





Decline or Transformation? Modern Welsh Artists and the Welsh Biblical Heritage

Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan



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As the preceding chapters confirm, art depends largely on patronage. In the Middle Ages the artist relied perforce on the patronage of the Church or of rich laypeople. These categories overlapped, for senior figures in the Church might act as individual patrons in much the same way as secular lords, and laypeople often commissioned works of religious art, from devotion or for worldly reasons such as status, ostentation, or political expediency. Artists might choose biblical subjects even for works not actually commissioned before their production, in hopes that they would lead to a sale or a commission. Despite the major changes in Christian observance which the Reformation brought, the tradition of commissioning art inspired by the Bible continued, whether as a teaching or exegetical tool or simple invitation to devotion, as a response to fashion, or a means of displaying wealth or status. With the advent of the Reformation, however, the relationship between word and image began to change, as the Protestant emphasis on individual access to Scripture encouraged the spread of literacy, even for women. As much as the theological objections to ‘graven images’ which John Harvey discusses,¹ it is perhaps the emphasis laid on reading and studying the Bible from the sixteenth century onwards which effected the greatest revolution.²

Densil Morgan rightly stresses the role of the Protestant denominations in the spread of literacy in Wales, especially in the Welsh language,³ a movement which in turn affected the use of pictorial images. As Peter Lord shows in his contribution to this volume,⁴ the work of nineteenth-century artists and engravers, often combining word and image, depended on a high level of literacy, as well as biblical knowledge, on this part of the public; it also demonstrated that visual images could foster a national consciousness as well as Christian knowledge and values. The question now is to what the extent that inheritance has persisted and in what form. Ten years after the

¹ See John Harvey, ‘The Bible and Art in Wales’, pp. 72-89 in this volume.

² Few manuscript books for private devotions produced for use in Wales have survived, and illustration is rare in both secular and devotional manuscripts in Welsh or produced in Wales. One might speculate, therefore, that this shift to the written word, and away from the centrality of the visual image as medium of biblical instruction or object of reverence and meditation, was less dramatic here.

³ See Densil Morgan, ‘The Bible and Wales in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, pp. 2-9 in this volume.

⁴ See Peter Lord, ‘The Bible and the Artisan Tradition of Welsh Visual Culture’, pp. 92-119 in this volume.



religious revival led by Evan Roberts in 1904-05 reignited a brief flame, the traumatic experiences of the First World War hastened religious decline in Wales, as many left their faith behind in the trenches.⁵ Nevertheless, that socio-religious culture did persist, in increasingly attenuated form, for another half century. With religious observance now the exception rather than central to the Welsh experience and world-view, the *Imaging the Bible in Wales* research project, with its mission to document and analyse its artistic legacy, has come not a moment too soon.

One of the consequences of the dramatic decline in religious observance since the 1960s is that artists now rely mainly on secular rather than on religious patronage. This chapter will focus, therefore, on works produced in recent decades primarily as works of art rather than purely at the service of religion. Some of the variety of possible responses to biblical themes and texts by contemporary artists is indicated in the on-line record of the exhibition held at the School of Art in Aberystwyth in April and May 2008 as part of the *Imaging the Bible* project and to coincide with the conference from which this volume of studies grew.⁶ Organized by John Harvey, this exhibition featured work by students, staff and former students as well as items from the School of Art's own collection and, as we shall see, the contributors' responses followed a similar pattern to what may be observed in the mainstream of work currently being produced by established, professional artists.

Biblical art need not necessarily be judged on purely aesthetic grounds, and not all religious art is good art, hence this volume has concentrated on other considerations, such as effectiveness in conveying the message or assisting devotion, the treatment of subject matter, and so on. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that for many of us who grew up Welsh-speaking in the post-war period, when the Bible still had an integral role in private and communal life, the visual images which we encountered in the religious context were very limited, and didactic rather than of any great aesthetic quality.⁷ Many were borrowed from imported English models, or influenced by them, for much of the illustrated Sunday-school literature was produced by the SPCK or British and Foreign Bible Society, translated into Welsh, and published outside Wales. Most Welsh people – and despite the growth of an educated middle class, the working class still represented a substantial percentage of the population – would simply be unaware of the work of professional artists like David Jones or Ivor Williams, not to mention Gregynog Press publications (such as those of Blair Hughes-Stanton considered elsewhere in this volume). In this context E. Curig Davies's biography of the Welsh

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⁵ In my own family, which had been devout and observant Wesleyan Methodist before the First World War, not one of the men who survived service in the armed forces ever attended chapel regularly again, and neither did their sisters.

