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PACINO DI BONAGUIDA'S *TREE OF LIFE*: INTERPRETING THE BIBLE IN PAINT IN EARLY 14TH CENTURY ITALY

ABSTRACT

The investigation of works of art on biblical subjects has become an established sub-field of biblical studies, closely connected with the wider interest in the reception history of Old and New Testament texts but also with the manner in which biblical art assists biblical interpretation. Many of the paintings so far investigated come from early modern and modern Europe. Since it is helpful to study a phenomenon at its birth, the subject of this article is Pacino di Bonaguida's *Lignum Vitae* (*c.* 1305-1310 CE). This work was created during the very period when Italo-Byzantine pictorial representation was giving way to a more naturalistic and recognizably modern form. Bonaguida, although inspired by and very loyal to the pre-text of the painting—Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae*—is nowhere near the doggedly literal follower of Bonaventure he is often alleged to be. Instead, while working closely within an Italian tradition of portraying narrative cycles from the Bible in various settings, Bonaguida produces a work that integrates the Bonaventuran scheme, with its focus on Jesus, into a larger context of salvation history. In so doing he introduces biblical themes and subjects not found in Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae*. He thereby reveals his debt both to Byzantine modes of representation, with their gold field, strong lines and dominant colours, and to the Italian revolution in artistic expression as painters discovered ways to create real depth in an image and to situate three-dimensional figures convincingly within it.

INTRODUCTION[1]

Over the last two decades we have seen the birth of a new area of biblical studies that is closely connected to the upsurge of interest in the reception history of Old and New Testament texts. This interest takes its place, however, next to a long-standing interest on the part of art historians and some church historians in the significance of biblical narratives in art from the late antique and early Christian eras (not least in relation to the frescos in the catacombs in Rome), to the Medieval and Renaissance periods and into early modern and contemporary times. One aspect of this work with particular significance is the long and honourable tradition of research into the iconography of Western biblical and other Christian art.[2] Biblical interpreters who investigate visual representations of biblical narratives owe a huge debt to art historical and church historical scholarship on these works, as the references in this article will serve to indicate.

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[1] The earliest version of this article was presented as a paper at the SBL International Meeting in Rome in July 2009, in 'The Bible and Visual Culture' section. Subsequent versions were presented to the Institute for Theology, the Imagination and the Arts in the University of St Andrews on 26th October 2010 and then to the Bible in Art, Music and Literature Seminar in the University of Oxford on 6th February 2012. I was also greatly helped by an anonymous reviewer to a draft version of this article. I am very grateful for all the views expressed on those occasions and have sought to respond to them where possible below.

[2] See, for example, Ripa 1986 (originally published in 1603), Schiller 1971 and 1972 and van Straten 1994.

Yet this interest, new for biblical interpreters at least, does not only embrace reception history more narrowly conceived, as the way in which social and cultural features have influenced an artist's portrayal of a particular biblical text. For it also involves an examination of the extent to which artistic representations of scenes from the Old and New Testaments are actually examples of biblical interpretation—by artists with unique insights into the meaning and contemporary application of biblical passages—and deserve to be treated as such.[3] As well as examinations of particular biblical narratives and scenes, we are also witnessing an increasing interest in theorising the phenomenon of painting the Bible.[4]

Yet, even if we restrict ourselves to Europe, while tens of thousands of frescoes and paintings on biblical subjects exist, only a tiny fraction of the works extant has been considered from this perspective and the basis for selecting those that have been so analysed has been somewhat adventitious and even haphazard.[5] Since there is much to be said for understanding a phenomenon by getting to grips with its origins, this article focuses on a painting from the place and period that have had the greatest influence on Bible-based art in the Renaissance and modern periods: Italy in the period 1250-1450.

The principal basis for this claim for influence is that these two centuries saw a movement in Italy away from the tight visual traditions of late Italo-Byzantine painting in the direction of greater painterly freedom and naturalism, especially through the re-appearance of three-dimensional space in painting, with an optical accuracy never achieved in the ancient world.[6] Many of the works that brought about this revolution featured biblical subjects. The second basis is the way in which during this period Italy witnessed a religious, intellectual, social and economic efflorescence that is omni-present in its art in ways that had a huge influence later.

The particular work that is the subject of this article comes from the early part of my two-century range and constitutes an intriguing point of transition between the Italo-Byzantine and early Renaissance modes of visual representation, as well as illustrating how closely an artist could be immersed in the religious and intellectual currents of the time. The work in question is Pacino di Bonaguida's *Tree of Life*, usually dated to the period 1305-1310, executed in tempera on wood, with dimensions of 2.48 x 1.51 meters, now in the Accademia in Florence. The ultimate inspiration for this image is the tree of life (*Xulon Zoês/Lignum Vitae*) in Rev. 22.2 that bears twelve fruits in a year, one in each month and the leaves of which are for curing the non-Israelites (see Image 1).

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[3] Early developers of this approach include Bal (1991) and Exum (1996). Exum (2012) represents a recent expression of this approach with persuasive evidence of the capacity of biblical paintings to highlight points of view that are missing in the biblical texts or to cast light on troubling discordant features insufficiently attended to by exegetes.

[4] For some examples, see Boyd and Esler 2004, O'Kane 2007: 1-33, 2008b and 2010b; Davey 2011 and Harvey 2013.

[5] Thus Rembrandt has attracted much attention, (artist) Jane Boyd and I have written on Velázquez (Boyd and Esler 2004), Martin O'Kane and others have worked on biblical works in Welsh churches (O'Kane 2010a) and in smaller British galleries (O'Kane 2011) and so on.

[6] See White 1967.

[Image 1: Pacino di Bonaguida's *Tree of Life;* courtesy of the Accademia Gallery, Florence]

Very little is known about Pacino di Bonaguida. He is first mentioned in 1303 and he was probably active during most of the first half of the fourteenth century.[7] But we do know that this panel was created for and originally sited in the Convento delle Monache di Monticelli, the oldest convent of the Poor Clares in Florence.[8] The Poor Clares are the female wing of the Franciscans.

