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Abstract

This article explores the complexities and challenges of the representation of the biblical episode of the Agony in Gethsemane. Beginning with the recognition of the inherent differences between textual and visual arts, it highlights how visual representations must contend with the metaphysical and temporal dimensions that are central to the Gethsemane narrative. The synoptic Gospels provide the primary textual basis for these representations, focusing on Jesus' intense prayer and the disciples' failure to remain vigilant. The article examines how artists have historically navigated the challenge of depicting an event that is intimate and eschatological in nature. It discusses the evolution of these representations, from early Christian art that emphasized Christ's divinity to later works that increasingly focused on his humanity and psychological suffering. The use of space, symbolism, and specific motifs, such as the cup, the angel, and the sweat of blood, are analyzed to show how painters have pictured the unrepresentable aspects of this episode.

Ever since Lessing's *Laokoon* in 1766,¹ it has been said that text is an art of time, in which words, spoken one after another, combine to form meaning, while visual arts are an art of space, caught "at a glance", in an immediate perception. Bridging the gap between the world of text and the visual arts therefore poses a series of difficulties that have been explored over the last two centuries, but which painters had already considered in antiquity. Indeed, if we postulate – as our journal *Bible in the Arts* does, following the work of Martin O'Kane in particular² – that the work of art is an exegesis like any other, we realize that this exegesis elaborated through space and not time must take into account its own graphic constraints. Instead of interpreting words with other words, the plastic arts interpret them on *une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées*³ (a flat surface covered with colors in a certain assembled or-

¹ *Wenn es wahr ist, daß die Malerei zu ihren Nachahmungen ganz andere Mittel, oder Zeichen gebraucht, als die Poesie; jene nämlich Figuren und Farben in dem Raume, dieser aber artikulierte Töne in der Zeit.* Lessing, *Laokoon*, 104.

² O'Kane, *Painting the Text*.

³ *Se rappeler qu'un tableau – avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote – est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées.* Denis, *Définition*, 1.

der), as Maurice Denis famously defined it. This is why biblical episodes sometimes appear to be beyond representation, either because they evoke elusive perceptions that are challenging to interpret through the use of colors assembled in a certain order, or because they focus on episodes that appear to lack any significant action, such as moments of pause in the narrative. The pericope of the agony in Gethsemane is particularly instructive of these considerations. Artists have always faced the challenge of illustrating this pericope. How might one depict an “agony”, as described in Lk 22:24, that is, an intimate spiritual struggle? Furthermore, how might one portray an episode in which language is of paramount importance, namely, Jesus’ prayer to his Father?

1. From Time to Space: Depicting the Agony in Gethsemane

1.1. Five Texts for One Story

The Gethsemane episode is recalled by five texts, three of which are important. The other two are merely allusions. First allusion: In arguing that Jesus is indeed the compassionate High Priest, the author of Hebrews draws on elements that evoke the Gethsemane tradition. Jesus, he said, was “praying with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him” (Heb 5:7). Second allusion: John places Jesus’ arrest on the Mount of Olives (18:1) and, in a very distant allusion⁴ to the words preserved in the Synoptics, mocks the depressed Jesus shown in them: “Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? This is why I have come to this hour.”

The main elements of the depiction of the agony in Gethsemane in art can be found in the synoptic gospels: Mt 26:36–46; Mk 14:32–42 and Lk 22:39–46. There is a common strand between these three passages: the arrival at a place that Mark and Matthew call Gethsemane and that Luke places on the Mount of Olives, the singularization of three disciples who are assigned to “watch” (Mark and Matthew) or “pray” (Luke) while Jesus walks away. Then, he expresses extreme anxiety about the suffering that awaits him. Jesus prays intensely for “this cup” (potérion) to be removed from him, but submits to the divine will. In each story, the disciples fall asleep despite Jesus’ exhortations to remain vigilant and pray not to give in to temptation.

The evangelists each bring their own color to this dramatic moment. Matthew and Mark emphasize the repetition of Jesus’ prayer as he returns three times to his sleeping disciples. This structure reinforces his perseverance in prayer despite the apparent abandonment of his disciples. Luke, for his part, offers a more condensed narrative in which Jesus’ prayer is mentioned only once, but Jesus’

⁴ Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium* 3, 485; Beutler, *Johannesevangelium*, 361.

agony is described with heightened intensity: Jesus' sweat became "like clots of blood" and an angel came to strengthen him, which details are missing in Matthew and Mark.⁵ Besides, the reasons for the disciples' sleep vary from gospel to gospel. Matthew and Mark do not give a precise explanation, merely noting that the disciples do not know what to say to Jesus. Luke, on the other hand, attributes their sleep to "sadness", adding another emotional dimension to their behavior. Finally, the way Jesus concludes this scene is also different. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus expressly announces that "the hour has come" and that he has been delivered into the hands of sinners, marking a clear transition to his arrest. Luke, on the other hand, places a stronger emphasis on continued prayer, reinforcing the importance of remaining spiritually alert.⁶



Fig. 1: Miniature in the Gospel of Otto III, from Bamberg, late 10th Century.