⁶ See <http://www.aber.ac.uk/museum/exhibitions/imagingthebible/>.

⁷ Even though churches commonly had nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century stained glass windows with biblical content, as several contributors to this volume demonstrate, such works might rarely, if ever, be seen by Nonconformists. This was especially true in areas like my own, where historical events and linguistic, political and social connotations made the relationship between Anglicans and chapel members difficult or even hostile at times.

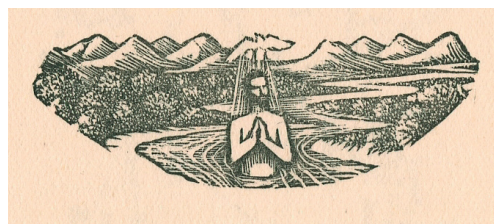


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383. John Petts, *Baptism of Christ*, tailpiece to E. Curig Davies, *Y Morwr a'r Merthyr* (London: Livingstone Press 1940), wood engraving.

missionary John Williams, *Y Morwr a'r Merthyr* (The Sailor and Martyr), was a staggering exception, illustrated as it was by wood engravings commissioned from a professional, Wales-based artist, John Petts.⁸ One of these, the tiny tailpiece to a devotional poem by J. Luther Thomas, evokes a biblical subject: in an uninhabited landscape, suggestive of Wales, Christ at his baptism stands quite alone in the river, hands joined in prayer, with light radiating over him from the hovering dove as it



descends upon him. This image may have gone unnoticed by most readers of the book, whose illustrations are otherwise most memorable for being of unusually high quality, and often startlingly racy, for a Welsh-language publication of the time.

Given the rapid secularization of society and consequent decline in religious patronage, the main focus of this discussion will be the kind of works commonly seen in private galleries, in public buildings and in private houses, and arguably reflect current practice and taste. Although conceptual art, including installations and site-specific works constitute a major strand in contemporary Welsh art, as a visit to the annual, competitive exhibition at the National Eisteddfod makes clear, more traditional media of artistic expression have remained central. One factor (perhaps among many) may be that the market favours either two-dimensional works or three-dimensional ones of modest size, because small-scale private collectors are now the artist's bread and butter.⁹

⁸ London: Livingstone Press, 1940.

⁹ The emergence of an expanding Welsh middle class since the 1980s, hastened by the establishment of the Welsh-language television channel, S4C, and later by political devolution, has greatly increased the number of individual private collectors buying Welsh art and, concomitantly, of private galleries showing and selling the work of Welsh artists, whose survival is thus less dependent on exile and day-jobs than heretofore.

Biblical subjects are certainly rarer among practising artists today than ever before. Now that younger generations lack the thorough, early grounding in the content of the Bible, has the Bible remained a source of inspiration or has it been largely abandoned? Even where artists may derive inspiration from Scripture, they can no longer take for granted public familiarity with biblical text or narrative, so that public galleries increasingly feel obliged to provide such glosses to works displayed.

Artists belonging to the last generation to experience the chapel at the core of a community's life have tended to focus less on the Bible than on the social implications of secularization, as witness the recent lively but nostalgic landscapes by Catrin Williams and Luned Rhys Parri, which are as much about the loss of naturally Welsh-speaking communities as about religion and its decline. Nonetheless, many artists



have avoided religious subject matter, perhaps because for many Welsh-speakers today the idea of Christian faith holds difficult memories of an oppressive culture, especially for women and those whose sexual identity or behaviour was judged unacceptable by the religious establishment. Moreover, the relation of Christianity to questions of Welsh identity may cause unease, for the baggage of that Christian past can easily become as much a dangerous cliché as the outsiders' stereotypical images of a Wales of sheep, choirs and coal mines.