While we may grant that Bonaguida was not as great a painter as his contemporary Duccio,[9] Richard Offner made some important comments about this painting in 1930 that reflect on the quality of Bonaguida:

> Pacino's panel is in several respects without contemporary parallel. It is the only painting not on wall or parchment that fully illustrates a literary work and the only panel in its time devoted to a quasi-contemporary text. But more remarkable still, it is the only pictorial biography of Christ as flexibly and familiarly episodic… In the Tree of Life he has invented a new mode of narrative evolution.[10]

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[7] White 1993: 402.

[8] For the whereabouts of the panel over the centuries, see Offner 1930: 122.

[9] For the complete works of Duccio, see Cattaneo and Baccheschi 1972; for a detailed monograph on his *oeuvre* in its medieval context, see White 1979; for a more recent treatment with numerous colour reproductions of his paintings, see Christiansen 2008.

[10] See Offner 1930: 135.

We must ask what is going on here?

To understand this image, it is first necessary to say something of the *immediate* inspiration for the painting, which is not the tree of life in Revelation 22:2 but a text by Saint Bonaventure ultimately dependent on that scriptural text and entitled *Tree of Life*. That is so say, while Revelation 22:2 provided a major biblical source for the painting, we observe in this work by Bonaguida that the biblical pre-text has been mediated to the artist (and the viewers of the painting) via a literary text reasonably close in time to Bonaguida, and, since the text was composed by an eminent Franciscan, of obvious importance to the nuns who appear to have commissioned the painting. Hence our need to examine Bonaventure's work quite closely.

BONAVENTURE AND HIS *TREE OF LIFE*

Bonaventure was born in Bagnoregio, a small town in central Italy, probably in 1217. This was a time in which the new order founded by Francis of Assisi was flourishing, with Francis himself having died in 1226. Bonaventure's father was a physician and a man of some means and in 1234 Bonaventure journeyed to France to study in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Paris. There Bonaventure encountered the Franciscans, who had arrived in 1217 and had begun work on their great house at Saint-Denis in 1240. He joined the Franciscan Order in 1243. He became a lecturer and then, in 1253 or 1254, a Master of Theology and leader of the Franciscan school in Paris. In 1257 he was elected Minister General of the Franciscan order. In 1273 Pope Gregory X appointed him Cardinal Bishop of Albano and he then helped the Pope prepare for the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, at which he died on 15th July 1274.[11]

During 1257-1267 Bonaventure wrote number of important works. One of these was *The Soul's Journey into God*, which was based on the spirituality of St Francis and gave expression to the Franciscan sense of the presence of God in creation and the importance of the mystical Christ. Another was *The Legenda Maior*, the official biography of St Francis that Bonaventure was commissioned by his order to write in 1260.[12] A third text was the *Tree of Life* (*Lignum Vitae*), which contained a powerful expression of Franciscan devotion to the humanity of Christ, especially in fostering human sentiments developed in cultivating compassion for the suffering Jesus.[13]

The Tree of Life aims to assist the true worshipper of God and disciple of Christ to conform to him by striving 'to carry about continuously, both in his soul and in his flesh, the cross of Christ until he can truly feel in himself' the words of Paul in Gal 2.19, 'With Christ I am nailed to the cross.' This entails contemplating the labour, suffering and love of Jesus crucified with a vivid memory, sharpness of intellect and charity of will, so that Jesus becomes, in the words of Cant. 1.12, a 'bundle of myrrh.'[14] Bonaventure tells us that to 'enkindle in us this affection (sc. toward Christ nailed on the cross), to shape this understanding and to imprint this memory', he has gathered 'this bundle of myrrh from the forest of the holy Gospel, which treats at length the life, passion and glorification of the Jesus Christ.' He has bound it, the

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[11] For these biographical details, see Cousins 1978: 2-8.

[12] For these details, see Cousins 1978: 8-16.

[13] For an English translation of *The Tree of Life* (as cited here), see Cousins 1978: 117-175. For the complete works of Bonaventure in Latin, see Bonaventure 1882-1902.

[14] *Tree of Life* 1, in Cousins 1978: 119.

'myrrh', together with 'a few ordered and parallel words to aid the memory' using simple, familiar and unsophisticated terms.[15] To understand the prominence of memory here, we need to bear in mind that in the Middle Ages *memoria* was highly valued and a frequent subject in texts on prayer and meditation. It signified a process whereby written materials became internalised within the language and pedagogy of a group.[16]

In this context, with its stress on memory, Bonaventure proceeds as follows:

> Since imagination aids the understanding, I have arranged in the form of an imaginary tree the few items I have collected from among many, and have ordered and disposed them in such a way that in the first or lower branches the Savior's origin and life are described; in the middle, his passion; and in the top, his glorification.[17]

Bonaventure asks the reader to 'picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing stream that becomes a great and living river with four channels to water the entire Church' (these are presumably the four rivers flowing out of Eden and mentioned in Gen. 2.10). From the trunk of this tree we must imagine 'twelve branches that are adorned with leaves, flowers and fruit' and that the leaves can prevent all illness (clearly alluding to Rev. 22.2), since 'the word of the cross *is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes* (Rom. 1.16).'[18] This is the first time Bonaventure equates the tree with the cross. We must next imagine twelve fruits that originate in the Virgin's womb and reach maturity 'on the tree of the cross under the midday heat of the Eternal Sun.'[19] This continues the equation of the tree with the cross, a process carried further when Bonaventure quotes the first stanza of a poem:

> O cross, salvation-bearing tree,
> Watered by a living fountain …[20]

This fruit is one and undivided, yet it nourishes devout souls with varied consolations in view of its 'varied states, excellence, powers and works', of which there are twelve, which in each case Bonaventure equates with some broad aspect of the Saviour's life, passion or glorification:

1. The origin and birth of the Savior.
2. The humble modes of life he condescended to adopt.
3. The loftiness of his power.
4. The fullness of his piety.
5. The confidence he had during his Passion.
6. The patience with which he endured insults and injuries.
7. The constancy he showed during his torture and crucifixion.
8. The victory he achieved in death.
9. The novelty of his resurrection.
10. The sublimity of his ascension, pouring forth spiritual charisms.