Fig. 2: Ivory from Italy, 11 × 32.3 cm, 11–12th century.



Fig. 3: Mosaic from Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice, 1215–1220.

The differences in the construction of the episode are of little interest to artists, who in the earliest representations melt the comings and goings into two scenes (a scene with the disciples, a prayer scene as in the Otton III Gospel [fig. 1]) or in the Ivory from Italy [fig. 2], with the notable exception of the five comings and goings scenes in the San Marco mosaic (which proves that it follows Matthew and Mark, especially since it includes the rebuke to Peter) [fig. 2]. From the 14th century onward, these back-and-forth movements were of even less interest to artists, as everything was condensed into a single scene. At about the same time, the connection with the arrest was made, in particular through the influence of the northern painters, which would later be seen in Bel-

⁵ Bovon, Luke 3, 207–209.

⁶ Complete analysis in Brown, Death 1, 146–234.

lini and Mantegna. One of the panels of the altarpiece from the Middle Rhine, preserved in the Museum of the Convent of St. Catherine in Utrecht, provides a good illustration: a soldier, at the instigation of Judas, boldly crosses the plessis barrier that closes off the garden [fig. 3].

1.1.1. Two Unrepresentable Issues: Time and Agony

While the artists easily managed to recreate the space of the episode, they struggled to represent what is at the heart of the text, the relationship with time. The term *hōra*, used by the three synoptics, can denote a time of eschatological crisis,⁷ but refers rather to the end of life announced in Mk 10:38.⁸ Jesus sees the final hour of his death nearing, i.e. the decisive moment that has been prepared since the beginning of the Gospel. The whole point of the passage is to show how the protagonists (the disciples and Jesus) relate to this hour and, more precisely, to its approach, its imminence. The question posed by the pericope is the stark realization that the time remaining is very short, almost non-existent.



Fig. 4: Anonymous from Westfalia, 73 cm × 60 cm, tempera on wood, 1405–1414.

This central point is experienced differently by the two groups. For Jesus it is endured in the form of a cup. It is a symbol, and therefore something that can be depicted, but this cup is so metaphorical that it takes a long time to be represented in art, no doubt because of the danger of confusing it with another cup, that of the Eucharistic chalice. These two cups have nothing to do with each other: Gethsemane does not involve bloodshed; the cup presented in the episode is the cup of God's wrath, or the cup of eschatological sadness,⁹ probably linked to the cup of the Last Supper, which has just ended.¹⁰

⁷ Gnllka, Markus 2, 261; Davies / Allison, Matthew 3, 501.

⁸ France, Mark, 584; Luz, Matthew 3, 396; Marcus, Mark 8–16, 976.

⁹ Davies / Allison, Matthew 3, 497; Bovon, Luke 3, 199; Pesch, Markusevangelium 2, 389–393.

¹⁰ Nolland, Matthew, 1099.

For the disciples, on the other hand, the imminent hour takes the form of a vague concept that is difficult to define: temptation. Their time has a different quality from that which Jesus will experience: it is a time of disorder, of self-control (because in temptation someone else, the devil, takes control of us to make us do things we do not want to do). The strange invitation to wake up, which is never really explained in the text, has to be interpreted by the reader, who has to give a different meaning to wakefulness and temptation.¹¹ This interpretation inevitably takes on a moral meaning: more than physically not falling asleep, it is morally important to resist. Faced with the hour, Jesus prays and watches, demonstrating his steadfastness; faced with temptation, the disciples should be watching and praying, but they are asleep, a bad omen for what is to come.¹²

For Jesus, this relationship with time is plainly marked by sadness, as evidenced by the statement he makes to his disciples: “Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’” (Matthew 26:38). The quotation from Ps 41:6 about the sorrow of the soul makes it clear that this is a time of pain. But how are we to interpret the dialogue that opens with the Father? The psychological journey is initially characterized by strong inner reluctance. The Gospels describe this resistance through evocative, emotional language, using verbs such as *ekthambéomai* (to be seized with dread), *adēmonéō* (to be troubled, distressed), and *perílupos* (sad).¹³ These words portray Jesus deeply affected by the prospect of crucifixion, showing shock at the hardship to come. However, this initial reticence gradually gives way to acquiescence of the Father’s will, marked by the verb “to will” (*boúlomai*) and the noun “will” (*thélēma*). This movement from resistance to acceptance is central to the story of the agony in Gethsemane, illustrating Jesus’ inner struggle between his human desire to escape suffering and his obedience to his divine mission.¹⁴

In fact, the psychological journey of Jesus becomes more complicated if we take into account two theological elements which are not explicitly present in the Gospel text, but which emerge as progressive constructions over the centuries. The first is the question of the identity of both natures of the Son. If the Father and the Son share the same divine nature, how could they differ in their wills? This concern fueled many theological debates, especially in the early centuries of Christianity when the understanding of the Trinity was still developing. The second element is the union of the two natures, divine and human, in the person of Christ. This hypostatic union, defined by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, raises the question of how Jesus, as the divine incarnate Son, can exert a distinct human will that initially seems to resist that of the Father.