Changes in art training are undoubtedly another factor. In the late-nineteenth century art colleges encouraged the study of Old Masters, and narrative painting was central. Biblical themes, belonging to both these threads and offering rich scope for figure composition, were often set as tasks. Augustus John's early student works such as *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* (1898) emerge from this context and belong

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384. Augustus John,
*Study for Moses and
the Brazen Serpent*, 1898,
ink and wash.





¹⁰ The finished oil painting and some related studies are in University College, London, Art Collections; see David Fraser Jenkins and Chris Stephens, *Augustus John and Gwen John* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 15, fig. 2, and A.D. Fraser Jenkins, *Augustus John: Studies for Compositions* (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1978), items 1-3. Other biblical subjects in John's early, post-Slade School work, include *Adam and Eve* (1900) and the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1900); see Jenkins, *Augustus John: Studies for Compositions*, items 9-11, 16.

¹¹ Works such as Iain Andrews's depiction, after Tiepolo, of Elijah ascending to heaven, included in the *Imaging the Bible* exhibition (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/museum/exhibitions/imagingthebible>), are no longer typical art school products.

¹² See *Baneri'r Beibl, 1985-1988* (Aberystwyth: Baneri'r Beibl, 1988). The archives of Brith Gof are now held at the National Library of Wales.

¹³ See Christine Kinsey & Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan (eds), *Imaging the Imagination: An Exploration of the Relationship between the Image and the Word in the Art of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2005). For examples by Harvey, see his website, <http://users.aber.ac.uk/jhh/>.



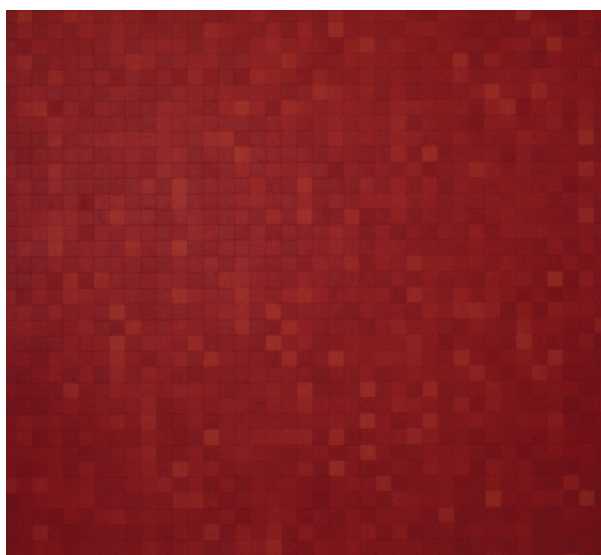
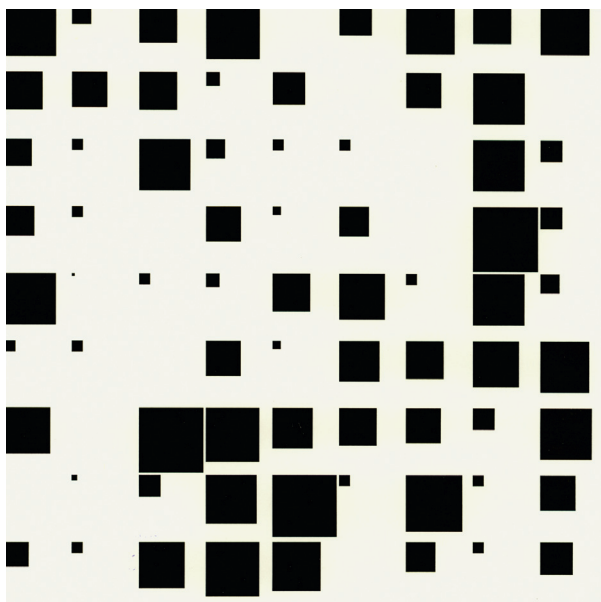
385. Cliff McLucas, *Baneri'r Beibl: Exodus*, 1988, batik.



