many commentators on Lk. 16:22, Lazarus is not depicted in iconography as reclining against Abraham's breast as at a meal. Rather, the image is overwhelmingly one of a father holding or cradling a child in his lap; but, despite the connotation of intimacy that the term *κόλπος* denotes,



the poise and demeanour of the figure of Abraham suggests a father that is reserved and remote. If we compare Abraham to the figure of Simeon with the child Jesus, the warmth and humanity of Simeon as a father contrasts with the coldness and aloofness of the other-worldly Abraham. Perhaps, as Jérôme Baschet suggests, this may be intentional, indicating that we should see Abraham as a spiritual rather than a 'fleshly' father. But there may be a further reason: it is clear from Baschet's comprehensive studies of the image in the Middle Ages that, in portraying the image of Abraham as father of Lazarus, artists and iconographers were conscious of the ubiquitous image of Abraham and Isaac from Genesis 22, and so were faced with having to create an image that was consistent with, or at least corresponded to, the troublesome picture of Abraham as father that emerges from that scene. Augustine explains away the dichotomy between the two contrasting images of Abraham as father by suggesting that he is worthy to receive the souls of the just into his bosom in Luke 16 because he has proved his obedience to God in Genesis 22. Nevertheless, we still get the impression from several visual representations of Luke 16:22 that artists were not entirely persuaded by this explanation and that the coldness and remoteness with which they depict Abraham may serve to draw attention to how incongruous they felt the two biblical portrayals of the patriarch as father really were.

Should we see reflected in the image of Abraham's bosom an interest in gender or associations of motherhood? Certainly the noun κόλπος is used frequently elsewhere to denote the close relationship between mother and child and I have included iconographical examples where, first, Abraham's bosom is included in the nativity story from the infancy narrative of Luke; second, where the image is paralleled with the woman in labour from Revelation 12, and third, where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appear as if pregnant with the souls of the just. Whether Abraham was consciously perceived by these artists as a mother we do not know, but it is clear that they wish to make a very explicit association between the image of the bosom of Abraham and the traditional Old Testament concept of Abraham as the father of many nations: it is his male function of fathering and his female function of giving birth that artists seek to combine in one image. The title, *Pater multarum gentium*, that frequently accompanies the image of Abraham holding Lazarus in his bosom is really an inappropriate title,



when we think about it; but the effect of the title is to draw attention to the procreative function of Abraham which is presented to us in this image under the guise of a maternal and life-nourishing figure. It may be simply an accident of bad translation but the Vulgate, very uniquely, uses the phrase *de utero tuo*, to translate the idea in Gen. 15:4 that no-one except from Abraham's own issue (*de utero tuo*) shall be his heir. The same female imagery is implicitly contained in the Vulgate's phrase *in sinu Abrahæ* in Lk. 16:22, the biblical version most widely used in the Middle Ages.

Mary Rose D'Angelo's conclusion that Luke is concerned with gender roles and that issues of gender surface in very complex ways throughout his gospel is supported by the way Lk. 16:22 was perceived in the iconographical tradition of the bosom of Abraham. The important role (and the memorable words) that Luke assigns to Simeon assures his role as spiritual father and, along with Abraham whom Luke mentions most frequently in the New Testament, he overshadows the maternal roles of the women of the infancy narrative. In iconography, too, for many centuries, the paternal roles of Simeon and Abraham outnumbered and overshadowed representations of the Virgin and child. It was really only with the start of the Italian Renaissance that the mother and child image became hugely popular and replaced that of the father and child. Yet, it is ironic that in commentaries that use visual images to illustrate the message of Luke, there are normally several of the Virgin and child, perhaps one of Simeon and usually none of Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. This reflects neither the priority that Luke gives to his male and female characters nor the subtle distinctions within the iconographical tradition of the gospel.

Abraham with the souls of the righteous in his bosom is frequently flanked by Isaac and Jacob. Van der Lof describes how the early Church Fathers were keen to extend the number of those in paradise who were suitable to receive the souls of the just into their bosom and, in the light of Mt. 8:11, began with Isaac and Jacob. But why the artistic convention of depicting all three as looking exactly alike? It may be that this is to indicate that both Isaac and Jacob are of equal importance to Abraham but it also underscores the idea of fatherhood: the father-son theme is reflected in the presentation of the trio of patriarchs itself as well as in the relationship between the patriarchs and the souls they hold in their bosoms.

Two recent examples confirm how the image of the three patriarchs are still used in contemporary settings. Baschet includes in his book an illustration of the bosom of Abraham from the front cover of *Le Monde Diplomatique* (October, 1991) in an article dealing with the future of Palestine.⁵⁰ The image expresses the wish that Abraham, figurehead of the three monotheistic faiths, might unite all the peoples of the region in harmony within his bosom.

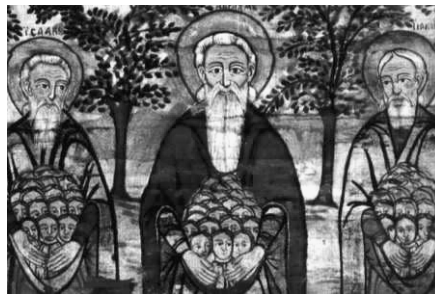


Figure 14. Ieud-Deal Church, Romania
18th century
© Photo: Radu Lissner



Figure 15. Romanian Coin
© Photo: Radu Lissner

⁵⁰) Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 20.



Second, in 2006, the Romanian government incorporated a depiction of the three patriarchs with the souls of the just in their bosom from the famous eighteenth-century church at Ieud-Deal into the design of one of their coins (figs. 14 and 15).

The final word is best left to Jerome Baschet who has surveyed hundreds of representations of the subject from the Middle Ages, a time when the numbers of images being produced was at its greatest. He suggests a Freudian explanation for the enormous popularity of the subject in iconography: in establishing an inseparable link between the idea of an everlasting paradise and that great and final paternal reunion, he concludes, the image of Abraham's bosom confirms completely Freud's claim that at the very core of all religious sentiment lies a need for paternal protection and reassurance.⁵¹ Perhaps he is right, but, however we explain it, the bosom of Abraham continues to be one of the most intriguing and engaging of images in the entire repertoire of Christian iconography.

⁵¹) Baschet, *Le Sein du père*, p. 22.