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Abstract:
À partir d'études de cas envisagés à la lumière de l'exégèse visuelle (Michel-Ange, Giulio Romano, Cranach l'Ancien, Tintoret, Cousin Père et Fils, Charles Le Brun, Sébastien Bourdon et Rembrandt), l'article analyse les valeurs d'usage de l'iconographie du symbole juif du Serpent d'airain (Nb 21, 4–9) destinée à des milieux protestants et catholiques. Tantôt palimpseste christologique, tantôt argument de l'iconophilie et de l'usage des œuvres d'art pour le culte collectif selon les catholiques, le thème iconographique du Serpent d'airain devient au contraire une arme apologétique pour l'aniconisme au sein des temples protestants, où il apparaît combiné à l'iconographie des Tables de la Loi sur lesquelles figure le commandement iconoclaste. L'étude examine comment l'iconographie chrétienne du Moyen-Âge et des Temps modernes en Europe a transformé et s'est approprié le symbole juif créé par Moïse.

Die Studie untersucht, wie christliche, europäische Ikonographie im Mittelalter und der frühen Neuzeit ein jüdisches, auf Mose zurückgeführtes Symbol transformiert und sich aneignet. Sie zeigt anhand von Beispielen (Michelangelo, Giulio Romano, Cranach d.Ä., Tintoretto, Cousin Vater und Sohn, Hendrick Goltzius, Charles Le Brun, Sébastien Bourdon und Rembrandt), wie verschieden die Erzählung von der Ehernen Schlange (Num 21,4–9) in der Kunst rezipiert wurde. In katholischem Kontext erscheint sie als Verweis auf das Kreuz, als Symbol der Erscheinung Gottes und als eschatologisches Heilssymbol. Die Stange, an der sie befestigt ist, kann als Kreuz, aber auch als Lebensbaum dargestellt werden. In den Bilderstreitigkeiten des 16. Jh.s diente die Eherne Schlange der Rechfertigung bildlicher Darstellungen. In protestantisch-reformierten Kreisen wurde sie dagegen dem Goldenen Kalb gleichgestellt und als Götzenbild betrachtet. In privatem Kontext konnte sie jedoch auch dort positiv rezipiert werden.

The Bible has little to say about the brazen serpent, the sculpture created by Moses in the desert by order of Yahweh in order to heal the Israelites, who had been attacked by fiery snakes as punishment for their impiety; tired of the terrible conditions of their existence in the desert after leaving Egypt, the people had lost their faith (Num. 21:4–9). The account is vague as to the circumstances of the brazen serpent's display, and above all as to the support on which Moses set it in order to make it visible to the people. The Hebrew *nes* (נֵס) means standard, ensign, banner, signal, sign[1] – a term which remains imprecise in terms regarding the actual nature of the support used by Moses.

1 The Vulgate translated it by *pro signo* and the Septuagint by ἐπὶ σημείου (Num. 21:8–9).

Contained in only six verses, this episode in Israel's history has nevertheless given rise to an abundant iconography in the Christian West. It lies also at the root of one of the earliest attestations of Christian allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament, since the Gospel of John views the bronze serpent Moses made and raised up on a support as a prefiguration of Christ on the Cross (John 3:14–17). This emphatic and early Christian symbolism that Christians assigned to the episode probably explains the rarity of its iconography in Jewish circles in the medieval and modern periods[2]. Rabbinical exegesis developed various interpretations of the brazen serpent, relating it, for example, to the battle against the Amalekites; for just as it was through the faith and prayer of Moses that the Israelites defeated Amalek, so it was also through faith that those in the desert who turned their eyes and their hope to the brazen serpent found salvation[3].

Its lapidary nature did not prevent Christian artists from appropriating this text, and we are able to examine what their additions to the biblical outline were. This article therefore intends to explore the procedures through which certain artistic representations of the brazen serpent implemented a Christian exegesis of the episode. To do so, we will examine a number of examples created in the modern era and selected for their variety of interpretation.

1. The brazen serpent as figure of Christian redemption and of Catholic iconophilia

In the Middle Ages, four types of work attested to an effective artistic translation of the written allegorical exegesis that re-reads the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament and, more broadly, of Christian history[4]. These works are: the *Bible moralisée*; the *Biblia Pauperum* (*Paupers' Bible*), of which the first known illuminated manuscripts date from the beginning of the 14th century[5]; the *Speculum humanæ salvationis*, attributed to the Dominican monk Ludolph of Saxony[6] and dating to the early years of the 14th century; and the *Glossa ordinaria*[7]. All these manuscripts intended for Christians used illumination as complement to scriptural texts in order to underline the parallels between the Old and New Testaments, and notably between the lives of Moses and Jesus[8].

2 Fellous, Moïse, 65–86 and Oiry / Montignie / Wénin, Le serpent de bronze,105–136

3 ועל (יא) אלשיך תהלים פרק כט ד"ה והנה זה 47 and תפארת שלמה מועדים רמזי פורים ד"ה 93. I owe these references to Sonia Fellous.

4 Lubac, Exégèse médiévale, *passim*.

5 Wimmer / Ratzke / Reudenbach, Studie zur Biblia pauperum, *passim*.

6 Wilson / Lancaster Wilson, A Medieval Mirror, *passim*.

7 Smith, The Glossa ordinaria, *passim*.

8 Mâle, L'Art religieux, 337–346; Réau, Iconographie, 59–66.

Fig. 1 Anonymous, *Speculum humanæ salvationis*, Crucifixion of Jesus and the Brazen Serpent.

Mixing texts and images, the *Bible moralisée*, the *Speculum humanæ salvationis* (fig. 1) and the *Glossa ordinaria* (which most often include only illuminated drop capital letters) employed iconographical and page layout principles similar to but simpler than those used in the *Biblia pauperum* (fig. 2). The *Glossa* and the *Speculum* proceed by compartmentalised binary figurative juxtapositions, sometimes vertical, sometimes horizontal; *one* figured scene (or sequence of scenes) taken from an Old Testament story is thus juxtaposed with *one* scene (or sequence of scenes) taken from the gospels, and they are brought together in accordance with the *topoi* of written allegorical exegesis, which viewed the first scene (or sequence of scenes) as the prefiguration of the second.

In bringing together striking images from the two Testaments, these four works assured the propagation of allegorism to the faithful and inculcated in them the coherence of Christian doctrine in the light of the analogies pointed out between the gospels and the Old Testament. These medieval illuminated manuscripts created a 'typology en bloc'[9] that juxtaposed Old Testament episodes and their New Testament figures, but by compartmentalising them.

The practice persisted into the modern era[10], as seen notably in the Book of Hours illuminated by Giulio Clovio, delivered to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese in 1546

Fig. 2 Anonymous, *Biblia pauperum*, *Crucifixion of Jesus* prefigured by the *Sacrifice of Isaac* and by the *Brazen Serpent*, c.1460–1465, xylography coloured.

9 Kemp, Christliche Kunst, 149.
10 Eichberger / Perlove, Visual Typology, *passim*.

(fig. 3): a double page juxtaposes the antitype (the crucifixion) and the type (the brazen serpent) without the two referencing one another. Other modes of artistic exegesis were developed in the modern period, and the study of a few cases makes it possible to appreciate the variety and invention used by the artists to link the Jewish symbol to Christian history.