386. Cliff McLucas, *Baneri'r Beibl: Josua*, 1988, batik.

opposite, top:
387. John Harvey, *Foundation Piece II*, 2002-2007, oil on board.

within an inherited tradition, although they are far from purely backward-looking.¹⁰ But in recent decades, with art training shifting away from both representational painting and biblical subjects, artists drawing directly on Scripture are fewer.¹¹ Nonetheless, significant works have drawn directly on the Bible. Clifford McLucas's Bible banners are perhaps a special case because they were specifically commissioned by Brith Gof experimental theatre group for the quatercentenary in 1988 of William Morgan's authorised Welsh translation of the Bible.¹² Forty large banners were produced to form the backdrop to dramatic performances, each banner inspired by a book of the Old Testament, and each featuring the title together with either a text or an image evoking the subject matter. Exodus, for example, featured the bulrushes where Moses was found, and Joshua the trumpets and tumbling walls of Jericho, whilst others featured abstract or semi-abstract designs. Biblical art need not be literally illustrative: abstract as well as representational art may of course be inspired by the Bible; although perhaps less useful as a didactic tool, it can still play as important a role in devotion and worship. John Harvey's abstract paintings inspired by meditation on biblical texts,



388. John Harvey,
Psalm 51: Fountain, 2000,
acrylic on board.

389. Claudia Williams,
The Nightmare, 2006,
oil on canvas.

such as *Foundation Piece II* (2002-07),
included in the *Imaging the Bible*

exhibition, are a case in point. The marriage of word and image and the incorporation of text into visual works have long been important in art in Wales and the use of biblical texts by McLucas and Harvey confirms that tradition's continuing significance.¹³

Traditionally, Welsh women's fabric-based art has favoured abstraction and letter forms as much as, if not more than, representational expression. The female tradition of presenting scriptural texts in needlework art such as samplers has been evoked by Claudia Williams in her recent series of Tryweryn paintings, in the detail of the framed cross-stitch design of the Bible text 'Duw Cariad yw' (God is love) in *The Nightmare* (2006).¹⁴ The sampler tradition is again the reference for a striking series of mixed-media works by Catrin Williams, featuring the verse 'Bachgen a aned i ni, mab a roddwyd i ni' (Isa. 9.6: For a child ['boy' in the Welsh] has been born for us, a son

¹⁴ One of her series of paintings commemorating the families of Tryweryn evicted from their homes when the valley was turned into a reservoir in the early 1960s. Works from the series were exhibited at the Martin Tinney Gallery, Cardiff, May-June 2008, and at Canolfan y Plase, Y Bala, July-August 2009. On Tryweryn see Einion Thomas and Beryl Griffiths, *Capel Celyn: Deng Mlynedd o Chwahu, 1955-1965* (bilingual text; Swansea: Cyhoeddiadau Barddas, 2007). Fabric-based art is discussed by John Morgan-Guy, 'Biblical Art from Wales: Setting the Scene', pp. 22-24 in this volume; see examples also in the accompanying DVD ROM.



390. Catrin Williams, 'Bachgen a aned ...', 2008, mixed media.

¹⁵ Examples from a series on this theme were exhibited at the Tegfryn Gallery, Menai Bridge, and the Royal Cambrian Academy, Conwy, in 2008.

¹⁶ Curwen's modulator, used to teach and practice sol-fa reading, was an essential part of the furnishings of chapel vestries and schoolrooms. The artist's location of this group of works within the wider 'Cerdd Dant' series provides a further cultural reference, this time to the ancient, still-thriving tradition of contrapuntal penillion singing.

given to us).¹⁵ As well as celebrating work of her female forerunners, 'Bachgen a aned ...' locates the scriptural text within the social context where the artist would have encountered it as a child, for the words are accompanied by the sol-fa notation which was integral to the Nonconformist musical tradition in Wales.¹⁶ Its presence thus suggests that here as in her landscapes Catrin Williams is responding primarily to memories of a lost world of childhood and, as in her *Te Cymreig* (Welsh tea) series, reappropriating and transforming



391. Claudia Williams, *Madonna & child & beach children*, 1983, oil on board.



392. Robert Alwyn Hughes, *The Expulsion*, 1990-2006, acrylic on canvas.

what had become stale clichés. This is confirmed by her characteristic use of a lively, bright palette – no chapel gloom here – and her gentle subversion of the ‘*Bachgen a aned ...*’ theme with a counterpart ‘*Merch a aned ...*’ (A girl is born ...).