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[15] *Tree of Life* 1, in Cousins 1978: 119-120.
[16] Carruthers 2008: 11 and Hollis 2006: 2.
[17] *Tree of Life* 2, in Cousins 1978: 120.
[18] *Tree of Life* 2, in Cousins 1978: 120.
[19] *Tree of Life* 2, in Cousins 1978: 120-121.
[20] *Tree of Life* 3, in Cousins 1978: 121.

11. The equity of the future judgment.
12. The eternity of the divine kingdom.[21]

These form the twelve broad subdivisions of the work and each of them is further divided into four sections, each of which deals with some aspect of Jesus' life and mission. Thus the four sections of the first subdivision deal with Jesus begotten of God, Jesus prefigured, Jesus sent from Heaven and Jesus born of Mary. There are forty-eight sections in all. Bonaventure develops each of them in the same way. First he describes an aspect of Jesus' life and mission by summarising passages of the New Testament in third person singular narration. After each such account, he offers a meditation, often in second person imperative mood and in poetic form, wherein he urges his reader to identify with the biblical characters; for example:

> Rejoice, then,
> with that blessed old man and with Anna,[22]

or,   Like Matthew, therefore
> follow this most devoted shepherd,[23]

or,   so that having atoned with Peter
> for the guilt of your crime,
>   with Peter
>   you will be filled
> with the spirit of holiness.[24]

REACTIONS TO PACINO DI BONAGUIDA'S *TREE OF LIFE*

Art historians tend to maximise Bonaguida's alleged debt to Bonaventure. According to John White, for example:

> *The Tree of Life* itself is virtually an illuminated manuscript both in intention and in treatment. It follows every detail of St Bonaventure's text and illustrates each of his forty-eight chapters in a separate roundel. These pictograms are notable for their simplicity and clarity and, like the Morgan manuscript and its fellows, they owe much to Giotto and the fresco painters.[25]

White characterises Bonaguida's work in terms of his 'earnest didacticism' and 'dogged textual faithfulness.'[26] Richard Offner, similarly, describes the painting as 'a faithful illustration' of Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae,* which 'follows scrupulously the essentials of Bonaventure's text'.[27] How accurate are these views of White and Offner?

It is certainly fair to say that Bonaguida has taken great pains to give visual expression to the arrangement and content of Bonaventure's forty-eight sections

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[21] *Tree of Life* 3, in Cousins 1978: 121.
[22] *Tree of Life* 7, in Cousins 1978: 131.
[23] *Tree of Life* 13, in Cousins 1978: 137
[24] *Tree of Life* 21, in Cousins 1978: 144-5.
[25] White 1993: 402.
[26] White 1993: 402.
[27] Offner 1930: 122-135 (an iconographic commentary to *The Tree of Life* of Bonaguida), 122.

through his representation of a very similar number of roundels. Indeed on a section of a branch (or 'fruit' in the text of *Lignum Vitae*) roughly above or at least proximate to each roundel Bonaguida has included Bonaventure's Latin title for that section. Thus, approximately above the nativity of Jesus there is *Iesus Maria natus*, above the Transfiguration *Iesus transfiguratus* and so on.[28] While there can be no doubt that Bonaguida has been very faithful to Bonaventure's text, to claim, however, that he has followed 'every detail' of the *Lignum Vitae,* or that he is an artist of 'dogged textual faithfulness', is very far from an accurate interpretation of this work or this artist. This is not so much because he has introduced some changes to Bonaventure's text in relation to its forty-eight sections in his roundels, which he has, but because of the major additions he makes to Bonaventure on the panel. Let us now consider how Bonaguida has used Bonaventure and what we learn about his painting from undertaking this analysis.

VISUALISING BONAVENTURE'S *TREE OF LIFE*

Since we have Bonaventure's text against which we can compare Bonaguida's painting, critics such as White and Offner have assumed that the decision to represent the forty eight scenes pictorially was an inevitable one for anyone seeking to render the *Tree of Life* into visual form. An initial problem with this assumption is the likelihood that Bonaventure himself did not offer a pictorial representation of the tree in his work.[29] Two other early representations of the *Tree of Life* extant in manuscripts (where one page, admittedly, could not contain 48 images) further lay bare the error in this assumption, since while illustrating the Tree and a cross superimposed on it, the roundels hanging from the branches contain not imagery but text. The earliest visual depiction of the *Tree of Life*, in a codex in the Vatican Library dated to about 1290, takes this form, with Alessandro Simbeni describing the image, accurately, as 'non-figurative' and 'schematic'.[30]

A very similar (non-figurative and schematic) example occurs in Beinecke Ms. 416, produced at the Cistercian monastery of Kamp, near Düsseldorf in the Rhineland, in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century (so roughly contemporaneous with Bonaguida). This manuscript, now owned by Yale University, is composed of eight folios of figures that, when so combined, are often referred to as the *Speculum theologiae* ('The Mirror of Theology'). One of the eight figures is a Bonaventuran *Tree of Life*.[31] We have quotations from Bonaventure's text attached to the branches of the tree,[32] but directly underneath the vertical wood of the cross there is a quotation from the Vulgate of Rev. 22.2:

> *Et ex utraque parte fluminis, lignum vitae adferens fructus duodecim, per menses singulos reddens fructum suum, et folia ligni ad sanitatem gentium.*

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[28] For a listing of the Latin titles for each section (although without the word 'Jesus' that appears in each case in the text), see Pacini 1972: 31-33.

[29] So Hollis: 'The physical diagram was not conceived as part of the original work, but Bonaventure organized his text to aid in memory. He writes, "Since imagination aids understanding, I have arranged [the passages] in the form of an imaginary tree"' (2006: 2-3; citing Cousins 1978:120).

[30] This is in the Vatican Library, Ms. Lat. 1058, f. 60; see the reproduction in Simbeni 2007, Table I, and his description of it at pp. 152-3.

[31] See the essays on this folio by Mary Hollis and Lauren Simpson at http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/speculum/. A coloured image of this work is available on the Yale University Library website (http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/speculum/pages/1v.jpg).

[32] See Simpson 2006:4-5 for some details.