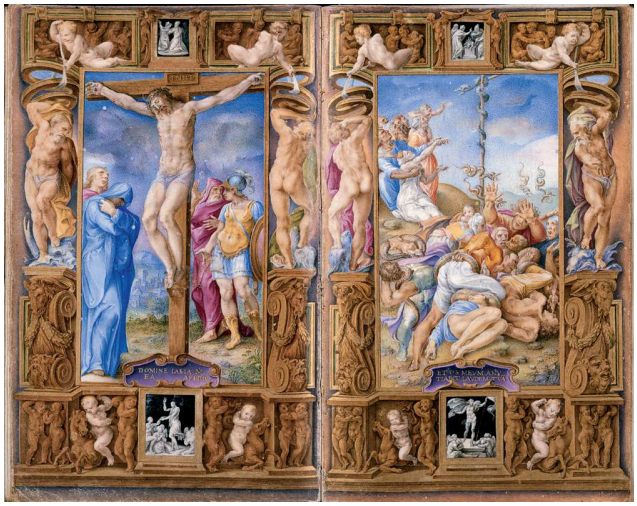

Fig. 3 Giulio Clovio, *Farnese Hours*, *The Crucifixion* and *The Brazen Serpent,* c.1546, illumination.

A drawing by Giulio Romano (c.1492–1546) that documents the lost frescoes of the Chapel of the Crucifix in the church of Sant'Andrea in Mantua[11] stands apart from the medieval exegetical tradition, which tended to juxtapose type and antitype at the same time as separating them (fig. 3). In a unified and anachronic composition the artist has confronted the brazen serpent, represented in the upper left corner of the sheet, with a crucifix enveloped in a glorious cloud (fig. 4). This brazen serpent seems to be considering the crucified Christ looking down on it.

Fig. 4 Giulio Romano, *The Brazen Serpent*, first half of the 16th century, pen wash, ink, wash and black chalk drawing, 39.5 x 34.3 cm.

Unlike the biblical narrative, which gives few details as to the atmospheric and topographic circumstances of the miracle, the artist has wound the brazen serpent around a pole of dead wood in the manner of a caduceus, near to a tree trunk with a living and leafy branch that points in the direction of the crucifix. Romano's own invention, these *parerga* (decorative elements which surround the action performed by the animated figures) near the brazen serpent and the crucifix seem to work in the iconographic tradition of allegories of the Old and the New Testaments. These allegories articulate the two historical epochs of

11 Hartt, Giulio Romano, 162, 224, 273–274 and 304.

Law and of Grace[12] in accordance with an axial symmetry from the trunk of the central tree whose branches are dead on the side of the Old Testament but living and leafy on the side of Christ (figs. 5 to 7).

Fig. 5 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Allegory of Law and Grace*, c. 1529, oil on panel 72 x 88.5 cm.

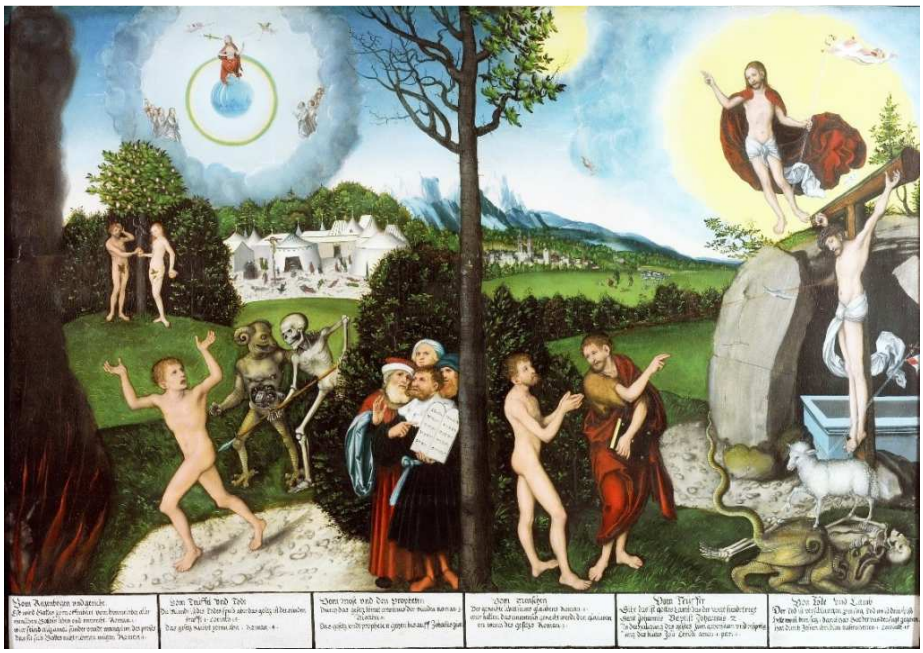

Fig. 6 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Allegory of Law and Grace*, 1529, oil on canvas 96.5 x 269.2 cm.

12 See Auerbach, 'Figura', 436–489.

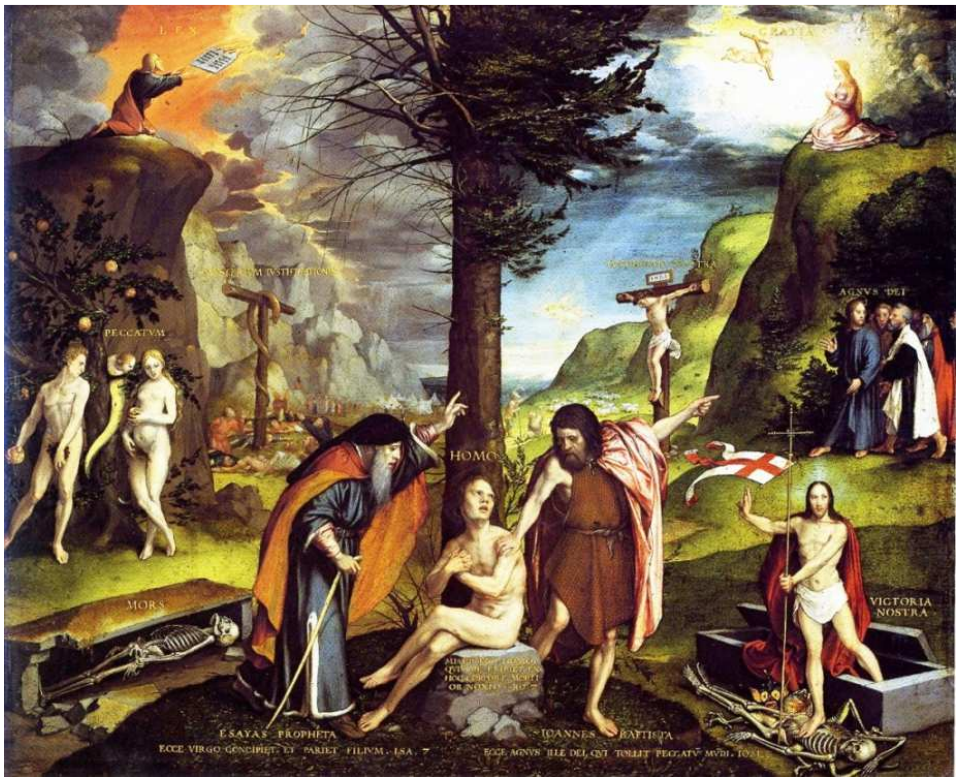

Fig. 7 Hans Holbein, *Allegory of Law and Grace*, c.1532–1535, oil on panel 49 x 60 cm.