¹¹ Luz, Matthew 3, 396.

¹² Hooker, Mark, 348–349; Luz, Matthew 3, 396; Marcus, Mark 8–16, 379.

¹³ France, Mark, 582.

¹⁴ Wiefel, Lukas, 378–379.

In short, any sane artist would have had to give up the idea of depicting the agony in Gethsemane, because the essence of it, the relationship with time and the emotions involved, go beyond the possibilities of visual art! Time, as experienced by Jesus, is an intense eschatological ordeal, a moment of inner crisis. Likewise, Jesus' deepest feelings, his overwhelming sadness and his inner struggle between human and divine will are intimate, metaphysical and emotional realities that should escape figuration. Nevertheless, the scene has been part of the iconographic repertoire since the earliest works of art, dating back to at least the 4th century: It first appeared around the year 370 on the Brescia Casket [Fig. 13].

2. How to Represent the Unrepresentable? Space, Angel and Blood Sweat

The artists captured the Agony in Gethsemane by employing two key visual strategies in a symbolic manner. The first is the architectural composition of the scene, particularly the spatial arrangement; the second is their reference to a verse from the Gospel of Luke, Lk 22:44.

2.1. The Essential Role of Space

In the narrative of the agony in Gethsemane, what transpires is fundamentally beyond representation, especially regarding the intimate dialogue between Jesus and the Father, characterized by anguish, silence, and submission to divine will. Nevertheless, both the biblical text and artistic depictions manage to express this tension indirectly, largely through the spatial organization of the scene. Four distinct spaces emerge, each adding layers to the understanding of the unfolding drama.

(a) **The space of the disciples:** This is the area where the disciples sit, embodying passivity and distance. Exhausted and overcome with sleep, they are detached from the central event, both physically and spiritually. Their failure to stay awake and keep watch with Jesus highlights their separation from the intensity of the moment.

(b) **The space of neglected vigilance:** Adjacent yet distinct from the disciples' area, this space represents the call to watchfulness, which the chosen group of disciples should have heeded. It is a space of missed responsibility, where they were expected to be present in spirit and prayer, sharing in Jesus' burden. The contrast between the call to vigilance and the disciples' actual slumber heightens the drama of the scene.

(c) **The space of prayer:** In this third space, Jesus withdraws to engage in solitary prayer. It is a space marked by intimacy and anguish, where his inner struggle culminates. Physically and symbolically separated from the disciples, this space underscores Jesus' isolation during his trial. Here, prayer becomes a

dialogue with the Father, a moment of submission to divine will, but also one of profound suffering.

(d) **The space of the Father:** The final space is that of the Father, characterized by silence. This silence is not merely an absence of response, but a mysterious, inexpressible presence. It represents the gap between Jesus' human suffering and the divine will. Though this space is inaccessible, it conveys the overpowering dominance of the Father's will, soundlessly governing the scene and adding a layer of mystery to the unfolding drama.

The interval between these spaces does not have the same value, and this disparity reveals much about the interpersonal relationships at the heart of this scene.¹⁵ The interval between the disciples and the subsequent spaces – the space of vigilance and the space of prayer – appears to hold lesser significance, as the disciples remain on the periphery of the central drama. Their physical and spiritual detachment from Jesus mirrors their inability to comprehend or fully engage in the profound nature of his suffering. They stand as passive observers, unable to grasp the magnitude of what is transpiring.

In contrast, two other spatial intervals are of critical importance: the space Jesus crosses to engage with his disciples and the space he does not cross to address the Father. The interval Jesus traverses to return to his disciples and urge them to stay awake highlights his care for them, but also emphasizes their inability to respond. This distance, repeatedly crossed, symbolizes a form of intersubjectivity where Jesus, despite his own intense anguish, strives to keep a connection with his followers. Each crossing signifies an effort to involve the disciples, underscoring their human frailty and failure.

Conversely, the gap between Jesus and the Father remains unbridgeable. This uncrossed space, filled with silence, reflects a different form of intersubjectivity – one where communication transcends human understanding, conducted instead through silent submission to the divine will. Here, the silence becomes an expression of Jesus' profound isolation in his prayer and his ultimate acquiescence to the Father's will. The uncrossed interval speaks to the absolute solitude Jesus experiences in this moment.