(And on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations)

Even a very accomplished artist like Taddeo Gaddi, painting in the 1330s, some thirty years after Bonaguida painted the *Tree of Life* and on the much larger space of the wall of the refectory in the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence, could paint a *Tree of Life* and yet choose not to represent all the scenes visually (see Image 2).[33]

[Image 2: Taddeo Gaddi, *Tree of Life*, Courtesy Wikimedia]

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[33] This fresco is accessible from the Web Gallery of Art (http://www.wga.hu/index1.html) and from the Museums of Florence website (http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/santa_croce_last_supper.html).
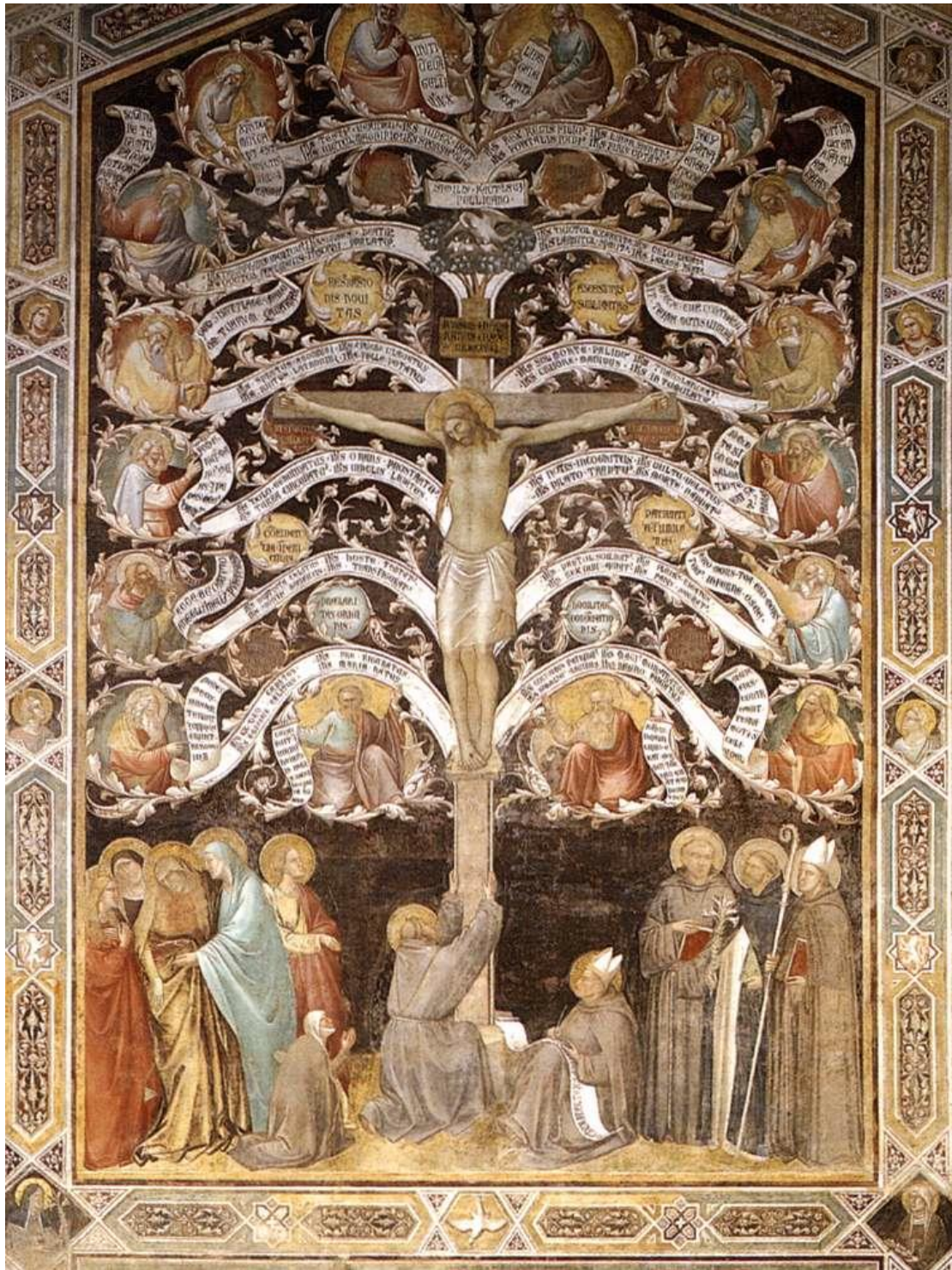
Biblical Narrative in Ancient and Medieval Italian Art

There is another important consideration that should warn against too quickly suggesting that Bonaguida has doggedly followed Bonaventure. Since the late Roman period, Christian artists in Italy had been representing biblical narrative in a series of episodes and this practice provides a broad painterly context for this painting. The most prominent setting for the representation of biblical narrative was on church walls, exposed to Christians of every social class. Marilyn Lavin has analysed over

one hundred such cycles in Italian churches from 413-1600 AD.[34] There was also a tradition of panel paintings containing a number of different scenes. In addition, the illumination of manuscripts provided another setting available to the wealthy and the literate. Bonaguida thus had ample stimulus from the pictorial tradition to depict a series of biblical scenes in the one work and he has actually displayed considerable artistic freedom in composing his painting. I will say more on this pictorial tradition of differentiated narrative scenes below.

The Additional Elements in Bonaguida's *Tree of Life*

It is true that Bonaguida has retained Bonaventure's basic scheme of twelve branches with four scenes on each (although on the top right branch he only has three) with the narrative moving from the earlier stages of Christ's life at the bottom to the later stages at the top.

Yet the major aspect of his originality is that he has added many prominent visual motifs to this scheme and bound the entire composition together in a powerful chromatic unity by means of situating all the images on a black field within which figures are painted in colour on a gold background. The result is a representation of the core moments in salvation history that is visually unified while embracing a large number of particular details. Let us consider these added motifs, which can be clustered into four groups: (a) the addition of the figure of the crucified Christ; (b) additions beneath the base of the cross from the Old Testament; (c) additions above the top of the cross; and (d) additions to, and alterations of, the roundels.