Expanding on the biblical history, Romano's drawing opposes the Mosaic serpent to Christ the dispenser of salvation, and constructs a hierarchy between them. Indeed, the Brazen Serpent is rendered ineffective, while the crucifix heals the figures who contemplate it. These light and serene figures occupy the upper part of the sheet and overlook a group of Israelites who do not see the crucifix and look at the brazen serpent while contorting themselves under the effect of the burning snakes' bites. A strong chiaroscuro contrast, linked to the use of a wash that is darkened in places, shapes these plaintive bodies set at the bottom of the sheet. The tiered disposition of the figurative elements – and not lateralised according to the direction of reading from left to right which conventionally materialises the succession of time (figs. 5 to 7) – constructs a Christ-centric exegesis of the Jewish event. This contrasting figurative treatment seems to transpose curren Christian exegetical speculation, which considered Christ to be the 'Word-Light' (John 1:4–5) as the unique and true source of salvation[13], and finally valorised the Christian message in that it supplied fulfilment to the doctrine of Moses[14]. In-

13 See the papal decree Moyses vir (September 4th 1439) which, following the Church Fathers, puts the superiority of the Church upon the Synagogue: Ecclesia sanctior quam sinagoga, et Christi vicarius ipso Moyse auctoritate et dignitate superior, excerpt from the seventh session of the Council of Florence in opposition to the Council of Basel. Consulted on the Vatican website: https://w2.vatican.va/content/eugenius-iv/it/documents/decretum-moyses-vir-4-sept-1439.html.

14 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest

tended to decorate a chapel of the crucifix, Romano's drawing thus established a kind of valorising genealogy of the crucifixion which magnified its efficacy through an allegorical and hierarchised confrontation with its Old Testament antecedent.

While this confrontation of the two Testaments gradually disappeared from the arts in the early modern period, all representations of the brazen serpent, henceforth treated in an autonomous manner, can be seen as a genuine Christological palimpsest: one cannot avoid seeing the crucifixion implicit in it behind the biblical *figura*. Hence the emphasis on the Israelites' gaze focusing on the brazen serpent, a point of view which favours contemplation and healing over the snakes' attack and thus over the representation of suffering and death.

Michelangelo (1475–1564), however, chose to combine the two time periods in one of the four pendentive paintings of the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508–1512), pendentives dealing with the miraculous salvation of the chosen people[15]. On the entrance side, the decapitations of Goliath by David and of Holofernes by Judith show that this salvation is the fruit of the victory of a weak over a powerful warrior. On the altar side, the brazen serpent responds to the crucifixion of Haman, the antitype of Christ (fig. 8). In these two last representations, the same upright pious person on one side condemns the persecutor and on the other saves those who focus their gaze on him.

Fig. 8 Michelangelo, *The Brazen Serpent*, c.1511, fresco 585 x 985 cm.

Closely following the confined form of this pendentive, the bronze serpent fresco shows on the right the attack of the snakes in a highly tormented scene in which bodies are intertwined and in addition merge with the sinuous shapes of the reptiles. From this pile of bodies contorted by pain and panic – an intertwining whose echoes of the famous sculpted group of the Laocoön have

letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished' , Matt 5:17–18. 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms', Lk 24:44.

15 Careri, La torpeur des Ancêtres, 62–70.

not failed to be pointed out – there emerges in the axis a serpent entwined around the body of one of the Israelites, whose arm appears to be a segment of the snake, displaying the same shape and colour. This snake-man is visually prolonged by the stake at the centre and background of the composition on which, as on a caduceus, the brazen serpent is entwined. This axis thus separates, in the manner of the Last Judgement that the fresco adjoins, those bodies stricken by evil and those saved by sight. In the foreground of the much more tranquil group on the left a man helps a woman to get back to her feet. In particular, he supports her arm, which has been bitten by the snakes and is now held out in the direction of the redeeming image – an arm whose shape does not fail to create a visual rhyme with the bodies of the snakes on the right, especially if one compares it to the arm of the person placed in the foreground which, as we have pointed out, is confused with the body of the snake. If the group on the right is thrown down as in to hell, the one on the left turns, or even raises itself up, towards the redeeming image. The emphasis here is more on gazes than on gestures. A child perched on the shoulders of an adult is ostensibly pointing at the adult's eyes as if to open them and direct them towards the image.

The absence of Moses from this scene may be surprising, and indeed some have seen him in the person supporting the woman on the left, while others see him in the features of the frightened man with raised hands on the right. But it is more plausible to think that Michelangelo was inspired not by the tale recounted in *Numbers* 21 but by the text of *Wisdom* 16:5–8, from which Moses is absent. More in tune with the three other pendentives, which stress divine mercy with no need of penitence, this chapter also emphasises the salvation of Israel through a miraculous intervention. What matters here is to show the permanent presence of God in the life of the Israelites, as well as the permanent renewal of his Word in order to strengthen faith and confidence, despite the rather dramatic circumstances.

The visual reflection Michelangelo offers on salvation through the image did not fail to resonate with the intense debates between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th century. Indeed, from this period on the episode assumed a new meaning oriented towards the very issue of the status of the image. For every representation of the brazen serpent offers an image of an image, in the manner of representations of the golden calf. Both Protestant and Catholic controversialists were thus to pay a great deal of attention to the type of biblical image that made it possible to legitimate or condemn the making and worship of Christian images. The main issue is as follows: how can one resolve the apparent contradiction between the prohibition of any image of God as stated in the Ten Commandments and the existence of an image that saves, when one is aware of the divine anger with those who made and adored the golden calf? The comparison with this idol *par excellence* represents a genuine exegetical challenge.

For Catholics, it was first a matter of emphasising the divine institution of the brazen serpent and its miraculous efficacy, which makes it a prefiguration of Christ on the cross. Hence, the Louvain theologian Johannes Molanus, author of a treatise on holy images published in 1570, takes from Pope Adrian the comparison between the brazen serpent and the crucifixion, if only to explicitly transfer this comparison to the field of images: 'O folly of those who grumble against the sacred worship of Christians! If we truly believe that the Israelite people was saved from the plague striking them by looking at a brazen serpent, will we doubt that by worshipping and contemplating representations of Christ-God, our Saviour, and of all the saints, we too will be saved?'[16] Here, there is shift from Christ on the cross to the crucifix which iconises the crucifixion and so places the emphasis on the image.