These spatial distinctions do more than just organize the scene; they reveal a deeper temporal dynamic that is central to the narrative. The Father's space governs time itself. In this space, time seems suspended, yet the divine decision regarding the hour and the cup Jesus must drink is silently predetermined. It is here that the Father controls the unfolding of events, with an authority that dictates the course of the drama.

In Jesus' space, time is most acutely felt. His agony reflects the relentless approach of the appointed hour – the decisive moment when his mission will cul-

¹⁵ Delorme, Marc 2, 475.

minate in the Passion. For Jesus, time becomes a heavy, almost physical burden, a reality that looms ever nearer as his fate approaches.

Meanwhile, the disciples' space is one where attentiveness to time is required, yet they fail to grasp it. Called to watch, they miss the significance of the moment, their disconnection marking a deeper spiritual distance. Their inability to remain vigilant speaks to a profound disengagement, not only from the physical reality of what is happening, but also from the critical time in which it unfolds. Each of these spaces, therefore, reflects a different relationship to time – divine control, human submission, and human failure – bringing out the layers of tension between the heavenly and earthly spheres in this moment of profound spiritual and temporal significance.



Fig. 5: Codex Purpureus Rossanensis, ca. 550, fol 4v.

This spatial structuring is evident in one of the earliest depictions of the Agony in Gethsemane, found in the *Codex Rossano* from the 6th century [Fig. 5]. The scene unfolds on a tranquil night, beneath a sky dotted with small stars and illuminated by a quarter moon. In the lower section of the image, a rugged, rocky landscape is enveloped in deep darkness. On the right side, nestled among the rocks, Jesus leans toward one of the three sleeping apostles, gently touching his shoulder with his right hand. Cloaked in his mantle, Jesus is also portrayed on the left side of the scene, kneeling on the rocks with his arms outstretched, his head almost touching the ground in fervent prayer.¹⁶ This dual depiction underscores the sense of solitude.

The painter takes advantage of the rectangular format to sharply divide the two actions: the prayer and the exhortation of the sleeping disciples. A long strip of stone separates these two spaces, further emphasized by a large boulder that visually obstructs the passage between them, making the gap appear even

¹⁶ Muñoz, Rossano, 14.

more insurmountable. The distance between the two actions seems unnaturally extended, contributing to a heightened sense of disconnection. By juxtaposing these spaces, the artist creates the impression that Christ is, in a way, turning his back on himself, thereby intensifying the sense of miscommunication between the two scenes.



Fig. 6: Saint Augustine Gospels, ca. 600.

The distinct separation between the two spaces can be achieved in various ways, depending on the format chosen. A few years after the *Codex Rossano*, the *Gospels of Saint Augustine* (circa 600) employ a unique spatial device to convey this division [Fig. 6]. Given that the scene is set within a square format, the illuminator divides it using a line that represents the mountains, emphasized by a striking color contrast. In this case, the sense of incommunicability is explicitly marked by the black line that bisects the image.

To further highlight the difference in nature between the two spaces, the painter includes a small depiction of God's hand on the prayer side. Emerging from a cloud-like form that wraps around the wrist like a sleeve, this hand is rendered in the same color as Jesus' cloak, symbolizing the shared divinity between the Father and the Son. This visual cue not only reinforces the separation between the spaces, but also emphasizes the divine connection that transcends the earthly disconnection between Jesus and his disciples.

A millennium later, similar considerations on space can be found in some of the most emblematic works of the Renaissance, particularly in the paintings of Mantegna [Fig. 7] and Bellini [Fig. 8]. In these canvases, the treatment of space reaches a peak. Both paintings share a distinctive feature: they are in-depth explorations of landscapes and architecture. Through a subtle interplay of levels, each figure – Jesus, the three apostles, and the group led by Judas, coming to arrest Jesus – is positioned on a different plane. Each area has a specific function: a place for prayer – where the rock takes on the shape of a *prie-Dieu*, espe-



Fig. 7: Andrea Mantegna, tempera on wood, 62.9 x 80 cm, 1455.



Fig. 8: Giovanni Bellini, Tempera on wood, 81 x 127 cm, 1459–1465.

cially prominent in Bellini's work¹⁷ – a place for sleeping, and a place for conspiracy.

What is most striking is the way these works examine the notion of pathways. The viewer's eye can trace the route the group will take to arrest Jesus, as well as the potential path the disciples might follow to reach him. However, paradoxically, while the group of the soldiers is physically farther away, the path for the disciples, though much shorter, seems impassable due to the steep slope they are required to climb. This creates a sense of both physical and symbolic distance, highlighting the disciples' inability to join Jesus in his hour of need.