Narrative painting remains a strong tradition and biblical subjects are still sometimes chosen, and reinterpreted, by prominent artists. Claudia Williams’s *Madonna and Child* (1983) and Clive Hicks-Jenkins’s *Annunciation* (2004) are obvious examples.¹⁷ But choosing a biblical theme does not necessarily imply any religious faith or agenda: the artist may be purely attracted by the possibilities of the subject matter. John Selway’s fourteen Stations of the Cross for the parish church in Abertillery were inspired not by faith but by his political convictions, although he acknowledges that his political thought is probably conditioned by growing up in a culturally Christian climate.¹⁸ Similarly, Robert Alwyn Hughes recognizes the influence of his mother’s Baptist faith in his choice of biblical subjects such as *The Expulsion*, *Dogs are at my Feet* (inspired by Psalm 22) [illustration] and his own recent set of Stations of the Cross.¹⁹ Many subjects can, of course, be read on two levels. In the work of Ceri Richards there is a clear compositional link, for example, between his treatment of the limp body of the man being brought back from the operating theatre in *Return of the Patient* (1953) and the traditional subject of the Deposition of Christ, which Richards also addressed in works from 1958 and 1962, for example.²⁰ Similarly a viewer familiar with the Bible and with the traditions of European iconography may read the dyad of a mother and baby, for instance, as a depiction of the Virgin and her son.



393. Robert Alwyn Hughes, *Dogs are at my Feet* (Psalm 22), 1990-2006, acrylic on canvas.

¹⁷ Robert Meyrick, *Claudia Williams* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 2000), no. 14, p. 16. On Clive Hicks-Jenkins, see below; a further painting on the Annunciation theme, entitled *Virgin of the Goldfinches* was completed in May 2009 and acquired by the Contemporary Art Society for Wales.

¹⁸ Article in the *South Wales Argus*, 24 January 2009.

¹⁹ For *The Expulsion*, *Dogs are at my Feet* and related works see <http://www.walesmodern.co.uk/RAHWMIndex.htm>; drawings

for the Stations of the Cross are on the 56 Group Wales website at <http://www.56groupwalesart.co.uk/RAHIndex.htm>. See also ‘The Indistinct Breath of the Image/Anadl aneglur y Ddelwedd’, Section C in Robert Alwyn Hughes, *Recent Work/Gwaith diweddar 1990-2006* (unpaginated exhibition catalogue, Newport: Newport Museum and Art Gallery, 2006).

²⁰ On these works see Mel Gooding, *Ceri Richards* (Moffat: Cameron & Hollis, 2002), pp. 126-31.



394. Clive Hicks-Jenkins,
Elijah and the Raven, 2003,
acrylic on board.



395. Clive
Hicks-Jenkins,
Annunciation,
2004, acrylic
on panel.

Josef Herman's oil painting *Mother and Child* (1944-47), depicting a working-class Welshwoman, is a typical case.²¹ Secular subjects without any intended religious connotations may thus recall a scriptural subject to the biblically literate. Conversely, a painting representing a biblical subject may be open to purely secular interpretation: Mary as *mater dolorosa* can be read as the secular, universal, figure of the bereaved mother.²²

Given the ubiquity of biblical subjects in western artistic tradition from the Middle Ages onwards, a painting referencing a well-known biblical painting from the past may be 'biblical' purely on a compositional level, and simply locate the artist within a tradition. Some artists, deeply conscious of that tradition, have not only modernized it but subverted it. Clive Hicks-Jenkins has often favoured religious and indeed biblical themes, providing powerful new interpretations of themes such as *Elijah and the Raven* (2003) and the *Annunciation* (2004). Hicks-Jenkins does not paint from the standpoint of the believer, but is attracted primarily by the narrative content and its possibilities. Drawn to, and inspired by,

the work of Italian painters of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, he breathes new life into their subjects, compositions and even decorative elements. Thus in his *Annunciation*, where figures in dynamic movement are set against the flat planes of a decorative, Italianate flowery field, the angel is a young man in modern, urban dress, strongly physical despite his feet not touching the ground. His posture suggests masculine power, while the half-cowering stance of the young woman hints at fear of sexual violence. The image is further sexualized by her loose, long, wavy, auburn hair – more evocative of Mary Magdalene than of the Virgin – and by her red dress, cut to above-knee length and with one narrow shoulder-strap slipping down her arm in a classic *déshabille*, which her slipping mantle enhances rather than conceals.