Catholic writers like Molanus maintained that unlike Jews, who were naturally inclined to idolatry, Christians could not make this error because they know how to see in the image the sign that refers to the model, which can only be Christ. Hence the text of *Wisdom* (16:7) was often invoked: 'For he that turned to it, was not healed by that which he saw, but by thee the Saviour of all.' It is not a question, then, of letting one's gaze linger on the object that is the brazen serpent, whose material is emphasised in order to remind us that it is only an artefact meant to efface itself so as to lead the gaze towards Him who is at the origin of the miracle. The serpent is thus only a sign serving, as the Catholic controversialist René Benoist wrote, for 'the remembrance of the healing of the snakes, received by the grace of God'[17]. He stresses that this pious memorial is 'a figure of Jesus Christ, who must be exalted on the cross to give salvation and remission to all who look at him with vigorous faith'[18]. Finally, he concludes that it is its degradation to the state of idol, as shown by all the acts of praise made before this image, which led to its destruction by Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 18:4). The Jesuit Louis Richeome says much the same thing when he proposes that 'the cause of this destruction was because until then the children of Israel burnt incense before it, which was in this law the proper office of the Sacrificer [...]. It was thus a punishable temerity of the Israelites to use such a ceremony and even more severely punishable, in that having forgotten the meaning of the serpent, they worshipped its matter, and were true idolaters. This is why Hezekiah did well to destroy such an abomination, and to remove any reason for this idol loved by the people to return again'[19]. While the argument for this destruction was to be taken up, as we will see, by Protestants in order to attack Papist

16 Molanus, Traité des saintes images, book I, chapter 5, 117. See also, Paleotti, Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre et profane, I, 16, 54r and I, 17, 59r–60v.
17 Benoist, Traicté catholique des images, 6r.
18 Ibid.
19 Richeome, Trois discours, 721.

idolatry, Richeome defends the idea that this Old Testament episode 'does not at all damage' the Catholics, but to the contrary helps them to open the eyes of the Protestants, 'if they desire to see the truth', as did the Israelites when invited to discover divine truth through the brazen serpent: 'All this amounts to nothing against us, and indeed shows that this serpent had been kept by Moses and the Israelites through reverence and in memory of the benefits received, and as a figure of the Saviour, who must heal our spiritual bites, which he does for us. For if it has been praiseworthy to keep in reverence a figure of the Jesus Christ to come, with even greater reason must it be praiseworthy to honour the image of the Jesus Christ who has already come'[20]. In a strictly typological reading, one thus sees how if it was legitimate to honour this pious memorial, *a fortiori* it is legitimate to honour the image of Christ. The brazen serpent is 'a Sacrament or sacred sign of Jesus Christ'. It was conceived 'to honour and adore religiously, not the figure, but Jesus Christ who is figured in it, and to await healing and salvation from it'[21].

Fig. 9 Charles Le Brun, *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, c.1649–50, oil on canvas 98.1 x 135.6 cm.

20 Ibid., 721–722.
21 Ibid., 722.

Let us now see how 17th century painting assimilated this thinking about the image that underlies different versions of the episode of the brazen serpent, first taking as an example the interpretation offered by Charles Le Brun (1619–1690). With artistic means similar to those employed by Giulio Romano, such as the use of *parerga* of an atmospheric and vegetable nature which are not mentioned in the biblical account, the French painter distances himself a little further from the medieval tradition of a 'typology en bloc'. Painted around 1650 for 'one of his closest friends, M. Lenoir'[22], of whom we know nothing due to the frequency of this family name, Le Brun's painting (fig. 9) stands apart from the spectacular options chosen by his predecessors, such as Giulio Romano (fig. 4) and Tintoretto (fig. 11), who were concerned to point out the miraculous character of the serpent by surrounding it with a glory picturing an anthropomorphic epiphany of God the Father or of his Son, although the Bible does not mention them. Nor did he choose to arrange the serpent on a gleaming Latin cross evocative of a Calvary, as did Jean Cousin the Elder in making up for the silences of the Bible regarding the nature of the support of the brazen serpent (fig. 10). In contrast to these extravagant practices, Le Brun's composition displays a remarkable economy of

Fig. 10 Jean Cousin the Elder, *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, first half of the 16th century, pen and bistre wash on paper, 10.7 x 13.3 cm.

Fig. 11 Tintoretto, *The Brazen Serpent*, c.1576, oil on canvas 840 x 520 cm.

22 Guillet de Saint-Georges, Mémoires inédits 9. See also Gady / Milovanovic, Charles Le Brun, 174–175 (cat. n°62).

means and excludes all explicit and anachronic juxtaposition of the antitype and the type, either of Christ or of the brazen serpent. His painting nevertheless constitutes a resolutely Christian interpretation of this episode in Jewish history. What, then, are the artistic resources of his exegesis of the subject?

Fig. 12 Étienne Delaune, after Jean Cousin the Younger, *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, c.1530–1560, engraving 28.5 x 39.4 cm.

The picture painted for Lenoir evoked without representing it the New Testament figure announced for Christians by the brazen serpent. Pictorial means such as the arrangement of the serpent on a desiccated and cruciform tree-like support, but one supplied with two transverse branches which once again turn green in a patchily illuminated sky, suffice to evoke the crucifixion of Jesus (fig. 9). In fact, the tail, coils and head of the serpent cling to the trunk and branches of the vegetal support like a crucified human body, whose limbs occupy at one and the same time the post and the crosspiece of a cross. Le Brun's use of this type of vegetal support for the brazen serpent in conjunction with a luminous atmospheric effect is not new: it appears in a composition after Jean Cousin the Younger engraved by Étienne Delaune (fig. 12) and Leonard Gaultier in 1573[23], as well as in a stained-glass window of the present-day church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont after Jean Cousin the Elder (fig. 13).

Fig. 13 After Jean Cousin the Elder, *The Brazen Serpent*, c.1600–1622, stained glass, 160 x 135 cm.

Le Brun, however, distinguished himself from his predecessors by equipping the dead cruciform trunk with two transverse branches which are growing out

23 Billat / Bimbenet-Privat / Cordellier, Jean Cousin père et fils, 148–151.

again and are covered in leaves. He also painted luminous coloured areas around the re-growing tree. Not mentioned in the Bible, this atmospheric detail, as well as the tree-like, cruciform and re-growing appearance of the brazen serpent's support, clearly constructed its salvational and eschatological value, at the same time as pointing out its Christian figural nature.

Indeed, exegetical treatises relating to the brazen serpent exploited the traditional vegetal metaphor of the tree of the Cross turned into the tree of life. Their thinking shows the potential Christic signification of the tree-like cruciform shape growing once again and surrounded by a luminous atmosphere that Le Brun invented and on which he painted the serpent:

> If the Israelites wounded by the snakes looked fixedly & carefully at the brazen serpent, we are no less sick, we have no lesser need to look at him who has been exalted on the tree of the cross[24].
> We know that the Cross, which before brought only death, & affliction, since the Son of God was raised up on it, in order to cure the mortal wound, that the infernal serpent had made on human nature, began to produce through a contrary effect life, & blessings. Just as a wild tree, if you graft on to it some young branch, instead of the harsh & bitter fruit it produced before, begins to load its branches with beautiful apples, sweet and delicious; so the Cross, which was but a deadly tree, & cursed, & and which bore only fruits of affliction (Numbers 21) since this fine new branch of the lineage of Jesse was grafted on to its trunk, has lost all it had of the harsh & the bitter, has produced delicious fruit, & has been changed from a tree of death into a tree of life[25].