The Crucified Christ Surrounded by Other Biblical Images

The first addition to Bonaventure is the large and superlative representation of the crucified Christ that hangs upon the tree, which is the most dominant feature in the painting. During the Middle Ages and later there were four ways to depict the crucified Christ: (a) *Christus Triumphans* (in victory); (b) *Christus Patiens* (in endurance); (c) *Christus Dolens* (in suffering); and (d) *Christus Mortuus* (in death). Depicting the crucified Christ as a *Christus Triumphans* figure meant that he had his eyes open, head erect, legs straight and hands spread horizontally with palms facing the viewer.[35] We certainly do not have that figure here. We either have the *Christus Patiens* or *Christus Dolens* figure. The former is characterised by a suffering, dying or dead yet curiously serene Christ, possibly representing a later development toward a more emotional and human image, with his head resting on his right shoulder, his eyes shut, his knees bent, making his body curved, with his pelvis turned to the right.[36] There are many examples in the Italian art of the period.[37] In the *Dolens* type Christ is shown with his head down on his shoulder, his eyes closed, with bleeding wounds and signs of grief on his face. For present purposes, not a great deal turns on whether the Bonaguida's image is closer to the *Patiens* or *Dolens* type. Apart from the effort expended by the artist to create a powerfully realised three-dimensional image,

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[34] Lavin 1990. Also see Kessler 1994b.

[35] For examples, see Garrison 1949, nos. 447 (Pisa, 1240-1250), 451 (Rome, second quarter 12th century), 458 (Arezzo, fourth quarter 14th century), 459 (Assisi, late 12th century) and 478 (Lucca, 1210-1220). Also see Hourihane 2012: 228.

[36] Hourihane 2012: 229.

[37] For other Tuscan examples, see Garrison 1949, nos. 450 (Pisa, 1255-1265), 457 (Florence, fourth quarter of 13th century), 469 (Florence, 1275-1285) and 473 (Florence, 1285-1290).

one must note the face of Christ with eyes closed as peaceful and asleep rather than dead and pain-racked. Also notable are the beautifully and tenderly evoked musculature of Christ's stomach and chest and the ethereal lightness of the cloth he is wearing.

In spite of Offner's assertions that the painting 'follows scrupulously the essentials of Bonaventure's text' and that in 'strict accordance with the parallelism *Lignum Vitae-Lignum Crucis*, the dead Christ is shown hanging on a tree-trunk,'[38] the representation of Christ hanging on the tree is not derived from Bonaventure's *Tree of Life*! Although in some of his narrative passages Bonaventure describes the injuries inflicted on Jesus,[39] at no time in describing his forty-eight scenes does he ask his reader to imagine the body of the crucified Christ hanging from the tree in the midst of the scenes he describes. Nor does he ask his reader to dwell upon his wounds or broken body. Instead, rather than exhort his reader to contemplate the crucified Christ he asks, 'Who will grant me …that… I may be fixed with my beloved on the yoke of the Cross.'[40] This fits in with his theme of identifying oneself with the characters in the action. Bonaventure seems to have thought that reflection on the body of Jesus could be inappropriate, since at one point he says, 'When you hear that Jesus is begotten of God, beware lest some inadequate thought of the flesh appear before your mind's eye.'[41]

Strong support for the fact that the crucified Christ was not something that Bonaventure wanted his readers 'to picture in the mind' comes from the circumstance that the earliest visual depictions of the *Tree of Life* in the manuscripts mentioned above (the codex in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, dated to about 1290 and the Beinecke manuscript in Yale from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries) do not display Jesus hanging in the midst of the Tree.[42]

Subsequent artistic use of Bonaventure's text, however, moved in a very different direction, admittedly, since the crucified Christ regularly appears in the central position (as with the Taddeo Gaddi fresco in the Florentine church of Santa Croce mentioned above [Figure 2]). [43] This was even the case in manuscript illuminations, as with the *Tree of Life* in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle in the British Museum, datable toward the end of the first decade of the 14th century (see Image 3) so almost contemporaneous with Bonaguida's painting.[44]

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[38] Offner 1930: 122-23.

[39] *Tree of Life* 26, in Cousins 1978: 148-9.

[40] Tree of Life 26, in Cousins 1978: 149.

[41] *Tree of Life* 1, in Cousins 1978: 126.

[42] See the reproduction in Simbeni 2007, Table I, and his description on pp. 152-3; as noted above, he describes the image as 'non-figurative' and 'schematic.'

[43] See Pacini 1972 for a detailed discussion of the artistic tradition inspired by Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior* (the life of Francis) and the *Tree of Life*.

[44] See Sandler (1983) Plate 14, opposite p. 60 for a colour reproduction of this work and pp. 12-13, 17 and 32 for the date.

Plate 14   fol. 125 verso

Underlying and stimulating this aspect of the painting was the manner in which crucifixions were depicted by the artists of Bonaguida's period and much earlier. In other words, this dominant aspect of the painting is dependent not on the

Bonaventuran pre-text of the painting but on painterly tradition, in fact on a practice that went back a long way, indeed as far as the frescoes in Old St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Built by Constantine, old St Peter's contained two series of paintings, on Old and New Testament themes respectively, probably going back to the third quarter of the fourth century (although added to later). William Tronzo and Herbert Kessler have written of their enduring influence throughout the medieval period.[45] Although the frescoes are lost, precious water colour copies made in 1608 and 1619 by Giacomo Grimaldi are extant.[46] The relevant point here is that the crucifixion was given a dominant place in the midst of the New Testament scenes on the left nave wall and in scale four times larger than the other scenes around it.[47]

Even closer to Bonaguida is the Tuscan tradition of depicting the crucified Christ on a panel surrounded by scenes from his life and Passion. When E. B. Garrison published his illustrated index of Italian Romanesque painting in 1949, he was able to show over seventy crucifixes of this type (that is, with various scenes in the side panels) surviving from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries.[48]

A very early example is the work of the so-called Byzantine Master of the Crucifix of Pisa, from around 1205-25, now in the Museum of San Matteo in Pisa (see Figure 4).[49]

[Image 4: Byzantine Master of the Crucifix of Pisa; Courtesy of Wikimedia]

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[45] See Tronzo 1983 and Kessler 1994c.

[46] Tronzo 1983: 93: Grimaldi formalised his 1608 and 1619 drawings in a text in 1620 that is now Vat. Barb. Lat. 2733.

[47] See Tronzo 1983: 94 and Kessler 1994c, for reproductions of the precious Grimaldi water colours of the frescoes from old St Peter's.