El Greco, for his part, created several versions of the Agony in Gethsemane, all of which also engage deeply with the theme of space, using two distinct techniques to emphasize it. In the first version (paintings in Toledo, Ohio [Fig. 9] and London), the landscape itself serves as the barrier, similar to the approach seen in Mantegna



Fig. 9: El Greco, Oil on Canvas, 104 x 117, 1590.

¹⁷ Bättschmann, Bellini, 47.

and Bellini. This impediment takes the form of a hole in the rock, functioning as a protective yet isolating grotto. Though the disciples are present in the scene, they appear disconnected from the central action, as if they are “elsewhere”, both physically and spiritually removed. In the other version (paintings located in Andújar, Buenos Aires, Budapest, Lille [Fig. 10], and Cuenca), geography plays a role, but it is primarily the contrast in lighting – achieved through tenebrism – that defines the separation. Here, a



Fig. 11: Raphael, Transfiguration, oil tempera on wood, 310 × 279 cm, 1516–1520.



Fig. 10: El Greco, Oil on Canvas, 138 × 92 cm, 1600–1610.

dramatic burst of light illuminates Christ, while the disciples remain shrouded in darkness. Despite the boundary being physically easy to cross, the stark contrast in light and shadow creates the sense of an intangible barrier, reinforcing the separation between Jesus and his disciples.

This four-space structure in the Agony of Gethsemane parallels that of the Transfiguration.¹⁸ Both narratives feature four distinct spaces: the space of the

¹⁸ Luz, Matthew 3, 395.

disciples, the space of the three chosen apostles (Peter, James, and John), the space of Jesus, and finally the space of the Father. However, there is a key difference: in the Transfiguration, the space of Jesus and the space of the Father seem to merge, as though the distance between the divine and the human is momentarily dissolved, revealing Jesus' divine glory. Another significant similarity is the disciples' lack of awareness of the profound event unfolding before them. Just as in Gethsemane, where they sleep instead of keeping watch, in the Transfiguration, their response is marked by sleep or confusion, leaving them on the periphery of the divine revelation. Their inability to fully grasp or participate in these transcendent moments highlights their distance – both literal and spiritual – from the divine reality at play. This contrast between divine revelation and human incomprehension is vividly depicted in art, as seen in Raphael's renowned painting of the Transfiguration [Fig. 11]. The juxtaposition of the Transfiguration scene with the episode of the healing of the epileptic below further emphasizes the gap between the divine experience above and humanity, which remains entangled in the mundane and the everyday. The painting visually reinforces the disciples' struggle to realize what is occurring before them, a theme mirrored in both biblical episodes.

2.2. The Angel and the Blood Sweat

The two theological questions – the alignment of will between the Father and the Son, and the union of the two natures in Christ – add a significant layer of complexity to the interpretation of Jesus' journey to Gethsemane. These themes highlight how the understanding of this passage has evolved over time, shifting from a simple narrative recounting to a profound theological reflection on Christ's nature and his relationship with the Father. The history of visual interpretations, as an integral part of this evolution, mirrors and interacts with the history of textual and theological readings, while also employing key theological motifs in unique ways. As scholars such as Luz, Bovon, and Boxall¹⁹ have noted, this interpretive history unfolds in three distinct phases, each focusing on two key journeys: the journey of Jesus and the journey of the readers.²⁰ These phases build upon one another, but the concerns of earlier phases never entirely vanish. Each phase brings a new perspective, yet remains connected to the foundational questions raised in earlier interpretations.

2.2.1. Patristic and Medieval Reading: Christus Victor

The patristic interpretation of the Agony in Gethsemane centers on the Christological debates that shaped the first centuries of Christian theology. This nar-

¹⁹ Luz, Matthew 3, 405–408; Bovon, Luke 3, 204–210; Boxall, Matthew, 384–386.

²⁰ France, Mark, 582.

rative is examined through the lens of key theological crises, including the Manichean controversy, which denied Christ's humanity; the Arian controversy, which subordinated Christ to the Father; and the Monothelite controversy, which questioned the existence of a distinct human will in Christ. In response to these debates, early theologians sought to maintain a delicate balance in their interpretations of the Gethsemane account. For instance, St. Jerome observes that Christ begins to suffer but does not fully succumb, while Leo the Great emphasizes that Christ assumes human weakness in order to fulfill his redemptive mission. This careful balance is also evident in the writings of Ambrose and Gregory of Nazianzus, who affirm the unity of will between Father and Son, as well as in the works of Cyril of Alexandria and John Damascene, who explore the complex relationship between Christ's divine and human natures.²¹



Fig. 12: Prayer in the Garden, mosaics, 6th century.



Fig. 13: Brescia Casket, upper panel, ivory, 32 × 22 cm, 350.