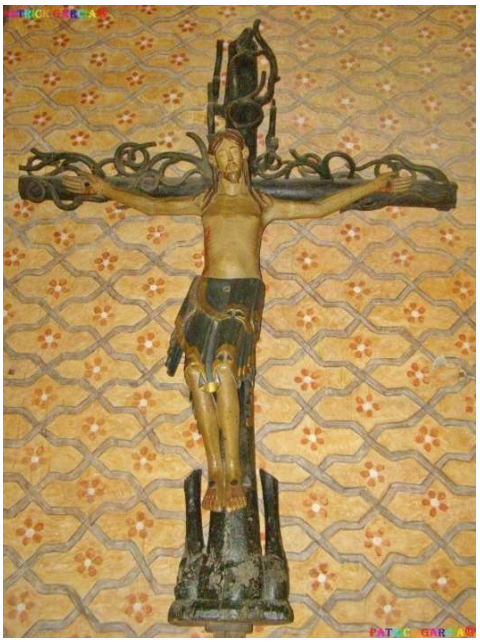

Fig. 14 Anonymous, *Arborescent Crucifix*, Moissac, c.1135.

These treatises suggest that the painting focuses its own exegesis, by means of a probable borrowing from the iconography of the Cross-Tree of life, which was very much in vogue in the medieval period (with the arborescent crucifix of Moissac, c. 1135, fig. 14) and revisited notably in the modern era by Hendrick Goltzius (fig. 15)[26]. The porosity between Old and New Testaments that is at work in the vegetal and atmospheric invention of Le Brun also recalls the *Allegories of the Old and New Testaments*

24 Durant, Sept Sermons, 282.
25 Molinier, Le mystere de la Croix, 93–94.
26 Schama, Landscape and memory 214–226; Irvine, 'The iconography of the Cross as the Green Tree', 195–207; see also Naïs Virenque's PhD, Structures arborescentes et arts de la mémoire: art, science et dévotion dans les ordres mendiants en France et en Italie du XIIIe au XVIe siècle, defended in the University of Tours on October 4th 2019, p. 269–520. My thanks to Naïs Virenque, to whom I owe the reference to Irvine.

by Cranach the Elder, widely circulated in Europe (figs. 5 to 7) and organised according to an axial symmetry starting from a trunk which occupies the middle of the painting, with dead branches on the side of Moses, live and leafy branches on the side of Christ. Le Brun, however, went beyond this binary opposition between the age of the Law and the age of Grace by making visible the similarities between the brazen serpent and the crucifixion, the source of the redemption of humanity and of the eternal salvation granted to the faithful, in accordance with an allegory *in absentia* which does not explicitly represent this New Testament episode but suggests it through the subtlety of the play of the coloured shapes.

Fig. 15 Hendrick Goltzius, *Christ with the Verdant Cross*, c. 1610.

Indeed, the renewal of the cruciform tree's leafage is on a kind of halo made of areas coloured in yellow, a colour synonymous with salvation. This painting for a private collector changed the brazen serpent into a Christian eschatological and soteriological sign. In arranging the brazen serpent on this re-growing and glorious cruciform tree which seems to condense the iconographies of the verdant cross and allegories of the Old and New Testaments, Le Brun reinvented the appearance of the brazen serpent and plausibly made of it a support for meditation on the salvation and eternal life produced by the crucifixion. Supplementing the biblical story as to the concrete circumstances of the brazen serpent's display, the painter has therefore formulated an implicit or *in absentia* allegorical exegesis of them which eludes the figuration of its Christian key and counts on the theological and artistic culture of its viewers.

2. Protestant usage of the brazen serpent

As we have seen, the brazen serpent constituted one of the foundations of the defence of images by Catholics in the 16th century. Not only did it supply proof of the divine institution of images, it also testified to the miraculous power of these images instituted by God. Very clearly, the interpretation of it offered by Protestants was different. For them the bronze serpent was merely a prophetic image of the Saviour, whose coming henceforth makes this kind of representation pointless. One might say that it was now a matter of de-iconising Christ,

whose coming annuls all prefiguring representations. If such an image had any use, it was only for a very limited time. One thing is certain: the image was not conceived to represent God, and even less to be the object of any kind of cult. Its degeneration into an idol proves, moreover, that this is the fate of all images of a religious nature. Thus, for François de Saillans, 'if King Hezekiah had occasion to shatter and break this brazen serpent, because of the abuse and the idolatry committed for it, this serpent made and raised up by the commandment of God, the Christian Kings and Princes today have the same reason to shatter and break the images of the Papacy, raised up against the commandment of God, because of such an abuse'[27]. In the eyes of the Protestants, then, all Catholics were invited to see in the adoration of the brazen serpent not a negative example of idolatry which confirmed the legitimacy of their own images, but rather a disagreeable precedent in which there are no longer distinguished from but are assimilated to the faithless Jews. One may therefore speak of a comparison between the brazen serpent and the golden calf. Even if the latter was created by the chosen people to turn away from God, the former, willed by God, necessarily led to idolatry.

Fig. 16 Anonymous, after Hendrick Goltzius, *Moses and the Tablets of the Law*, c. 1600–1630, oil on panel 131.4 x 94.2 cm.

Regarding artistic representations, one is forced to note that the theme was not often the subject of independent representation in European Protestant circles in the modern

27 Saillans, Response, 656–657.

age. On the other hand, it was often linked to other biblical episodes, notably in the context of Lutheran allegories of the Old and New Testaments (figs. 5 to 7) in such a way as to suggest the coherence and unity of the divine Christian plan[28].

In representations of the Ten Commandments[29], probably intended for Calvinist circles (fig. 16), the depiction of the brazen serpent was sometimes coupled with that of the golden calf, tied to the transcription of the aniconic Law of Moses following the Exodus (Ex 20:21–27). This use of the iconographic theme of the brazen serpent in paintings which show Moses holding the tablets of the Law (fig. 16) emphasised the iconoclastic nature of the Law.

Intended for Protestant circles, a painting inspired by a composition of Goltzius and circulated by means of an engraving of it by Sadeler (figs. 17 and 18) linked the transcription of Moses' aniconic law to the iconography of two archetypes of the idol: the golden calf and the brazen serpent, which the Israelites worshipped to the extent of driving King Hezekiah to destroy it (2 Kgs. 18:4). Moses and, behind him, the two scenes clearly identifiable as the brazen serpent and he breaking the tablets of the Law confronted with the Israelites adoring the golden calf, occupy only a fifth of the painted surface and represent idolatrous episodes, while the rest of the panel is reserved for the array of the iconophobic divinecommandments, en-

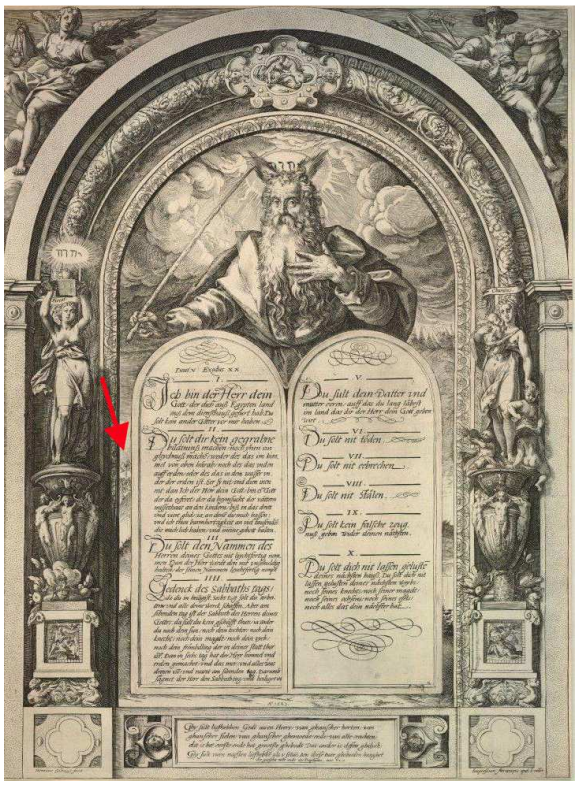

Fig. 17 Johannes Sadeler I after Hendrick Goltzius, *Moses and the Tablets of the Law*, 1583, engraving 48.5 x37.3 cm.