[48] Garrison 1949: 174-177 and 181-203.

[49] This is No. 521 in Garrison (1948: 201); for the image, see
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_Master_of_the_Crucifix_of_Pisa#mediaviewer/File:Maestro_bi zantino,_crocifisso_del_museo_nazionale_di_san_matteo,_pisa,_1230_circa,_tavola_sagomata.jpg

It is striking, first of all, how similar is the representation of Jesus, as *Christus Patiens*, on this cross to that of Bonaguida some eighty to one hundred years later: head resting on right shoulder, eyes closed; enhanced musculature of chest and stomach, curvature of the legs around the knees. There are differences to be seen, however, in the closed thumbs and the fact that there are four nails and not three. But here we see stronger line, colour tonality and contrast (the features I find make Romanesque art in Italy and Catalonia so appealing) than in Bonaguida's painting and the work is not so accomplished three-dimensionally. Also noteworthy is the addition of images to the figure of the crucified Christ. There are six images on the apron of

the cross: moving down from left we have the Deposition, Lamentation and Entombment. Moving down from the right are the Marys at the Sepulchre, the Road to Emmaus and Emmaus, and Doubting Thomas. On the terminals (of the cross-piece) there are John and the three Marys, on the cimasa the Ascension and on the base Limbo (or the Harrowing of Hell). As for the extra images, in the visual tradition the figures appeared in the terminals before the apron was added. The step of adding the apron was probably taken in the 12th century, possibly in connection with the use of these crucifixes as altarpieces.[50] Another example, dated to the first quarter of the thirteenth century comes from the Benedictine Monastery of St Maria di Rosano, just outside Florence.[51] A third example is Cross No. 469 (Garrison 1949) from the Bardi Museum in Florence, dated *c.* 1275-1285. In these representations Christ is turning his head to his right, as in the Bonaguida. It is absolutely clear from the San Matteo crucifix and from the many other examples such as these preceding Bonaguida, that he was working in an Italian, especially North Italian, visual tradition of the representation of Jesus on the cross and surrounded by images of other New Testament scenes. He most certainly did not get this from Bonaventure.

Additions to the Base of the Tree

The second element added to the Bonaventuran scheme comprises scenes from the creation of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden (Genesis 1 and 2) at the bottom of the picture. There are eight separate vignettes arranged from left to right, around a nimbed figure holding a sheet of paper or a scroll appearing at the mouth of a cave in a rocky hill. Although the face of this figure has been largely erased, according to Offner this is probably Bonaventure.[52] There are good grounds for this, since there is no other image clearly referable to him in the painting and from this image we gain the impression that the tree appears above his head as an elaborate figuration of his thought. On this view the scroll that he holds is the text of the *Lignum Vitae.* Yet perhaps the person depicted is Francis, given his proclivity for praying in caves, although against this possibility is that the figure seems to lack the usual beard.[53] The eight vignettes are as follows:

1. God creating Adam.
2. God creating Eve.
3. God's warning about the Tree of Life.
4. A composite scene with Adam and Eve speaking with the serpent draped around the tree.

   Bonaventure/Francis(?)/John (?) in a cave.

5. Adam and Eve taking from the Tree.
6. God rebuking them.
7. The fountain of Paradise.
8. The angel driving them from the Garden.

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[50] Garrison 1949: 175-6 .

[51] See the discussions and colour reproductions in Scalini 2005: 86-7.

[52] Offner 1930: 123.

[53] Another possibility is John on Patmos who was presumably holding paper when he was asked to write down what he heard (Rev. 1.11).

The only one of these eight vignettes attributable to Bonaventure is the seventh, which derives from the following statement in the text: 'Picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain that becomes a great and living river with four channels to water the garden of the entire Church.'[54] The artist has depicted a (rather diminutive) stone well with four streams issuing forth from it.

Above these scenes are four figures: from left to right we have Moses, St Francis, St Clare and St John the Evangelist. Each of them holds a scroll with a biblical quotation:[55] Moses has: *Lignum vitae in medio paradisi* (Gen. 2.9); St Francis has: *Mihi absit gloriari nisi cruce Domini Nostri* (Gal. 6.14); St Clare has: *Fasciculus myrrhae dilectus meus mihi, inter ubera mea commorabitur* (Song of Songs 1.13); and St John the Evangelist has: *Lignum vitae afferens fructus duodecim, per menses singulos reddens fructum suum* (Rev 22.2). It is important to note that nowhere in the *Lignum Vitae* does Bonaventure refer to Gen 2.9; this tree of life reference from Genesis is attributable to Bonaguida.

Additions to the Top of the Tree

The third additional element, or rather set of elements, is at the top of the tree. At the summit of the vertical beam there is a pelican feeding her young with the blood from her own breast. This is an element that goes back at least as far as Aristotle's *Historia Animalium (circa* 350 BCE) and appears later in the *Physiologus* (a Greek text from Alexandria, possibly from the second century CE). The motif re-appears in late antique/early Christian works. It is therefore no surprise that this legend, which became a symbol of the atonement and the redeemer, is referred to in the great eucharistic hymn of Thomas Aquinas (*Adoro Te Devote*; *c.* 1265) that contains the line 'Pelican of mercy, cleanse me in your precious blood.' The motif also appears in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (*c.* 1320 CE), when Beatrice identifies the apostle John to the pilgrim Dante by saying, 'This is the one who lay upon the breast of our own Pelican...' (*Paradise* 25.112-113). The pelican motif is found at the top of many medieval crucifixes and occurs, for example, in Beinecke Ms. 416, in the *Tree of Life* in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle (see Image 3 above) and also in the *Tree of Life* of Taddeo Gaddi from the Church of Santa Croce in Florence (see Image 2 above). Again, although the pelican is not mentioned in Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae*, it was firmly part of the pictorial tradition.

Above this (occupying the gable of the panel) is a scene of the community of saints standing within an elaborate architectural structure, part choir stalls and part battlements, in heaven. Jesus and Mary are enthroned at the very top. Slightly below them appear St John the Evangelist on the left and St Francis on the right, each flanked by two seraphim. Under them Bonaguida has painted four rows of patriarchs, prophets, apostles and saints, in the first three rows alternating with angels. In the third row from the top there are five women saints. Some wear the expensive dress of the aristocrat, another is Mary Magdalen (with her characteristic long [red] hair) and there is a single nun, probably St Clare. Given that the panel was painted for a Poor Clare convent, it would have been very odd if no women appeared in Paradise. Beneath them is another row of the blessed, behind battlements of the heavenly city.