Early Christian art reflects this theological emphasis by prioritizing the depiction of Christ's divinity, sometimes at the expense of engaging with the nuanced theological discussions of the time. For example, the mosaics in the Basilica of St. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna [Fig. 12] depict a triumphant Christ, highlighting his divine nature rather than his human suffering in Gethsemane. Although this scene has often been interpreted as the Sermon on the Mount, several indicators suggest it actually represents the Gethsemane episode. Its placement just before the depiction of the arrest, the presence of olive trees, and Christ's posture of prayer – facing the viewer in the orant position – all point to this interpretation. The ambiguity is noteworthy, as it underscores a theological shift from earlier periods, where emphasis on Christ's divinity eclipsed his human suffering, to later interpretations that focus more intently on the latter. In this early representation, it is Christ's prayer, not his agony, that takes center stage, much like in

²¹ Boxall, Matthew, 384–386; Just, Luke, 345–347; Oden / Hall, Mark, 198–203.

the renowned [Fig. 13], where the Gethsemane scene is distilled into its most essential form: three olive trees and a standing Christ making an authoritative gesture with his right hand.

2.2.2. From the 11th Century: The Angel and the Sweat of Blood

The 11th century witnessed the rise of a new spirituality originating from the East, which increasingly emphasized the human suffering of Christ, a movement that would later culminate in the *devotio moderna* and the dolorism of subsequent centuries. Theologians like Bonaventure emphasized a *vera tristitia* (“true sadness”), which became a model for the faithful to imitate. In his *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Pseudo-Bonaventure further encouraged an empathetic imitation of Christ’s suffering, promoting a spirituality grounded in humility and ultimately expressed through devotions like the Rosary. This period marked a significant shift in focus, moving from the contemplation of Christ’s journey alone to a greater emphasis on the disciples’ journey, where prayer and suffering became central to the Christian experience.

This shift is also evident in the theological commentaries of the Reformers, who underscored the importance of prayer and suffering as essential ways of following Christ. This reorientation from Christ’s experience to that of the disciples becomes a recurring theme in Reformation writings, which stressed the need for the readers to engage in prayer and endure suffering as part of their spiritual path.

The emphasis on the disciples’ journey is echoed in Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, where the third week is devoted to meditating on the Passion. Here, participants are encouraged to vividly imagine the details of Christ’s suffering, with the aim of cultivating compassion: “a deep suffering because of the great suffering Christ endured for me.” However, it is essential to recognize that this phase of spiritual reflection does not replace the earlier focus on Christ’s own journey. Even in the 20th century, scholars like R.T. France maintained that the question of Christ’s weakness was secondary, viewing the core of the Gethsemane episode as primarily concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son, rather than solely focusing on Christ’s human frailty.²²

Art responded to these emerging sensibilities by increasingly focusing on Christ’s suffering, particularly through the introduction of the angel and the sweat of blood. The absence of this detail in some manuscripts is of little consequence, as it was not until the Reformation that any significant doubts about its authenticity began to surface, and only in the 20th century did scholars definitively argue that this element was a later addition.²³ Despite these textual con-

²² France, Mark, 580.

²³ Bovon, Luke 3, 207–209.

cerns, artists integrated these motifs into their representations, using them to underscore the profound anguish of Christ, aligning with the growing theological and devotional focus on his human suffering.²⁴ The appearance of the angel is difficult to date, but one of the earliest representations could be an ivory plaque from an 11th-century portable altar in Bologna. Adolph Goldschmidt recognizes a Byzantine model, suggesting that this iconographic innovation was created at the turn of the millennium in the East.²⁵ It was soon widely adopted, as evidenced by its presence on the bronze *janua major* of Benevento Cathedral. The motif of the sweat of blood became, from the 14th century onwards, a recurring iconographic element, symbolizing Christ's intense agony. Similarly, the depiction of a consoling angel became a common visual element, emphasizing Christ's



Fig. 14: Mikolaj Obilman, tempera on panel, 182 x 165 cm, 1466.



Fig. 15: Andrea Pozzo, oil on canvas, 1675.

humanity in his suffering. A particularly striking example is the painting by the Polish artist Mikolaj Obilman, where Jesus, his face contorted and covered in blood, is depicted in a posture of extreme anguish, while his disciples sleep at his feet. The impending danger is palpable, foreshadowed in the background by the ap-

²⁴ For a summary of the debates, one commentator in favor of the inauthenticity (Fitzmyer) and one in favor of the authenticity: Fitzmyer, Luke 2, 1443–1444; Garland, Luke, 882–884. For a thorough study: Clivaz, L'Ange.