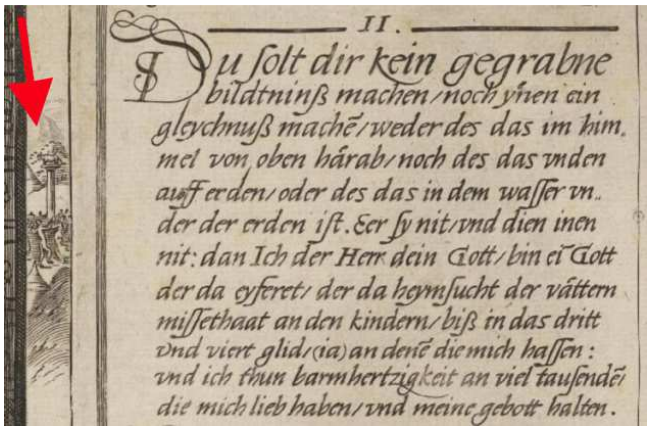

Fig. 18 Detail of the Ten Commandments with the adoration of the golden calf, on the left, close to the iconophobic commandment.

28 See Noble, Lucas Cranach the Elder, 27–66.

29 On the iconographic theme of the Decalogue in the Early Modern Low-Countries, see Mochizuki, The Netherlandish Image, 251–268 and Id., 'At home with the Ten Commandments', 287–300.

tirely rendered in French in a grandiloquent and modern cursive typeface, in such a way as to make the Law solemn and readable for the contemporary viewers of the panel. It would be hard to find a more Protestant painting (fig. 16): the overwhelming hold the text of the aniconic Ten Commandments has over the rest of the composition displays the absolute primacy of the divine word over all figurative and mimetic images, which are reduced to the status of idols (the golden calf and the brazen serpent).

A Karel van Mander (1548–1606) composition engraved by Jacob Matham flanks the Ten Commandments of the dyad formed by Moses and Aaron (fig. 19), and also shows the idolatrous episodes of the golden calf and the brazen serpent above the tables of the Law, which are so monumental as to occupy almost the entire width of the composition and two thirds of its height. Once again, this iconographic combination makes it possible to spectacularise the aniconic and even iconoclastic import of the Mosaic Law, to which Protestants were firmly attached. An invention of artists, this association of the iconographic themes of the adoration of the golden calf, of the brazen serpent – irrefutable 'illustrations' of the devastating effects of idolatry – and of the presentation of the Ten Commandments, constitutes the originality of these Protestant representations compared to Catholic iconography of the Ten Commandments, which are distinctly more iconophilic to the extent of betraying the aniconism of the Law of Moses[30].

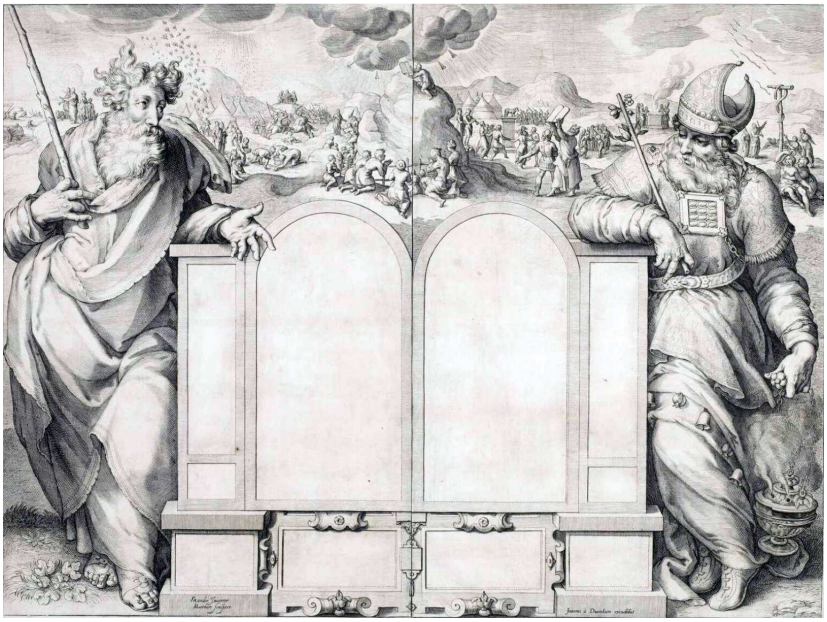

Fig. 19 Jacob Matham after Karel van Mander, *Moses and Aaron display the Ten Commandments*, 1630, engraving 58.6 x 78.5 cm.

In all likelihood, in Protestant circles this iconographic networking of the brazen serpent (figs. 15, 16, 18) aimed at the overt display of the aniconic or even iconoclastic nature of the Law of Moses, on which the Reformation relied in or-

30 See Matthieu Somon's PhD, Une réinvention en images. L'histoire de Moïse au XVIIe siècle en France, 2017, Paris 1 – Panthéon-Sorbonne University.

der to exclude figurative art from the public space of worship[31]. These few paintings and engravings developed a Protestant exegesis of the Ten Commandments and of the story of Moses, and served as a weapon for the Reformation, which was iconophobic as regards its places of worship but not as regards private homes.

Fig. 20 Rembrandt, *Portrait of Jan Uytenbogaert*, 1639, etching and dry point, 25 x 20.4 cm.

In fact, the subject of the brazen serpent could also flatter the iconophilia of certain Protestant individuals, as is suggested by an etching of 1639 by Rembrandt: the *Portrait of Jan Uytenbogaert*, receiver-general of the States of Hol-

31 See Michalski, The Reformation, and Koerner, The Reformation.

land (fig. 20). The circumstances of its creation are well known: Rembrandt had a pressing need of money in order to buy his house in Sint Anthonisbreestraat in Amsterdam (which now houses the Rembrandt House Museum), and Jan Uytenbogaert satisfied this need by expediting the payment for two paintings of the passion commissioned by the stadtholder Frederik Hendrik[32].

This portrait takes on an unequivocal encomiastic function: it is a matter of praising the wealthy model and thanking him for his generosity towards the artist, in need of money. To do this, Rembrandt takes up compositional devices similar to those used by Quentin Metsys in his panel *The Money Lender and his Wife* (fig. 21)[33]: an almost allegorical professional portrait linked to a biblical reference which exalts the probity of the individual[34]. But Metsys was working in the prosperous Flemish city of Antwerp, while Rembrandt's etching was for a Protestant Dutchman. In this etching, the figurative reference to the Bible undoubtedly changes as a result of this new confessional environment: for the Book of Hours decorated with an image of the Virgin with Child painted by Metsys, Rembrandt substitutes a painting with a curved top of the brazen serpent. This Old Testament iconography was more suited to the Calvinist sensibility of the recipient and model, who was close to the theologian Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557–1644) and was a devotee of Bible study. One might ponder the way in which this figured painting connects to the engraved portrait. Larry Silver and Stephanie Dickey[35] have offered a number of possibilities and have pointed out the close connection between the brazen serpent and the role of faith in Calvinist spirituality, but without citing the writings of Calvin. We can attempt to fill out their analysis.