Finally, beneath all this we have the prophet Ezekiel on the left of the pelican and the prophet Daniel on the right. Ezekiel's scroll, referring to the trees that will

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[54] Cousins 1978: 120.
[55] See Offner 1930: 123-4.

grow on the banks of the river flowing from the Temple down to the Dead Sea and turn it into fresh water, reads: *Et erunt fructus eius in cibum, et folia eius ad medicinam* (Ezek. 47.12). Daniel's scroll, from the passage where Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a huge tree, reads: *folia ejus pulcherrima, et fructus ejus nimius*, *et esca universorum in ea* (Dan. 4.9).

Interpretation of Bonaventure's text in the Roundels

Bonaguida has forty-seven roundels, although there are forty-eight sections in the Bonaventuran text. But the forty-eighth deals with Christ as the alpha and the omega from Rev. 1.8 and this is not a narrative incident and hence not easily susceptible to visualising as a scene in a roundel. Bonaguida has retained the idea, however, by including two wooden plaques at the base of the cross, the lower one bearing the word 'ALPHA' and the one above having the words 'et omega' (with 'omega' represented by the corresponding Greek letter in lower case.

There are also some changes to, or unexpected emphases in, particular roundels. Thus, whereas in Bonaventure's section 3, 'Jesus sent from heaven', the discursive text is taken up entirely with the annunciation and incarnation, with Mary's visit to Elizabeth in the poetic section, Bonaguida has painted the Annunciation and Visitation as parallel scenes in the roundel (although the former does have a more central and slightly more fore-grounded position). In section 25, 'Jesus scorned by all', Bonaventure describes how the entire cohort assembled in the praetorium, stripped Jesus, dressed him in a scarlet tunic and placed a purple cloak on him, a crown of thorns on his head and a reed in his right hand. They genuflected in mockery, hit him, spat on him and beat his head with a reed. Bonaguida has followed this fairly closely, although he adds a seat or throne on which Jesus is seated. Yet Bonaguida diverges from his pre-text by adding to the roundel a second image in which Jesus is led away, wearing the same clothes he wore before he was scorned. It is in Section 26, which focuses on Jesus being nailed to the cross, that Bonaventure mentions Jesus being led away, noting that he had been clothed in his own garments. Thus Bonaguida has brought forward the leading away of Jesus to a more natural point in the narrative. In relation to section 27 of the text ('Jesus linked with thieves'), Bonaguida omits the passers-by who mocked Jesus crucified between two thieves and inserts instead Mary and John whom Bonaventure does not mention here. Yet he does mention their presence in section 28 and that Jesus said to her 'woman behold your son' (from John 19.26).

At times Bonaguida provides an image that is only roughly aligned with the text. Section 33 ('Jesus given dominion over the earth') begins with a quote from Matt. 28.16-20 as to how the Lord appeared in Galilee and declared that all power in heaven and on earth had been given to him. Bonaguida, however, depicts Jesus addressing the disciples with a pile of fish between him and them, no doubt a reference to John 21, even though neither that text nor the fish are mentioned by Bonaventure.

Bonaguida could also be highly selective with respect to which aspect of the often rich details of a section he will paint. In section 32, 'Jesus is Laid in the Tomb', Bonaventure offers a compilation of Gospel passages describing how Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body down from the cross, embalmed with it with spices, wrapped it in a cloth and laid it in a new tomb in a garden, with soldiers assigned to guard the body. Later women came, including Mary Magdalene, to anoint his body. Bonaguida has a very different representation of this scene. Out of all these

details in the text, Bonaguida paints an image totally focused on the statement 'soldiers were assigned to guard the tomb'.[56] He depicts three soldiers sitting (perhaps asleep) in front of a rectangular stone tomb sealed with a curved top.

Section 35, 'Jesus, extraordinary beauty', plainly posed a challenge to the painter. This section does not relate a narrative event but describes how Jesus was the beautiful flower of the root of Jesse (Isa. 11.1) that had blossomed in the incarnation, withered in the passion and blossomed again in the resurrection, clothed in glory. Bonaguida has painted an image of Jesus holding what seems to be the root of Jesse and with two disciples on each side of him. Presumably these are the four Evangelists, as one of them looks like John in earlier scenes.

While limitations of space prevent any further consideration of the relationship between the sections of the text and Bonaguida's roundels, it is clear that he has shown a freedom in his treatment that belies the suggestion of his having followed Bonaventure even in this area with 'dogged literalness'.

THE PICTORIAL QUALITIES OF THE PAINTING

The painting graphically illustrates its location at a point of transition between the Italo-Byzantine models that had been dominant up to the early to mid 13th century and the new concept of space that arose in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. One sign of the Italo-Byzantine tradition in the panel is the use of gold paint for the background in all the roundels, which was a typical feature of such art.[57] A good example is the fresco of St Francis and scenes from his life in the Bardi Chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence by Coppo di Marcovaldo, dated to about 1240-45.[58] In a sense Bonaguida's painting appears to be a tree of filled with icons, with the gold background reminding the viewer of God's glory and eternity. Other Italo-Byzantine features evident in the panel include the use of a narrow ground plane and a wide surface above it, plus a typical background object of a building or rocks. Similar to Italo-Byzantine painting, different planes tend to get telescoped. The movement of the figures, matching the lack of depth in the background, is often lateral, that is, parallel to the picture plane.[59] This is the case with the scenes concerning Adam and Eve at the base of the painting. The manner in which human form and spatial depth are represented requires somewhat more analysis.