²⁵ Goldschmidt, Elfenbeinskulpturen, 45. The information in this paragraph comes from Réau, Iconographie 2.2, 427–431; Thüner, Ölberg, 342–349.

proaching soldiers and symbolized in the foreground by the aggressive dandelion leaves, which suggest an ominous presence [Fig. 14].

Andrea Pozzo (1642–1709), a key figure of Catholic Reformation art, interprets these new iconographic elements – the cup and the angels – differently. In his depiction, Jesus lies prostrate on the ground, immersed in prayer beside the cup, his posture resembling a fainting spell or an overwhelming sense of despair. He is comforted by three angels and four cherubim, who cradle him as though he were gravely ill, underscoring both his physical and spiritual exhaustion in this moment of profound suffering [Fig. 15].

2.2.3. From the Enlightenment Onwards: The Solitary Christ



Fig. 16: Eugène Delacroix, Oil on Canvas, 34 × 42, 1861.

During the Enlightenment, attention increasingly shifted toward the psychological and human dimensions of the Gethsemane story. Theological interpretations stressed Christ's profound human suffering and the apparent silence of God during this moment of distress. Karl Barth, in particular, in his *Church Dogmatics*, underscored the significance of this divine silence, perceiving Jesus' agony as a confrontation with the experience of God's abandonment – a theme that gained considerable traction in 20th-century theology. This emphasis on divine silence and human anguish marked a departure from earlier interpretations, focusing

more deeply on the internal, existential struggle of Christ.²⁶ This theological perspective profoundly influenced art, particularly in its accentuation of the interiority and psychological depth of Christ's suffering. Visual representations from this period frequently highlight Christ's isolation, the intensity of his agony, and the stark absence of any divine comfort, reflecting the theological interpretation of God's silence. This shift in focus marks a pivotal moment in the history of visual and theological interpretations of the Gethsemane motif, where Christ's human experience and the mystery of divine suffering are examined with renewed strength. Eugène Delacroix's painting in the Rijksmuseum encapsulates this evolution perfectly [Fig. 16]. In the absence of the disciples, Jesus has collapsed on the ground, overwhelmed beneath a luminous cloud that seems to press down on him rather than offer consolation. This portrayal powerfully captures the profound solitude and inner torment of the instant, aligning with the theological focus on the silence and apparent absence of God in Christ's moment of greatest need.

However, this solitude is not necessarily depicted as purely dramatic. One of the most evocative images of this theme, though less known to art historians, is arguably one of the most widely reproduced works of the 19th century: *Christ in Gethsemane* by the Hessian painter Heinrich Hofmann. Celebrated as a masterpiece, it has been copied and displayed in numerous chapels and distributed through engravings.²⁷ In this painting, Jesus appears anxious, yet he looks upward with a sense of confidence. He is not depicted as the triumphant Christ of early Christian art, but rather as a figure embodying one of the possible interpretations of the Gospel pericope, particularly as Luke presents it.²⁸ Jesus is portrayed as a martyr – fully aware of the suffering that awaits him, troubled by the prospect, yet resolute, preparing himself through prayer.²⁹ In this way, he emerges as a kind of spiritual athlete,³⁰ determined and unwavering in his readiness to fulfill his divine mission.

In the 20th century, a new form of visual piety surfaced among various Protestant groups, including Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, and some premillennialist movements like the Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of God. This development has contributed to narrowing the historical divide between the use of images in Catholic and Protestant traditions. Many Protestants now embrace

²⁶ Jesus does not, in fact, receive any answer, any sign from God. Or, rather. He has "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Mt. 12:39f.) who was three days and three nights in the whale's belly. For Him, as for all this evil and adulterous generation, the only sign will be the actual event of His death: "So shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." God will give His answer to the prayer only in this inconceivable, this frightful event, and not otherwise. Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV 1*, 268 (German Original: KD IV.1, p. 231).

²⁷ Morgan, *Protestants & Pictures*, 335–337.

²⁸ Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 239–241; Arterbury, *Reading Luke*, 197.

²⁹ Bock, *Luke*, 1753–1763.

³⁰ Johnson, *Luke*, 354.

the concept of “devotional centers” or home shrines, where religious images are displayed to inspire meditation and prayer.³¹ This trend is also evident in the architectural design of many 20th-century Protestant churches, such as Riverside Church in New York, completed in 1931. Riverside incorporates a rich iconographic program featuring stained glass, sculptures, and paintings, creating designated spaces for private contemplation. One of the most beloved areas in the church is the space in front of Heinrich Hofmann’s *Christ in Gethsemane* painting. John D. Rockefeller purchased the canvas in 1930 and donated it to the church, where it was placed in a small mortuary chapel within the narthex, known as Christ Chapel. This specific arrangement mirrors a