Rembrandt portrayed his model as collector of art as much as collector of taxes. Paintings (one of the brazen serpent and, in the upper right corner, one of a long hair male bearing a beret portrayed in a Renaissance head-and-shoulder fashion), curiosities (a Turkey carpet, a sword and baldric), books, papers and caskets surround Uytenbogaert, who is dressed in sumptuous and outmoded garments (one admires the soft and velvety rendering of the furs resulting from the burrs left by the dry point furrows) probably refer to his taste for works of the 16th century (fig. 20) [36].

32 These two paintings represent the Burial of Jésus and his Resurrrection. See Dickey, S., Rembrandt. Portraits in Print (John Benjamins), 2004, 66-88.
33 Silver, 'Massys and Money:, DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2015.7.2.2.
34 The meaning of Metsys' panel would remain ambiguous without the ancient inscription on its original frame reported by his biographer Alexander van Fornenbergh: 'Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have' (Lev 19, 36). Silver, The Paintings, 137.
35 Dickey, Rembrandt, 83–85. Silver 2015, *passim*.
36 Jan Uytenbogaert collected Lucas de Leyde's engravings. On Jan Uytenbogaert's artistic collection, see Dickey, Rembrandt, 75–78 and Renouard de Bussière, Rembrandt , 76–77 (cat. n°23).

The ordering of the figurative elements in this work clearly links the model to the brazen serpent. On the vertical median axis of the engraving, the cruciform pole which supports the brazen serpent overlooks the tax collector's bonnet. His head is in plastic contact with the lower part of the biblical painting and is positioned as if at the foot of the brazen serpent, which is monumental, set on a cruciform support and surrounded by a glory that emphasises its miraculous nature and the analogy with Christ on the Cross, in accordance with the allegorical exegesis of the subject since John 3:14–17. The episode of the brazen serpent is centred on the gaze, which assures the salvation of the Israelites in the desert, and Calvin stressed the salvational dimension of the gaze charged with faith that the Israelites turned towards the sculpted images – to the extent of making the brazen serpent a symbol of faith[37]. Consequently, the representation of the magical sculpture directly above the model's head may refer to his iconophilia, which is also evoked by the figuration of the collected objects around him.

The theme of the *Lender* developed by Metsys praised temperance, in light of the inscription enjoining equity that the original frame bore[38]. The meaning of Rembrandt's engraving might also converge on temperance, if one is to believe an exegesis in circulation since Philo of Alexandria, which made the brazen serpent a symbol of temperance:

37 'C'estoit une folie de tourner les yeux vers un serpent d'airain, pour empescher que la morsure venimeuse ne nuist. Car selon le iugement des hommes que profiteroit une statue morte estant veuë de loin ? Mais c'est la propre vertu de la foy, de ne point refuser d'estre fols, afin que nostre sagesse soit d'obtempérer à la bouche de Dieu. Ce qui est apparu plus clairement à la verité dans ceste figure. Car Iesus Christ se comparant à ce serpent que Moyse avoit dressé en haut au desert, ne propose pas seulement une similitude vulgaire : mais proteste que ce qui avoit esté figuré sous une ombre obscure, a esté accompli en luy. Et de faict, si le serpent d'airain n'eust esté un marreau de la grace spirituelle, il n'eust pas esté serré comme un thresor precieux, & songneusement gardé par si longtemps au Sanctuaire de Dieu. La similitude aussi convient tresbien : pource que Iesus Christ, afin de nous delivrer de mort, a vestu nostre chair, non pas suiete à peché, mai laquelle en eust la semblance, comme dit sainct Paul. […] Car comme le serpent n'a point servi de medecine sinon à ceux qui tournoyent la veuë dessus, aussi il n'y a que le regard de la foy qui face que Iesus Christ nous soit vrayment salutaire.' Calvin, Commentaires, 618–619. ['It was folly to turn the eyes towards a brazen serpent to prevent the venomous bite from harming. For in man's judgment, what profit would there be in a dead statue come from afar? But it is the proper virtue of faith to never refuse to be mad, so that our wisdom yield to the word of God. And this appeared more clearly to be truth in this figure. For Jesus Christ comparing himself to this serpent that Moses had raised up on high in the desert, does not offer only a vulgar similitude: but says that what had been figured in a dark shadow has been accomplished in him. And indeed, if the brazen serpent had not been a portion of spiritual grace, it would not have been held close like a precious treasure, & carefully kept so long in God's Tabernacle. The comparison is also most apt: because Jesus Christ, so as to deliver us from death, was clothed in our flesh, not as a result of sin, but that which had the appearance of it, as Saint Paul says. […] For as the serpent served not as medicine but to those who turned their sight up to it, so it is only the gaze of faith that faces Jesus Christ which truly saves us.']

38 See note 28.

> God commands Moses to make the serpent according to temperance; and he says, 'Make thyself a serpent, and set it up for a sign.' Do you see that Moses makes this serpent for no one else but for himself? For God commands him, 'Make it for thyself,' in order that you may know that temperance is not the gift of every one, but only of that man who loves God. And we must consider why Moses makes a brazen serpent, when no command was given to him respecting the material of which it was to be formed. May it not have been for this reason? In the first place, the graces of God are immaterial, being themselves only ideas, and destitute of any distinctive quality; but the graces of mortal men are only beheld in connection with matter. In the second place, not only does Moses love the incorporeal virtues, but our own souls, not being able to put off their bodies, do likewise aim at corporeal virtue, and reason, in accordance with temperance, is likened to the strong and solid substance of brass, inasmuch as it is form and not easily cut through. And perhaps brass may also have been selected inasmuch as temperance in the man who loves God is a most honourable thing, and like gold; though it has only a secondary place in a man who has received wisdom and improved in it. 'And whomsoever the one serpent bites, if he looks upon the brazen serpent shall live:' in which Moses speaks truly, for if the mind that has been bitten by pleasure, that is by the serpent which was sent to Eve, shall have strength to behold the beauty of temperance, that is to say, the serpent made by Moses in a manner affecting the soul, and to behold God himself through the medium of the serpent, it shall live. Only let it see and contemplate it intellectually.[39]

The biblical iconography Rembrandt inserts in his engraving assumes its full meaning in the light of Uytenbogaert's job, but also from the inter-iconicity and exegetical speculation of which the brazen serpent was the object. The figurative association Rembrandt fashions between his model and the brazen serpent most likely highlights the probity of the Dutch tax collector.