²¹ See *Chwe Arlunydd yn Ne Cymru: Six Artists in South Wales* (unpaginated exhibition catalogue, Carmarthen: Carmarthenshire County Council with the National Library of Wales), no. 15. The mother holds her child in the traditional Welsh *siol fagu*, a shawl used for carrying the baby while leaving the hands free for work.

²² The overlap of secular and biblical subjects is particularly explicit in Julie Davis's *Self-Portrait: Mother* (2008) inspired by the account of the killing of the firstborn children in Egypt in Exod. 12. 23-30, in the *Imaging the Bible* exhibition [<http://www.aber.ac.uk/museum/exhibitions/imagingthebible>].

The work of Christine Kinsey can be located in a similar way, though from a feminist standpoint. In her exploration of the historical and spiritual dimensions of women's lives she openly confronts Scripture as mediated by male authority over two millennia, and challenges the roles that masculine writings and readings have imposed on women. As with Hicks-Jenkins, many of her subjects and compositional references situate themselves within the long tradition of biblical painting, but again subvert both



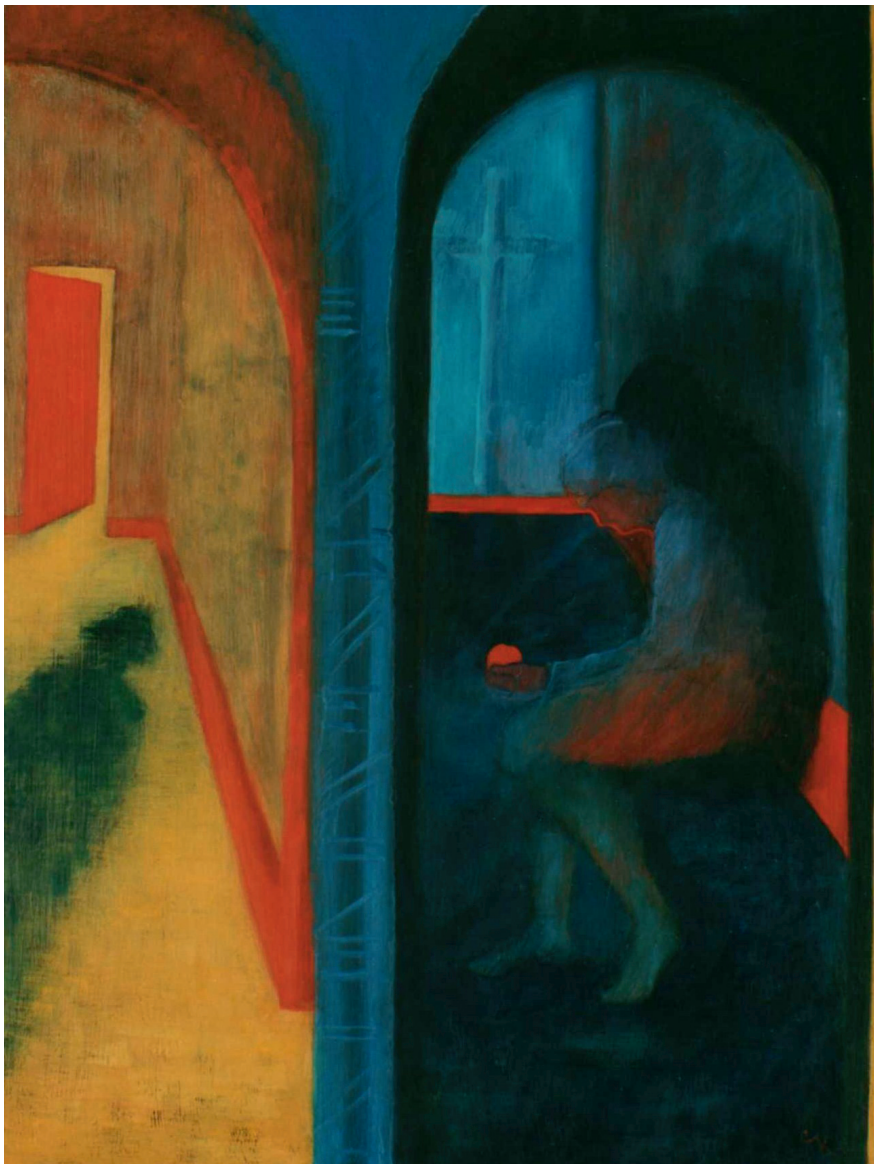
396. Christine Kinsey,
Ymson/Soliloquy 3, 2001,
oil on canvas.