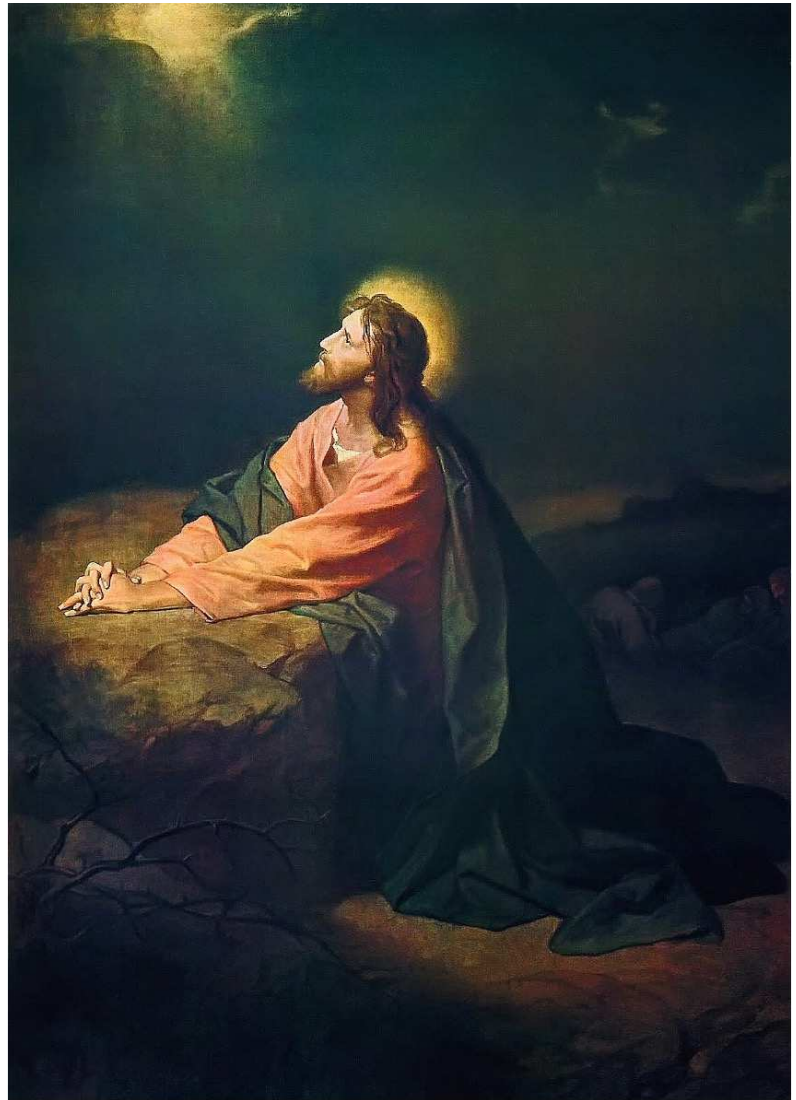


Fig. 17: Heinrich Hofmann, oil on canvas, 1886.

broader desire to create sacred spaces for contemplative prayer, allowing the faithful to reflect on religious images and engage in deep spiritual meditation.³²

Stripped of all anecdotal or extraneous details, and reduced to the famous immediacy of the believer’s dialogue with God, Hofmann’s painting – dramatized by the intensity of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane – has come to symbolize the very essence of prayer itself.

The agony in Gethsemane appears, at first glance, to be an unrepresentable episode. The intimate dialogue between Jesus and the Father, marked by silent anguish and submission to divine will, as well as Jesus’ extreme solitude, are

³¹ Morgan, *Protestants & Pictures*, 266.

³² Morgan, *Protestants & Pictures*, 321–322.

interior realities that seem to resist visual depiction. Yet, over the centuries, artists have successfully overcome these challenges by employing innovative visual techniques. The use of spatial organization, as seen in early works helps materialize the separation between the sleeping disciples, the place of Jesus' prayer, and the mysterious space of the Father. This structuring into four distinct spaces – the space of the disciples, the space of missed vigilance, the space of prayer, and the space of the Father – allows artists to convey the incommunicability between the figures and Jesus' spiritual isolation. Other visual strategies, such as the contrast of light and shadow, or the inclusion of motifs like the chalice or the consoling angel, depict Jesus' inner struggle without relying on explicit narrative elements. The use of details like the sweat of blood, inspired by Luke, and the topographical features of the landscape, which emphasize the insurmountable distance between Jesus and his disciples, show how artists have translated deeply symbolic aspects of the scene into visual form. Ultimately, this seemingly unrepresentable passage has found a lasting place in art history. Through these techniques – composition, symbolism, and the manipulation of space – artists have succeeded in rendering the tension between the human and the divine, suffering and submission, abandonment and isolation into powerful visual language. These representations do more than narrate the event; they become a kind of visual exegesis, offering new ways to engage with the theological depth of this central biblical episode.

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