Other compositional procedures move in the direction of a moral panegyric of the model. The tax collector is next to a young servant to whom with one hand he holds out a bag filled with coins, and with the other enters the accounts in a register after the weighing (fig. 20). This figuration of the act of writing highlights what today would be called the 'traceability' of these operations. The distribution of light brings out his face, his hands, his sleeves, the money bags being handled, and this targeted surfacing of the reserve of the paper, added to the circulation of daylight on the sheet, might suggest the transparency of his actions, devoid of all hidden or fraudulent practice. This lighting solution, moreover, distinguishes Rembrandt's engraving from his night-scene painting which, in contrast, consists of a satire on the wealthy and avaricious man, with the use of the candle and the chaotic aspect of the shadowy space that surrounds him giving material form to moral disorder in his panel *The Parable of the Rich Fool* (fig. 24), which is itself indebted to the *Lender* compositions by Metsys and their critical variants in the form of portraits of tax collectors (figs. 21 to 23).

39 Philo of Alexandria, Allegorical Interpretation, XX, 79–81. See also Philo of Alexandria, On Cultivation, §97–102. Philo's works were translated into Latin and then into vernacular languages by the Humanists. His exegesis of the brazen serpent as a model of temperance was often quoted in the early modern period. See for instance the exegetical compilation made by the Jesuit Sebastian Barradas (1542–1615). Barradas, Itinerarium, 687.

Using exclusively figurative means, such as his model's absorption in his accounting activity and his association with a salvational metallic symbol drawn from the Bible, Rembrandt's etching seems to attribute the virtues of temper-

Fig. 21 Quentin Metsys, *The Money Changer and his Wife*, c.1514, oil on panel 70 x 67 cm.

Fig. 22 Marinus van Reymerswaele, *Two Tax Collectors*, c.1535, oil on panel 94 x 77 cm.

Fig. 23 After Marinus van Reymerswaele, *Two Tax Collectors*, c.1550.

Fig. 24 Rembrandt, *The Parable of the Rich Fool*, c.1627, oil on panel 31.9 x 42.5 cm.

ance, attention to detail and probity to Jan Uytenbogaert, whereas an inscription was necessary to make clear the initial function of the painting by Metsys. An ancient manuscript annotation in Latin verse in the margin of a copy held in Vienna corroborates this hypothesis of an encomiastic function for the engraving,

since the couplet praises the justice of the model who has faithfully served the goddess Astraea for twenty years (fig. 20) [40].

As a result of the biographical circumstances relating to the creation of this plate, the iconographic combination Rembrandt invented shows three salvational uses of metal: that of Moses to the advantage of the Israelites (and Philo had constructed his exegesis on the basis of the metallic material of the serpent); that of Jan Uytenbogaert towards Dutch taxpayers (including Rembrandt, who profited from his beneficence); and perhaps that of Rembrandt, who turned his copper plate into an instrument of gratitude. It is probably the iconographic theme of the brazen serpent which crystallises the effect of flattery assigned to this copper plate, which the heirs of Jan Uytenbogaert kept until 1760[41]. The artist could be said to have carried out a privatisation of the iconographic theme of the brazen serpent, now a symbol of the probity of a Calvinist public servant and benefactor.

Fig. 25 Sébastien Bourdon, *The Brazen Serpent*, c. 1653, oil on canvas 113 x 151 cm.

To conclude, it is interesting to summon a final example, one by the French Protestant painter, Sébastien Bourdon (1616–1671). His *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, painted in 1653, allows the prefigurative dimension to be glimpsed through the discreetly cruciform appearance of the pole around which the serpent is entwined (fig. 25). On the other hand, he does not use the opposition between the time of the divine punishment and that of salvation through the image. All attention here is focused on hope and on healing. As Frédéric Cousinié has noted, 'in emphasising in this way the moment of miraculous salvation alone, Sébastien Bourdon also re-centres his work on the most controversial aspect of the scene: what is at stake between Catholics and Protestants is not the punishment of the Jews, deserved and indisputable, but the role of the representation of the serpent in salvation'[42]. In addition, he highlights not only the way in which the protagonists direct their gaze towards the serpent, following a well-established iconographic tradition, but also the variety of their gestures of imploration, similar

40 Quem sibi vicenis Astrea sacravit ab annis, / Amstola, nunc Quaestor, sic tuus ora refert. Vienna, Albertina Museum, Altbestand, DG1930/2469.

41 Today the copper plate is held in Jerusalem, at the Israel Museum. On its history, see Dudok van Heel, Mr Johannes Wtenbogaert (1608–1680), 167.

42 Cousinié, Sébastien Bourdon, 93.

to attitudes of prayer, or even of adoration. One might conclude from this that the idolatrous downward spiral that Catholics and Protestants believe to have taken place after the erection of the brazen serpent was well underway from the first moments of entreaty in the hope of healing. In accordance with the Calvinist theory that all religious images are potential idols as soon as they arouse superstitious behaviour, Bourdon's painting may be interpreted as an allusive criticism of the relationships with images maintained by Catholics. Whatever one thinks of such an interpretation, one may state along with Frédéric Cousinié that this painting offers 'a field of signification open to the conflict of intentionalities and interpretative projections. The real art here perhaps being less to denounce and take up a position than to identify and maintain, emphatically and continuously, issues and problems relating to images'[43].

This journey through a number of emblematic representations of the early modern period shows how these representations fill the gaps of the biblical account and reformulate the story of the brazen serpent. They highlight the variety of uses to which they have given rise by transforming the story by turns into a Christian eschatological sign, a confessional sign evocative of an aniconic or even iconoclastic Protestant doctrine, and a moral sign. Christian appropriations of the Jewish symbol created by Moses, elucidated by exegetical literature, these works reveal the inventiveness of the artists and the ability of their works to interpret the Bible.

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43 Ibid., 103.

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Fig. 15 Hendrick Goltzius, *Christ with the Verdant Cross*, c. 1610.

Fig. 16 Anonymous, after Hendrick Goltzius, *Moses and the Tablets of the Law*, c. 1600–1630, oil on panel 131.4 x 94.2 cm. Paris, Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français.

Fig. 17 Johannes Sadeler I after Hendrick Goltzius, *Moses and the Tablets of the Law*, 1583, engraving 48.5 x37.3 cm.

Fig. 18 Detail of the Ten Commandments with the adoration of the golden calf, on the left, close to the iconoclastic commandment.

Fig. 19 Jacob Matham after Karel van Mander, *Moses and Aaron display the Ten Commandments*, 1630, engraving 58.6 x 78.5 cm. London, British Museum, Nr. 1854,0513.138.

Fig. 20 Rembrandt, *Portrait of Jan Uytenbogaert*, 1639, etching and dry point, 25 x 20.4 cm.

Fig. 21 Quentin Metsys, *The Money Changer and his Wife*, c.1514, oil on panel 70 x 67 cm. Paris, Louvre Museum.

Fig. 22 Marinus van Reymerswaele, *Two Tax Collectors*, c.1535, oil on panel 94 x 77 cm. Paris, Louvre Museum, R.F. 1989–6.

Fig. 23 After Marinus van Reymerswaele, *Two Tax Collectors*, c.1550. Paris, Louvre Museum, R.F. 1973–34.

Fig. 24 Rembrandt, *The Parable of the Rich Fool*, c.1627, oil on panel 31.9 x 42.5 cm. Berlin State Museums, Gemäldegalerie, 828D.

Fig. 25 Sébastien Bourdon, *The Brazen Serpent*, c. 1653, oil on canvas 113 x 151 cm. Madrid, Prado Museum.

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