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message and familiar image. Kinsey, who has made an extensive study of scriptural tradition and the roles it assigns to women, reinterprets biblical subjects from the woman's viewpoint, for example in *Ymson/Soliloquy 3* (2001), drawing on the story of Eve. Other paintings evoke the Annunciation in the familiar round-topped arches and conjunction of two figures, but the woman may refuse rather than submit meekly to her fate. In *Ceidwaid y Cofion Ysbrydol/Guardians of a Spiritual Memory* (series 1, no. 6; 2000) the slightly threatening shadow of a female form replaces the angel, whilst the seated woman holds (Eve's?) apple and a cross is seen beyond her, each detail heavy with the weight of religious tradition as experienced by women.



Rather than interpreting specific biblical events, the work of Tony Goble (d. 2007), demonstrates the imaginative possibilities of biblical imagery, using a rich mixture of scriptural reference combined with magic realism to explore both the narrative of own life and his Christian faith. In the drawing *Voyage* (1980s), for instance, a Christ-like figure with outstretched arms lies in a cruciform open grave, a dove descends as for the Christ's baptism, and the bearded boatman surrounded by fish suggests the Miraculous Draught of Fishes,²³ whilst in *Poet Crossing* (c.2002-2003) the ship's masts suggest the three crosses of Golgotha.²⁴ *Flowers from a Poem* (2006) has echoes of Genesis 2-3 in the male-female opposition and the serpent, while the curious sculptural form behind the man could suggest the Tree of Life, the Crucifixion and Entombment, or even the empty tomb, whilst the man could represent Adam or perhaps the resurrected Christ appearing in the garden.²⁵

397. Christine Kinsey, *Ceidwaid y Cofion Ysbrydol/Guardians of a Spiritual Memory* (series 1, no. 6), 2000, oil on board.



At present biblical art, although far less prevalent than in the past, remains a rich and productive strand in Welsh painting. Although some artists may still be motivated by their personal faith, others turn to biblical themes despite their lack of conventional Christian belief and may even produce works which the devout might find unacceptable. But it is debatable whether biblical art can or will hold its shrinking ground outside the restricted circles of committed Christians. Many of the established, professional artists responding creatively to scriptural narratives are middle-aged or older, and the culturally-Christian upbringing and biblical education which were once such powerfully formative influences are increasingly outside the experience of younger generations; nor has the latter's training focused on biblical art. Perhaps ironically, alongside the long march of secularization, other faiths, notably Islam and Hinduism, are already making their mark in an increasingly multicultural Wales. It is impossible to predict the artistic consequences of all these factors, but we can already observe that in biblical art in particular, as well as in the wider history of western European art, major and unprecedented changes are under way.

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398. Tony Goble,
Flowers from a Poem, 2006,
acrylic on canvas.

²³ See Jill Piercy, 'The Barnyard and the Crucifixion: The Art of Anthony Goble', *Planet* 83 (1990), 42-49 (45), and Tony Goble and Paul Henry, *Dream Seeds: Paintings by Tony Goble, Poem and Prose by Paul Henry* (Swansea: Gynn Vivian Art Gallery, 1995).

²⁴ See Ceri Thomas, *Mapping the Welsh Group at 60* (s.l.: the Welsh Group, 2008), p. 52.

²⁵ Thomas, *Mapping the Welsh Group*, p. 52.