In paintings of human figures from the early 13th century we find that 'The musculature of the torso and face and the folds of the drapery are delineated in the Byzantine manner; the stylised forms are brought out by the sharp juxtaposition of lights and darks.'[60] In Italy during the late thirteenth century, however, significant changes in figural and spatial representation came about. Considerable evidence for these changes exists in the frescoes by Giotto and others in the great Franciscan basilica in Assisi and in the work by Cavallini in the frescoes in Santa Cecilia-in-Trastevere and the mosaics in Santa Maria-in-Trastevere in Rome in the 1290s, a date close to when Bonaguida painted this panel.[61] Cavallini's superlative mosaic

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[56] Cousins 1978: 157.
[57] Bunim 1940: 128.
[58] Bietoletti et al. 2005: 96.
[59] Bunim 1940: 129-30.
[60] Bunim 1940: 129.
[61] White, writing of the frescoes in S. Maria-in-Trastevere (1993: 155-61) says that 'Cavallini is striving to create, not symbols on a wall, but living forms presented in the round' (159).

Annunciation in the church of Santa Maria-in-Trastevere well illustrates these developments (see Image 5).[62]

[Image 5: Cavallini's Mosaic of the Annunciation, Santa Maria-in-Trastevere, Courtesy Wikimedia]

As Bunim notes:

> In place of the schematic delineation of anatomy and drapery derived from the Byzantine manner, Cavallini, as has often been noted, substituted gradual transitions of light and shade and drapery which falls about the body in naturalistic folds. The result is a figure that has volume: the planes emerge gradually from the shaded depths to the high-lighted surfaces.[63]

These characteristics are visible in Cavallini's representations of Mary and the angel. Giotto, similarly, relied on tone rather than line to describe form and this allowed him to create the illusion of the solidity of the body hanging on the cross in his crucifix in Santa Maria Novella in Florence, painted shortly after 1312 AD.[64]

These same features also apply to the way Bonaguida has painted Jesus. In the representation of the crucified Jesus, the focal point of this painting, we witness the emergence of a whole new way of portraying figures. In the older, Italo-Byzantine form of representation the viewer gained the impression of solid but two-dimensional figures. While this applies to some extent to the figures Bonaguida has painted in the roundels, it does not apply to the imposing representation of the crucified Jesus in this painting. This reveals the extent to which Bonaguida was part of the artistic ferment in Italy at this moment of transition from the Italo-Byzantine to a more naturalistic mode of representation of the human form.

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[62] For the mosaic, see
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro_Cavallini#mediaviewer/File:Pietro_Cavallini_013.jpg
[63] Bunim 1940: 131.
[64] Cannon 2008: 113 and 117-118,

Cavallini also used architectural settings to show depth. He depicted not just facades but interiors, with ceilings depicted with lines receding at various angles. In the Annunciation in Santa Maria-in-Trastevere careful attention has been paid to render the edifice in which Mary's sits as three-dimensional. The sense of perspective is not perfect: the main architecture of the building is disproportionately smaller than the low structures to Mary's left and right and they lack converging perspective lines. Nevertheless, the image is one in which a genuine sense of depth is created.

Similar developments are visible in Bonaguida's *Lignum Vitae*. In the structure in Paradise at the top of the painting we discern the artist also seeking to create a sense of depth by representing two landings jutting out from the rest of the stalls. Just as clearly as with Cavallini, a real effort is being made here to create three-dimensional space. So too in Bonaguida's Lazarus roundel (see Image 6) the various figures are, in fact, not portrayed laterally and parallel to the picture plane. There is real depth in this image, with Lazarus depicted in a three-dimensional tomb that is imperfectly rendered but the effect of which is clear, with the other figures receding into the background behind the tomb. Like Cavallini, Bonaguida does not quite get it right: sometimes parallel lines diverge, not converge, as we can see very clearly in relation to the depiction of the tomb of Lazarus and the thrones of Jesus and Mary at the top of the picture (see Image 7),[65] and he is not concerned with the unity of point of view in the scene as a whole. But just as Cavallini was aiming for a three dimensional representation and tried to put figures into specific interiors not just in front of them,[66] so too did Bonaguida.

[Image 6: Lazarus rising from his tomb]

[Image 7: The thrones of Jesus and Mary]

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[65] Bunim 1940: 127-9.
[66] Bunim 1940: 131-2.

None of this is to downplay the artistic qualities of the roundel scenes, which John White has suggested are 'notable for their simplicity and clarity and, like the Morgan manuscript and its peers', owe 'much to Giotto and the fresco painters.'[67] The roundel corresponding to section 26 of Bonaventure's text, 'Jesus nailed to the cross', offers a good example of this quality (see Image 8).

[Image 8: Jesus is nailed to the cross from Bonaguida's *Tree of Life*]

In addition, Alistair Smart, more appreciative of Bonaguida than many art historians, has written of the *Lignum Vitae* as follows:

> The entire work is finely composed, and its diverse parts are ingeniously related to each other. Despite its miniature-like quality, the forms are firmly modelled in light and shade, whereas in Pacino's illuminated manuscripts the treatment is generally more summary and more decorative.[68]

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[67] White 1993: 402.
[68] Smart 1978: 75.

CONCLUSION

While Bonaguida has closely followed Bonaventure's *Tree of Life* in the roundels, as was inevitable in a painting for a Franciscan convent at this time, to say that he has done so in 'every detail' or that he is an artist of 'dogged textual faithfulness' is very far from being an accurate interpretation of this work or this artist.

Even if Bonaguida was not as great a painter as his contemporary Duccio, let alone Giotto, who was also closely connected with the Franciscan tradition, he has produced a powerfully realised and unusual work that in its overall conception ties together in one complex image the central features of the biblical narrative of salvation: the creation and fall; the birth, ministry, Passion and resurrection of Jesus; and the Paradise and its community of the blessed that are to come. That the painting depicts the events of Jesus' life within this broad biblical context is due to the artist not to Bonaventure. To an extent Bonaguida was also capable of a more ample biblical interpretation than Bonaventure, as in the inclusion of the reference to the tree of life in Gen. 2.9 on Moses' scroll near the base of the painting, a textual passage that Bonaventure himself fails to mention.

It is the artist's creative use of the pictorial tradition in addition to Bonaventure that has determined the character of this work, especially the dominant image of the crucified Christ. That character reveals its location at a pivotal moment between the Italo-Byzantine tradition and the movement to truly three-dimensional and individualised art that Giotto especially was unleashing and that Brunelleschi would put on a sound footing in the theory of optics a century later.[69]

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[69] See White 1967, Hyman 1974 and Damisch 1994.

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